

“Wising Up and Rising Up”
an online talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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Last week I described the COVID-19 pandemic as a major social disjunction that is both widespread and long-term. The US hasn't experienced one since the Second World War. What we do know about major catastrophes is that society's survive and society's are profoundly changed by them. Especially the generation that is at that time in young adulthood.

The generation that emerged from the Second World War by and large trusted medicine and science; they believed in education; they believed that the federal government could fix large social problems such as poverty and racism. And they treasured social order and stability because they had personally experienced deprivation and wanton violence.

That generation's ideas dominated American politics for a very long time, but, slowly, other ideas—ideas arising from an extremist *individualism and even solipsism*, began to spread. It consisted of an intertwined economic and social conservatism and a rise in right-wing religious thought.

It thrived on science skepticism, superstition, magical thinking, conspiracy theories, and American exceptionalism.

Eventually this disdain of community; of communally agreed upon observation and evidence and reason went from a fringe movement to occupying the halls of American state and federal government.

That was then . . .

A few short weeks ago. And the carnage caused by these things is all around us.

What now . . .

What good might arise from the social dislocation of this pandemic?

If the past is any guide, things are going to change a lot. Large dislocations always affect the young deeply, and I have a strong suspicion that today's young people have some lessons indelibly imprinted on their psyches.

The first thing that may make a comeback is respect for reason. The value of evidence and the scientific method have been devalued for a long, long time. But, when the very fabric of society is on the line, many have returned to experts who rely on evidence. All the magical thinking about "fake news" did not stop the predictions of science and medicine.

Another fact that we knew intellectually but perhaps didn't feel viscerally is just how interconnected our planet is. One sick person anywhere can cause people all over the world to get sick. If this pandemic teaches us anything, it is that all of us—every human being alive on our planet—is connected. Interdependent. Our neighbor.

And then there's the air we breathe. People are seeing blue skies above the streets of Beijing for the first time in years. Those ugly brown domes of noxious pollution that hang over every major American city . . . those are floating away.

And this demonstrates that we human beings really do control our destiny in terms of the environment. All we have to do is what we already knew should be done.

Another thing that people will remember well is that flexibility is possible. We have changed whole institutions and industries essentially overnight. A phenomenon not seen in the US since the existential peril of the Second World War. It's a lesson: old ways can be changed quickly.

And perhaps the most graphic lesson for Americans is the social price we pay for having allowed the huge income disparities that have developed. The stats have long shown that many if not most Americans carry a crippling debt burden and live in desperation from paycheck to paycheck with minimal health care and little hope for a better future.

The economic distress exposed by this pandemic is, I hope, enough to at last cause political action concerning an income disparity that has been widening since the early 1970s.

After all, with a snap of the finger, crippling student debt has been paused as a result of this pandemic. Could it be—I hope young people are asking—could it be that the debt strangling their entire generation could go away exactly that quickly?

This past week, we saw American government actually work, with the most expensive and expansive legislation since the Second World War. It's not enough. But it's the first time in over seventy years.

Things can change. And change quickly. Many Americans are going to remember that lesson.

This pandemic is our "appointment with destiny," as President Franklin Roosevelt phrased it long ago.

We can learn lessons from this experience. Lessons such as that science and reason matter;

that the planet is small and fragile;

that we can change how we live;

and that as a nation we can do big things for the suffering of our fellow citizens.

Past generations have learned from tragedy. We can too. We can grieve for what's lost; or we can determine to create a just society at last.

We can weather this storm, rejecting fear and choosing life and abundant life for all our neighbors on this planet.

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