

Different Values

In the middle of 2021, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson each left earth to market their separate trips to outer space! Eager to check out the legitimacy of the “final frontier,” *Star Trek’s* Captain Kirk joined Bezos on board Blue Origin. Kirk returned as William Shatner and hailed the exploration as something he *never* wanted to forget! But despite such amazing experiences in outer space, troubles had surfaced the year before that kept most Americans grounded in grief. On March 11, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and 2020 was a year most Americans were eager to be rid of. Festivities to celebrate December 31 were minimal due to the social distancing imposed by the virus. The year’s end seemed as much about people being unspeakably glad to let 2020 slide into the rear view mirror as about wanting to ring in a New Year. One after another, favorite gathering hubs and haunts, gyms, Broadway shows and musical events had shut down. The NBA’s March Madness was cancelled. The 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics were delayed a year. Celebrities were not untouchable; Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson came down with COVID, but recovered. Charley Pride, Ellis Marsalis, Dawn Wells, Nick Cordero, and far too many loved ones did not. On March 27, 2020, former President Trump signed a \$2.2 trillion coronavirus relief package.¹ Places of worship closed and moved online. Near the end of 2020, I recall listening to Scriptures about end times and having premonitions. Then I reminded myself—perhaps every age reads similar warnings in the darker signs of their times? The year 2020 was a year when a sense of normalcy had been displaced by a predatory disaster over which we had little power and brought burdens that few now want reminding of. Unless...that is ...we can find in them worlds yet *unexplored* — perhaps in outer space, but perhaps also in inner space....Unless we can find new spaces *within* us and take time to ponder, as Pope Francis has suggested, what we might do differently to build a better future, together. At his inauguration the following year, President Biden’s campaign slogan echoed that sentiment by calling Americans to “build back better.”² We were at war with the air we breathed in an atmosphere wholly indifferent to human suffering.

For the many immersed in such suffering, its pervasive darkness became a foil against which we discovered or rediscovered who and what we cared for. In spite of its grim indifference, many tried to hold on to what they found stood out in contrast to the pandemic and to salvage what they found most valuable. But as millions of cases of COVID-19 spread, anxieties piled up on top of each other like stacks of old newspapers or boxes waiting to be recycled, and if one looked more closely—also about to topple over. Mental health was frayed. Being quarantined at home helped some to pay off bills, but for others, losing jobs increased debts and magnified fears of survival in ways they had never experienced with such immediacy. Economic burdens crushed down upon us. Business after business shuttered, and the loss of millions at work compounded a foreboding, economic disaster. Out west, large numbers of Americans in sedans and newer SUVs waited in lines that stretched miles, not just to buy gas, but also to receive a box of free food! When schools closed, parents—mostly single parents and particularly women—were torn between working to sustain survival and needing to care for and educate young ones. Zoom, Skype, and other technologies made it possible for some in offices to continue working from home, but young children adapted far less successfully to being educated in front of screens. Important medical procedures were put on hold as hospitals bombarded with cases of the virus had too few nurses and doctors, too few N-95 masks and personal protective equipment (PPE), too few testing supplies, and too little coordination of the data needed for contact tracing. A nurse made a plea that if she was expected to continue fighting the medical equivalent of war, she needed at least to be supplied with the protective armor or PPE for doing so! Elsewhere, medical personnel with uncommon courage draped themselves in plastic garbage bags and continued to help the next of countless victims. Then-Governor Cuomo of New York made urgent pleas for more ventilators, reasoning that he did not want to be the one to have to decide who lived and who died. When the west coast was hit, California hospital rooms also filled beyond capacity, and patients lay on make-shift cots sometimes pushed out into hallways. I was reminded of triage scenes from the series M.A.S.H., but with far less of the humor that made those scenes bearable. A nurse continued to work, but admitted she, too, was being “slowly traumatized.”

Throughout the year, members of the medical community repeatedly begged for cooperation and asked people to remain on lockdown in order to flatten the curve and prevent the virus from spreading further and later to prevent mutant strains from metastasizing into new hotspots. That meant limited social gatherings—if at all—even on holidays. Many refused to accept something Americans in particular were not accustomed to—that is, something for which there simply was no quick fix. At home, we mourned as person-to-person transmission of the virus gripped us, vise-like, and held us in lockdown, alienating us in ways more than just wearing masks. Family members and friends, in anguish, were unable to hold a spouse, a parent, or grandparent succumbing to agonizing deaths on ventilators. A few “lucky” ones watched—barred behind the screens of glass hospital windows—while doctors and nurses, more accustomed to healing, offered final, human touches to the dying. It was unnecessary to verbalize the fear, felt everywhere, of contacting the virus and the effects it might have on one’s life. Intense psychological stress broke through masks, social distancing, and lockdown—trauma that was manifested in increased domestic violence, alcoholism, still greater addiction to opioids, fears of suicide, and pervasive loneliness and depression. The country was accurately described as shell-shocked. Earth itself seemed to rebel against its atmosphere being swallowed up by contamination. Large areas of Nashville devastated by tornadoes resembled cities bombed during wartime. Drought scorched much of the West, and a massive derecho tore across the Midwest from South Dakota to Ohio with hurricane-like winds of over 100 mph, damaging millions of acres of corn and soybean crops across central Iowa.³ In alternate versions of the virus, California and Colorado battled the largest wildfires in their histories. Flames evaded containment and spread rapidly, ravaging over ten million acres in the U.S.⁴ In seeming mockery of the west’s most active wildfire year on record, a record-breaking hurricane season struck the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts.⁵ With storm surges over 15 feet high, Category 4 Hurricane Laura pummeled Louisiana, only to be followed by Category 2 Hurricanes Delta and Zeta. Zeta rampaged through the state with 110 mph winds, leaving nearly two million people without power, even as thousands more were still displaced from the destruction Delta had left behind.⁶

March 11, 2021, marked one year since the day in 2020 when the COVID-19 virus had been declared a global pandemic, forced us into lockdown, and seized any sense of normalcy from our everyday lives. Was “normal” even still within reach? And if not the “normal” we all knew, would there ever be a *new* normal? That night, on NBC’s *Dateline*, co-host Lester Holt offered his own take on the year under review. After some grim as well as some hopeful reflections, he suggested, “Maybe *tomorrow* marks the *real* start of the *New Year*.”⁷ The real start of a *new* year presumably means different directions from the normal whose loss we were not only suffering from—and even yet still grieve—but also new trajectories that the pandemic’s upheaval of our lives may have thrust center stage. The grim isolation imposed by lockdowns and social distancing had given Americans abrupt and unwelcome pause to consider the human lives and communities we belong to in both new and unexpected ways, to ask ourselves what we might salvage from the vast display of deaths, social conflicts, and particularly the political turmoil into which we had become immersed. It wasn’t just about grabbing family photo albums and saving the dog and cat as we ran from the flames or floods enveloping our homes and communities because a worldwide pandemic left us *nowhere to run*. We were left with only ourselves. Therefore, venturing out now, beyond the alienation of social distancing and political polarization to discover where—despite pervasive damage—*hope persists* might help unite us in 1) wanting, 2) then imagining, and 3) then *working* for what might be a better normal than the one the pandemic pulled back the curtain on. Will our elderly be less isolated and lonely? Will essential workers be respected and paid the fair wages they deserve? Will the mental health of young and old receive the attention it warrants? Will refugees be welcomed as brothers and sisters who, like us, need to work to stay alive? Will our democratic ideals hold? Will we care enough about our common humanity to forego revenge and examine, with greater compassion, our treatment of others? Pope Francis told us, “A crisis reveals what is in our hearts. To come out of this crisis better than we went in we must let ourselves be touched by others’ pain.”⁸ To be touched by the pain of others presumably means we cannot remain indifferent to human need. We cannot be indifferent to lives lost and human suffering the way the pandemic was indifferent to the destruction left in its wake.

Even now, against the dark expanse of that pain, traces of what we know of the human spirit remain recognizable. Ordinary people brought food to hospitals where, despite exhaustion, medical personnel worked around the clock. An appreciation for many of the essential workers who had often been taken for granted now surfaced as those workers remained dependable, showing up day after day. Heroic police officers went above and beyond, sacrificing themselves to defend our U.S. Capitol. People sought to bring humor to the dying—even, or perhaps especially, to strangers. A greater love was at work and apparent in countering the rampant destructiveness of Covid. In March, 2020, active duty military were deployed to Army field hospitals. Navy hospital ships were sent to both coasts: the USNS Mercy to Los Angeles, and the USNS Comfort to New York. The ships brought personnel to help with thousands of Covid patients in hospitals and nursing homes. When retired medical personnel were called on to help out, *more than 9,000* responded in what was surely an outpouring of love and service to help fellow humans fight an enemy that remained completely oblivious to the viral harm it spread everywhere!⁹ In an example of love’s transformative power, Tiffany Herbert and friends in Colorado sewed 1.3 million masks and pieces of PPE. She commented on a “sewing machine that was collecting dust before the pandemic,” but is now “bringing comfort to countless people in need.”¹⁰ She received help from other sewers in 35 states and has now shifted her focus to helping the “homeless and tribal communities, who need hats and blankets.”¹¹ Nor were they alone in their services of love. As powerful as it was and remains during its long reign, the pandemic has not been able to stamp out love shared with neighbors and friends. Neighbors have called to check on other neighbors, wanting to know if and how help is needed. In addition to delivering mail, postal workers have also delivered groceries to elderly citizens on lockdown. A retired man in Paton, Maryland, fixes bicycles in his garage at no charge—650 of them as of early 2021. He feels the happiness of others is his payment.¹² Confined as we were, these and many more acts of giving love buoyed our spirits by affirming, despite the grim pandemic backdrop, our common love for humanity. People reciprocated their love for others by sharing their grief of losing so many loved ones and in gratitude for the sacrifices made by first responders. In March, 2020, Italy was the first country with a massive outbreak of Covid-19 deaths. Opera singer Maurizio Marchini sung from his balcony and comforted a pandemic-stricken Florence with the sheer beauty of Puccini’s *Nessun Dorma*.¹³

To interrupt the thick stillness that hung over national lockdowns, flash mobs were soon to follow, playing instruments and singing across neighborhoods.¹⁴ Towards the end of 2020, Operation Warp Speed succeeded in making vaccines for Covid-19 available. The FDA authorized emergency use for the Moderna vaccine on December 18, 2020, and for Pfizer’s vaccine the following week. Neighborhood signs announced the appreciation ordinary people felt toward the medical personnel who worked nonstop to save lives: “Heroes work here.” Once elected, President Biden mourned a staggering 572,726 deaths in America alone—which was more than the number of those who had died in WWI, WWII, Vietnam, and 9/11 combined.¹⁵ Then he spoke of Americans “finding light in darkness.” And because at that time, more than one American was *still* dying each minute, he emphasized, “I need every American to do your part.”¹⁶ On March 6, 2021, Congress passed a bipartisan “\$1.9 trillion Covid-19 relief package to deliver \$1400 stimulus checks to millions of Americans, to extend the enhanced unemployment benefits (\$300/wk) and to boost funding and ramp-up vaccine distribution needed to reopen schools.”¹⁷ The American Rescue Plan provided an “annual child tax credit of \$3,600 for children up to age 5 and \$3000 for children 6-17.”¹⁸ This expanded “Child Tax Credit led to the largest ever, one-year decrease in childhood poverty in American history.”¹⁹ The Child Tax Credit has since expired, but efforts are underway to extend it—that is, if we care enough to *end* child poverty in America. Lester Holt’s suggestion that “tomorrow may be the *real* start” of a new year is a chance for each person to bring hope to those around them by re-pairing relationships that have frayed—relationships with family, colleagues at work, and with neighbors everywhere. Each tomorrow offers a chance for the differences we make now to help create a revised and better normal—to make the changes during this period in time ones we want to pay forward to the next generation. Perhaps now is also an opportune time to challenge ourselves with questions about why things are as they are—to hold in more regard the heroism found in people near us—those who work tirelessly to help others and those who respond more consciously to injustices that occur, repeatedly, on our watch..

Rejecting gossip, some groups and TV show guests, such as those on David Crabtree’s “NC Listening Project,” have taken time simply to talk with neighbors and discovered they are not the political enemies they have heard or been told they are! Ron Howard documented World Central Kitchen (WCK) in his film *We Feed People*.²⁰ Having now served millions of meals in Ukraine, Haiti, and other disaster areas, Chef Andrés, of World Central Kitchen, explained what spurred him to take action. After Hurricane Katrina, he initially witnessed *inaction*—a void or *absence* of response—as though we were in shock—to dire human need: “We had thousands of American citizens at the Superdome ... nobody was there feeding them, bringing them water, bringing them hope.”²¹ Chef Andrés response when he witnessed a seeming absence of love was to offer concrete hope with an even greater love for our common humanity. The values I find “different” today are less common and more marginalized, as other values have shifted center stage, especially technology, media, propaganda, and perhaps a love of materialism—valuing economic comfort and image over human lives. Christian values, once more common, are still apparent in Good Samaritan responses to natural and man-made disasters, but less so elsewhere. In what follows the values considered are not exhaustive or even dominant values. In today’s speeding culture, some may be the values only of a Luddite minority not fully in step with the times.* But in the midst of speeding change, outsiders can notice what may be overlooked. I was raised with certain values and adopted others as an adult. Some I have learned by sharing with highly intelligent students during the many years I taught at community colleges. The grimness of being under the pandemic’s siege for so long has made it easier to discern what may be more fragile but also more visceral, and thus, what one might choose to be more mindful of...more intentional about...to hold more closely.

* There are many positive uses of technology—the translation of world languages, the almost unfathomable readings of outer space, the incredible prosthetic limbs, the “not impossible vests” that allow deaf people to experience “hearing” music, and recently, what I hear about AI helping those with dyslexia. It is good to focus on these positive and sometimes trans- formative uses of technology and now, in particular, AI. But in the rush to recognize the positive aspects, hype often substitutes for lack of principled review by human consciousness. The harm, often propelled by naked greed, can relate to what may be *most* valuable in a culture. Only the European Union and California have placed regulations on what might harm humans. Nobel laureate Maria Ressa, who led the *Rappler* news organization in the Philippines, states: “Everything you post is pulled together by machine learning...we’re cloned. Then A.I. comes in and takes all of our clones, puts it together in a mother lode database. That’s what’s used to microtarget.”²² The perspective most concerning to me is the erosion of autonomous critical thinking skills, which are necessary for the vigilance that sustains democracies as well as personal integrity. Today we have a Congress that cannot find the will to overcome unfettered greed allowed to amass in the hands of a few, nor the ease with which lies are ignored in order to safeguard political futures. Despite an ongoing mental health crisis among young Americans and whistle-blower testimonies that are now years-old, Congress has passed no meaningful legislation to create guardrails that regulate the new powers of AI.²³ At a Senate hearing on January 31, 2024, some in Congress fumed that trillion-dollar corporations block Congressional action with armies of lobbyists and lawyers. But that is precisely the point. Guardrails are needed to critically evaluate such concerns before “innovations” get so out of control that we as individuals cannot control them. Trillion dollar corporations are now comfortably cushioned from regulations a more socially-minded Congress might have foreseen.