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The Ideas That Won't Survive the Coronavirus

Covid-19 is killing off the myth that we are the greatest country on earth.

By Viet Thanh Nguyen

Sometimes people ask me what it takes to be a writer. The only things you have to do, I tell them, are read constantly; write for thousands of hours; and have the masochistic ability to absorb a great deal of rejection and isolation. As it turns out, these qualities have prepared me well to deal with life in the time of the coronavirus.

The fact that I am almost enjoying this period of isolation — except for bouts of paranoia about imminent death and rage at the incompetence of our nation's leadership — makes me sharply aware of my privilege. It is only through my social media feeds that I can see the devastation wreaked on people who have lost their jobs and are worried about paying the rent. Horror stories are surfacing from doctors and nurses, people afflicted with Covid-19, and those who have lost loved ones to the disease.

Many of us are getting a glimpse of dystopia. Others are living it.

If anything good emerges out of this period, it might be an awakening to the pre-existing conditions of our body politic. We were not as healthy as we thought we were. The biological virus afflicting individuals is also a social virus. Its symptoms — inequality, callousness, selfishness and a profit motive that undervalues human life and overvalues commodities — were for too long masked by the hearty good cheer of American exceptionalism, the ruddiness of someone a few steps away from a heart attack.

Even if America as we know it survives the coronavirus, it can hardly emerge unscathed. If the illusion of invincibility is shredded for any patient who survives a near-fatal experience, then what might die after Covid-19 is the myth that we are the best country on earth, a belief common even among the poor, the marginal, the precariat, who must believe in their own Americanness if in nothing else.

Perhaps the sensation of imprisonment during quarantine might make us imagine what real imprisonment feels like. There are, of course, actual prisons where we have warehoused human beings who have no relief from the threat of the coronavirus. There are refugee camps and detention centers that are de facto prisons. There is the economic imprisonment of poverty and precariousness, where a missing paycheck can mean homelessness, where illness without health insurance can mean death.

But at the same time, prisons and camps have often served as places where new consciousnesses are born, where prisoners become radicalized, become activists and even revolutionaries. Is it too much to hope that the forced isolation of many Americans, and the forced labor of others, might compel radical acts of self-reflection, self-assessment and, eventually, solidarity?

A crisis often induces fear and hatred. Already we are seeing a racist blowback against Asians and Asian-Americans for the "Chinese virus." But we have a choice: Will we accept a world of division and scarcity, where we must fight over insufficient resources and opportunities, or

imagine a future when our society is measured by how well it takes care of the ill, the poor, the aged and the different?

As a writer, I know that such a choice exists in the middle of a story. It is the turning point. A hero — in this case, the American body politic, not to mention the president — is faced with a crucial decision that will reveal who he or she fundamentally is.

We are not yet at the halfway point of our drama. We have barely made it to the end of the first act, when we slowly awaken to the threat coming our way and realize we must take some kind of action. That action, for now, is simply doing what we must to fight off Covid-19 and survive as a country, weakened but alive.

The halfway point comes only when the hero meets a worthy opponent — not one who is weak or marginal or different, but someone or something that is truly monstrous. Covid-19, however terrible, is only a movie villain. Our real enemy does not come from the outside, but from within. Our real enemy is not the virus but our response to the virus — a response that has been degraded and deformed by the structural inequalities of our society.

America has a history of settler colonization and capitalism that ruthlessly exploited natural resources and people, typically the poor, the migratory, the black and the brown. That history manifests today in our impulse to hoard, knowing that we live in an economy of self-reliance and scarcity; in our dependence on the cheap labor of women and racial minorities; and in our lack of sufficient systems of health care, welfare, universal basic income and education to take care of the neediest among us.

What this crisis has revealed is that, while almost all of us can become vulnerable — even corporations and the wealthy — our government prioritizes the protection of the least vulnerable.

If this was a classic Hollywood narrative, the exceptionally American superhero, reluctant and wavering in the first act, would make the right choice at this turning point. The evil Covid-19 would be conquered, and order would be restored to a society that would look just as it did before the villain emerged.

But if our society looks the same after the defeat of Covid-19, it will be a Pyrrhic victory. We can expect a sequel, and not just one sequel, but many, until we reach the finale: climate catastrophe. If our fumbling of the coronavirus is a preview of how the United States will handle that disaster, then we are doomed.

But amid the bumbling, there are signs of hope and courage: laborers striking over their exploitation; people donating masks, money and time; medical workers and patients expressing outrage over our gutted health care system; a Navy captain sacrificing his career to protect his sailors; even strangers saying hello to other strangers on the street, which in my city, Los Angeles, constitutes a nearly radical act of solidarity.

I know I am not the only one thinking these thoughts. Perhaps this isolation will finally give people the chance to do what writers do: imagine, empathize, dream. To have the time and luxury to do these things is already to live on the edge of utopia, even if what writers often do from there is to imagine the dystopic. I write not only because it brings me pleasure, but also out of fear — fear that if I do not tell a new story, I cannot truly live.

Americans will eventually emerge from isolation and take stock of the fallen, both the people and the ideas that did not make it through the crisis. And then we will have to decide which story will let the survivors truly live.

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