

Hearts and Minds

How do we build from the current corona crisis towards a more sustainable future?

Introduction

Times of crisis and tragedy force us to work together, not as individuals, but to consider ourselves also as part of something larger. Against an invisible problem that demands vision, empathy, compassion and critical thought, it is no surprise that we run into difficulties. We face a virus now, but we are facing a global problem as well, a problem concerning humanity, life and survival. We need to reorganise our priorities, to acknowledge and put our values to the test. We must, in a pandemic and in any global issue, be educated, examine our habits, actions and thoughts. This is where I believe building must begin, from the fundamentals. If we are to learn anything from the current corona pandemic, and if we are to apply the knowledge from the lessons we have so harshly grown from, we have to begin by asking, what is important?

In this essay, I shall explore that question. First, I will consider the curious case of weighing up personal discomfort against the abstract concept of the greater good. Second, I will look into the worrying argument that economic value is comparable to the value of a life. Third, I will review a common solution offered which is for those in power to act despite criticism. Finally, I will argue that the solution is education through effective communication. If we are to comprehensively account for the difficulties and issues that surround any action towards a sustainable future, we must do better than facts, figures and transparency. We must communicate, educate and reevaluate. We must encourage critical thought and discuss matters concerning our values. I argue we must look inward, we must interrogate and seriously give thought to not only what will happen, how will it happen, where and when but crucially, if we are to really motivate people's minds, we need to ask, what matters, what is meaningful to us?

Problem of Discomfort

One issue that we encounter in regard to the virus and of sustainability, is how it weighs up against personal inconvenience. During the corona crisis, we have seen those electing to persist in their parties, in social

events and gatherings, citing that the reward is worth the risk¹. The young especially, in their interpretation of the ever-changing statistics, believe that they will not be affected, and more worryingly, if affected, that is perfectly alright. I identify two important details of note paralleling the sustainability conundrum. One, is examining the values fueling the reasons behind why they think this way. Two, the issue of statistics.

There are many reasons as to why one would believe the reward is worth the risk, but a common rhetoric heard is that doing something small like staying in, or avoiding social gatherings, or recycling, using less water, contributes a relatively insignificant amount of effort to a problem so big. Simply put, the cost of discomfort does not result in a corresponding beneficiary result that is sufficient to outweigh the consequences of that discomfort. My sacrifice does not matter if everyone else doesn't do the same, and since it seems unlikely that everyone would, why would I inconvenience myself? In matters of a sustainable future, the point is far more poignant, why contribute to a future that I would not live to see? What benefit is there in an investment in something so long term, so doomed to fail? When something so big requires so many people to cooperate, the only way we can be persuasive enough, is not just by appealing to facts (we've tried that) but appealing to values.

On the question of whether it matters, whether it is significant enough, I would like to simply use a story to demonstrate my point. A little girl strolls along the beach helping beached starfish by placing them back into the sea. A passerby questions her actions. Why would you bother, how many starfish could you save? The moment you throw one back in, one washes back ashore. How can your actions matter, how can they be significant? The little girl merely picks up another starfish and places it in the water. She responds, it matters to that one. And that one. And that one. To me, that's my answer. Doing as much as only one can, may not result in a large-scale change. But it might be equivalent to one life, one drink of water, one breath

¹ "If I get corona, I get corona': the Americans who wish they'd" 28 Mar. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/mar/28/americans-who-dont-take-coronavirus-seriously>. Accessed 23 May. 2020.

of air. It may matter to something, to someone. Maybe, on my own, very little is done, but where else can we begin, but one random little act of kindness at a time.

On the question of long-term investment, I like to think that we begin to understand what matters in life when we plant trees knowing full well that we will never have the benefit of sitting underneath its shade, of never tasting its fruit, and never breathing the air it provides. There are important individualistic values, of course, our own dreams, ambitions and hopes, but we have important values that concern our fellow persons as well. We value family, friendship, our children, our friend's children. We value each other, we value life. I think we should think deeply about whether our existence only concerns ourselves in isolation, or, as I believe, we live in an indisputable relation with others. We are all connected, in more ways, symbolic or literal than one. It's not just about us. Deep within us, we have those values, we understand that in the case of the virus, if we allow ourselves to be affected, we must consider that our actions involve others, bring consequences to others. As with sustainability, we share, we are part of a whole. But how do we convince people of this? What exactly, are these values we deem so important?

Question of Value

I shall answer this question by looking at another stance that some have taken during this corona crisis. There was a suggestion that perhaps that the elderly, who are at a higher risk, are worth sacrificing in order to save the economy, in order to return our lives to normal faster, whatever that should mean.²³ In the sustainability debate, we often see economic considerations as a major factor against action. After all, what about jobs, what about putting food on the table for some? My first question is to ask if there is a dichotomy

² "Opinion | 'Covid-19 Kills Only Old People.' Only? - The New York Times." 22 Mar. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/opinion/coronavirus-elderly.html>. Accessed 23 May. 2020.

³ "Coronavirus has shown that the economy is more ... - Euronews." 28 Mar. 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/28/coronavirus-has-donald-trump-dan-patrick-ready-sacrifice-older-people-view>. Accessed 23 May. 2020.

here? Do we really have to weigh up the economy now with sustainability later, or is money really a problem? With all the wealth in the world are we seriously running out? Food, yes, water, yes, resources, definitely, but money? If a problem can be solved with more money, the problem isn't the faltering force of the economy, what we lack is the will to distribute our resources. How do we motivate this? We, again, must do better than facts, we must appeal to values.

That leads me to my second question for consideration, how is it possible to even suggest the comparability of a life with the economy? The mark of a civilisation is how much value we place on a life, even on a seemingly insignificant one. The value we place on the elderly, on the lives we sacrifice in the future for the economies of now, that's our value. We share that value of human integrity. What is this value of life? That value is our capacity for happiness, our capacity for suffering, our hopes, dreams, ambitions, potentials. Think about our joys, the moments where we laugh, the memories we make and the love we have for those we care about. We can empathise with those that have all of the same, because their experiences are ours. Ask oneself, how could we place any quantitative value even comparable to that? Where do we place the value of humanity, of compassion? When we force ourselves to answer these questions, to think this through, we strike at the heart of the issue, we produce the thoughts and inclinations from the values we hold and transform this into a will for action and cooperation.

Action

So what? Values are values, actions are actions. How do we conjoin the two? Why bother? Some suggest that those in power should take action in regard to these matters, pandemic or the sustainability of our future despite criticism. While a democratic system at times considers the government to be its servant, to act out the wishes of the majority, in times like these the government cannot be a waiter. Maybe this is not the time to ask what people want. It is in times like these where we trust expertise, for matters in which the general public has insufficient knowledge, expertise and experience, we should look to the government for leadership, not just representation.

While the captain of a ship takes advice on where we would like to go on a sunny day out, in a storm, we allow the captain to take us to where it is safe, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. It is easy to criticise, whatever those in power do, we don't have the ability to judge what actions are too much, which are too little. That's why we listen to experts, we allow expertise to determine our politics, not the other way around. I return to a previously touched upon point about statistics. The general public may not understand how to objectively and critically evaluate the implications of facts and statistics. The government, if it wishes to communicate its actions clearly and deal with the resistance from the public, must remind us of that. But how to truly be compelling? How do we convince the average person to place faith in leadership and expertise? We must do more than appeal to facts, we must appeal to values, something we can all understand and empathise as part of a fundamental part of ourselves.

Education through Communication

As I have mentioned, it's important for experts to remind us of the complexities of the facts, the figures and its implications. There are many technicalities in the way forward that escape our comprehension, and that's alright. We can, of course, do our own research and educate ourselves. We need to be reminded though, that we need to think things through a little more critical. Far beyond this however, at its fundamentals, is for those in power to communicate to us and get to something deeper, something more meaningful, significant and truly compelling, our values, our emotions and what is important. What does it mean to be alive? What is valuable in life?

So what exactly am I asking, what am I proposing? I'm proposing the platforms necessary for communications, I'm proposing more education on the facts, but more importantly, more discussion and thought on what is important. Leaders and politicians should be the first to examine this. In the past, we remark on famous and compelling speeches of those in power not for their ability to report to us the facts, we leave that to expertise, but how those speeches give us hope, inspire in us the strength to unite by

reminding us of the values that are important. We debate and discuss, because the media is not there to tell us what to think but sets an example of how to think. We don't exchange and express enough, the values that determine who we are, the lives we live, and the things we do. It's simple, we need more speech, more communication, not only about the things that matter, but why they matter. Change our hearts, change our minds. We have the means to do anything, we just need the will.

Conclusion

Our problems, fundamentally, come from the depths of who we are. If it is a human-made problem, then it is a humanly solvable problem. Thus, it becomes imperative to ask what makes us human, and that is a question of value. Admittedly, that is the hardest to do, there is no reference, no facts, no statistics, no evidence I can appeal to, nor to any quantitative measure of statistical efficiency. I'm suggesting something completely different, I'm suggesting self-reflection, something we don't need an education to understand nor to enact. I'm suggesting the thought that we be kind, because we can be.