

Making Sense of Our Shared COVID Circumstance

We must go back to a time in history when the world was rife with uncertainty—a time when Plato conjured up Dialogue to enable humanity to make sense of mystery. **BY TONY O'DRISCOLL**



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Today we find ourselves stuck in the liminal space between our familiarity with “*what was*” and our uncertainty about “*what might be*.” We’re lost in a COVID-19-induced fog, many of us feeling exposed, paralyzed, and defenseless.

Worse, the longer we find ourselves stuck in this foggy “*in-between*,” the more hopeless it feels. We’re caught between pining nostalgically for a past we know will never return and feeling overwhelmed with fear about an impending future that looks much more bleak than it does bright.

So how do we get unstuck?

How do we start to make sense of this seemingly intractable situation? How do we make our way through the COVID-19 fog to discover and get to the safe harbor of a better shared future? How do we navigate these uncharted seas with no lighthouse to guide us?

To answer these most existential of questions, we must look backward before we look forward. We must go back to a time in history when the world was rife with uncertainty—a time when Plato conjured up Dialogue to enable humanity to make sense of mystery.

A BLESSING AND A CURSE

Our unique blessing and curse as human beings is that we possess both consciousness and language.

The blessings of self-awareness and communication afford our species the opportunity to reflect upon the past, to project into the future, and to share these reflections and projections with others. Our ability to use these blessings to engage in Dialogue to make sense of the unfamiliar and uncertain is the reason we are still around and dinosaurs aren't.

We are the only creatures on this planet with the ability to make collective sense of a newly surfaced mystery by sharing our reflections and projections about it with one another, allowing relevance and meaning to emerge from the flow of our dialectical interactions, and uncovering breakthrough insights that none of us could have conjured up individually.

In short, none of us is as bright as all of us.

So what's stopping us? This is where the curse of being human comes in.

If you have ever encountered a snake, you likely felt your body recoil instinctively before your brain even registered the presence of the serpent. In times of fear, our limbic brain takes control of our prefrontal cortex by robbing blood flow from it and redirecting it to our arms and legs in case we need to run away quickly or climb a tree.

When the limbic brain takes over, we operate on biological instinct, not cognitive insight. When confronted with our deepest fears, we humans can conjure up cataclysmic future images in our mind's eye. In so doing, we literally scare ourselves to a point where we unconsciously fire up our limbic system, mindlessly retreating to invoke responses that worked in the past to address our current existential threat.

DON'T LET FEAR WIN

Today, unfortunately, the evidence suggests that fear is winning out. A scan of the global media landscape reveals a rising cacophony of adversarial debate—not constructive dialogue—with different factions arguing vehemently and sometimes violently for their age-old responses, positions, or solutions.

In 1933, when the Great Depression was at its deepest, darkest point, President Roosevelt was prescient in his observation: “*The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.*” Do we each have the gumption within us to rise above our own fears and override our biological instinct?

Novel situations require novel breakthroughs. Are we willing to purposefully seek out constructive dialogue to illuminate a progression path forward?

Becoming collectively unstuck from this liminal space requires that each of us face up to our worst fears, let go of our limiting preconceptions, open our hearts and minds, and embrace our diversity of perspective by engaging in meaningful dialogue to make sense of this mysterious COVID-19 circumstance.

Let's get the sense-making started! **i**