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Why Should We Want to Survive? Finding Meaning in a World of Pandemics and Climate Change

- Michael Clague

We are pleased to publish this chronicle written by Michael Clague. Michael has been a friend for many years. He has had extensive experience in community development in large cities and rural communities throughout British Columbia.

The prospect of the Apocalypse – the end of everything – has taunted humanity since biblical times, and probably before. It encompasses our most primordial fears – of the unknown, of events over which we have no control and of the loss of our life and of our world as we know them. It's among the myths that we humans have conjured since our inception – the End is near - whether prompted by swarms of locusts, floods, volcanoes, plagues, or events we have inflicted on ourselves, most recently nuclear war and climate change. We wonder why. Have we angered the gods?

And today, faced with the convergence of the worst world pandemic in a hundred years and dire predications about the global climate emergency, these fears lurk in our psyche and haphazardly burst out in public conversation. Especially unnerving is the prospect that we might fail to limit global warming to 2 degrees centigrade, which will give us at best a 2 in 3 chance of avoiding catastrophic ecological damage before the end of the century.

When I was very young, I read a book called the “Big Eye.” It was a sci-fi novel about the threat of a huge asteroid colliding with our planet. It made an impression. I had never considered the possibility that everything I took for granted in my world could end – just like that. I was drawn into the story's description of how people responded to the predictions of the immanent demise of our world. As I recall some carried on as though there was no threat. Some partied like there was no tomorrow – which was expected to literally be the case. Some simply gave up any semblance of their daily lives.

Today our story is more complicated. We have no control as to whether or not an asteroid hits earth (though already, serious work is underway as to how one might be diverted). So our primary responsibility, if this were the case, is to determine how we behave in light of a circumstance for which we are not responsible; with personal and social breakdown or with dignity in how we respect ourselves and others?

Today we humans are the cause of our possible demise. Having created it we have the responsibility for our personal behaviour in facing this prospect. And we have to decide if we

want to do something about it, even at this late hour. The pandemic reminds us of our frailty and vulnerability.

But why should we do something about it? It is only worth acting if we believe life is worth living, this special momentary period each of us is given to experience this amazing world. It is the creation of meaning that makes life worthwhile for us humans, and mobilizes us for engagement in the world. This too is uniquely our responsibility. We have no excuse if we fail to create the reasons for why we should live.

We live by myth. Through the myths we create we find meaning in life. Myths can be spiritual, religious, and cultural. We are the authors.

Today we are the heirs of the myth of human progress which has dominated the western world, and, (without requesting it), much of the rest of the world for the past three centuries. This idea of progress, while dominated by science and technology is also about human social progress. Social progress is committed to improving the human physical condition to enable us to survive and live longer in robust health. With our physical health secure, social progress is also concerned with expanding the range of individual and collective choices we have to live fulfilling lives – thus nourishing our mental health (and reinforcing thereby our physical well-being). Finally, social progress is concerned with designing and building systems of equity, collaboration, decision-making, cooperation and governance and law that enable us to live well together, peacefully.

The record of the progress myth – that an ever-improving future is possible -has been rocky – witness the Holocaust, slavery, misogyny, colonialism, and environmental destruction – but none-the-less there has been over the past two hundred years appreciable material advance in human-kinds' health and physical well-being.

Not surprisingly, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic everything is being gauged on how long before we can return to “normal – to continue the march of progress. The spectacular success of creating vaccines in less than a year is a powerful validator for our faith in progress. Yet climate change is surging in as an even larger disrupter to our world as we have known it. We are having to rethink normal.

How are we supposed to respond when our normal is disrupted? If the world as we have known it is threatened with oblivion, why should we want to survive?

My work in community and social planning over the years brought me into British Columbia's single industry towns. In the boom years of the 50s – 70s they epitomized the aspirational life-style of the post war years particularly in forestry and mining. With good salary, union jobs many workers lived in attractive, suburban-style homes in communities set in spectacular environments. Education and health amenities – while modest by city standards were none-the-less a vast improvement over what had gone before. The recreation vehicles, boats and

campers parked outside 2 car garages attested to the incomes inside. The local travel agency offering southern vacations was another.

Many of these communities had attractive social amenities; rinks, pools, community centres and access to library services if not a local library itself. There were networks of voluntary organizations in sports, recreation, and religious life.

And yet. Explore a little deeper and alcohol, drugs, family violence and family breakdown were all too prevalent. The break-up of a family was especially difficult. Usually it was father who had the job. Mother and kids might have to leave town, absent the services, supports and job prospects that otherwise might have enabled them to stay.

I often asked myself why this would be occurring when people are living in such apparently favourable circumstances. My conclusion: people had all of the toys, but not enough of the personal meaning for a truly fulfilling life. How quickly things can unravel when we rely on external “things” as the cement to hold us together.

Today, the shock of COVID-19 and the climate crisis are equally testing us as they disrupt our “normal.” Just how resilient are we? Do we realize we need to create a new “normal?” Can we accept that the normal we have known excessively substituted market-driven commercial choices for those of quality of life? We have been deriving too much of our meaning in life from consumerism (bumper sticker on a Rolls Royce: “The one with the most toys wins.”). We have allowed ourselves to be seduced by the commercial myths generated by the market to give us meaning. Full confession; I am an active participant.

Our consumer, market-fueled normal will let us down for what lies ahead. A meaningful life is not to be found therein. It is neither a justification nor a motive for the survival of our species. It has polluted our innate need for recognition, belonging and place in society with ephemeral material symbols.

From whence is our meaning for living to be found? It is to be found in the quest for choices that draw out the best in human nature. The good news is that the capacities to create these choices are already within us. Each of us has the power to exercise them. They are how we can choose to behave in the most difficult of situations. They constitute the better side of human nature:

- Respect
- Tolerance
- Fairness
- Honesty
- Equity
- Integrity
- Recognition
- Appreciation

- Contribution
- Trust
- Cooperation
- Caring
- Patience
- Love
- Compassion
- Willingness to listen to the other

In place of securing our meaning and recognition through market consumerism we achieve it through striving for excellence in the talents that each of us have. We achieve it by agreeing that we are together in this mobilization for survival, and that no one should benefit at the expense of others. The age of increasingly unchecked capitalism and income and wealth inequality must come to an end. To quote Mark Carney, former governor of the banks of Canada and England – ... *unchecked market fundamentalism devours the social capital essential for the long-term dynamism of capitalism itself.* (139: “Values”).

In addition to enabling science, technology and yes, the market, to create solutions equal to the challenges of climate change this is a call to the artist in us to give emotional and intellectual expression for what we are experiencing. The arts validate and they challenge. They press us for honesty. They assure us we are not alone. They open unexplored horizons from which we can create meaning that personally fulfills and motivates us to act for the larger good. They energize us to celebrate our accomplishments.

And whether “Artist” or athlete, or scientist, or tradesperson, or engineer, or educator, or parent, or none-of-the-above we are motivated to be the best that we can in who we are and what we do. We create our meaning through our engagement in the common good. And in doing so, we are advancing social progress.

We don’t know if we will be successful in avoiding extinction as a species. We do know that, dire as the warnings are about the climate crisis, we still have time to act to make changes commensurate with the challenge. Seth Klein, in his recent book “A Good War” (2020) argues that Canada can make an appreciable difference by mobilizing on a scale comparable to the Second World War. He sets out a credible blue print. Similarly in his presentation last year to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance (June 19, 2020) Guy Dauncey argues that *it is well within our cultural, technical, social and economic means to achieve a carbon-neutral world.* Lessons from our current country-wide mobilization to control the Covid pandemic apply here, too.

We also know that every effort, every idea, every action we take individually and in community may well be the one that makes the difference. And regardless of the outcome, we will have the satisfaction of knowing we are giving it our best. We will be acting with integrity and with meaning. Good reasons for wanting to survive.

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