

Since the Coronavirus broke, people all over the world, have been shaken up

Rick McInerheney
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Since the Coronavirus broke out into the world as a pandemic just weeks ago, people all over the world, me included, have been shaken up, never to be the same again. We face a disease that threatens our own lives and livelihoods, as well as our loved ones -- our children, our parents and grandparents, our friends near and far.

Whether the virus originated in the Wuhan, China, either in a wet market or elsewhere, seems without question. What is also without question is that world affairs will never be the same again. But the geopolitics and its ramifications I will leave for others to debate. Clearly we have global economic meltdown which will take many years to stabilize, and we hear daily reports of the horrendous rate of infections and loss of life caused by the virus around the globe, especially amongst the frail and elderly. On top of that, it hasn't yet spread to many vulnerable third world countries that are much less equipped to deal with it. Alas, I fear the worst is yet to come in many areas.

On a national level in Australia, I am heartened that we have handled the pandemic so well so far. I am also hopeful that our political, business, scientific and medical leaders can be more collaborative going forward as we have seen evident in recent weeks. In some ways the virus is a wakeup call, highlighting such glaring national discrepancies as our over-dependence on China, our lack of a manufacturing base in key areas and our lack of fuel storage for emergencies.

What also seems evident, to the eternal optimist in me, is that amidst the doom and gloom, there is cause for hope. On a physical or environmental level, previously smog covered cities now have clear skies because air travel has largely been grounded, factories have closed or have cut their production, and road transport has reduced. Less demand for coal and other fuel equals lower emissions, giving the planet, and all of us living on it, a breath of fresh air in more ways than one. The positive environmental impacts and implications of Covid-19 are real.

Returning as the salt of the earth

But it is the possibilities on the spiritual level, of family harmony, social cohesion, and enhancing our key relationships with God and one another that gives me increased hope for the future. The havoc that Covid-19 has created is causing many to re-evaluate their lives, their priorities, as they face their own mortality. One day a person or a family has a stable income, the next day they are jobless and facing an uncertain future. Who would have imagined two months ago that we would all be sheltering in our homes, afraid of

meeting other people, even our own family members, for fear we will catch an unseen contagion? Where we used to meet face to face, families are adapting by having Zoom meetings. Because of lockdown restrictions we are doing more together, whether it be gardening or walking or cooking or watching movies together.

For over forty years I have been affiliated with faith based groups, including the Family Federation for World Peace and the Universal Peace Federation. Our core philosophy is that the family unit is supposed to be the happy place where God seeks to live. But often in the busy-ness of our lives we can easily become distracted and neglect these important relationships. Husbands come home tired from work, and wives who have had a busy day can easily clash and the children bear the brunt of this. A downward spiral often ensues leading to the breakdown of family life, which in turn is the genesis of all of our burgeoning societal problems such as domestic violence, teenage suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, depression, crime and the list could go on. It's fair to say that the world pre-virus was not in great shape.

But Covid-19 has hit the pause button on our lives. We suddenly have more time -- time to be together, caring, more sensitive and loving towards those who are supposed to be so dear to us. I heard one wife say on talkback radio this week that she is so happy with her husband since he has been home more. He is doing some things around the house that he does not normally do, because he works from home and has more time. Will this become the new normal? Will we learn some lessons that will linger after the virus passes? Of course there are still issues of a domestic nature going on out there in suburbia, but hopefully the peace and quiet of life in isolation will give many families a chance to reset and refresh.



How pleasant it is when God's people live in unity

UPF and its affiliate organizations is unique in that it celebrates the role of all the world's religions as vehicles for God's efforts to bring peace and harmony in the world, based on loving families as the cornerstones of a peaceful world. So is the virus era an opportunity for faith in God to re-enter the stage and play a role in modern life in Australia? Well maybe, but it won't be easy, because God has a bad reputation. Faith in God, which is so strong in our Asian region, is waning in our nation. Statistics show that Australia is becoming a predominantly atheistic nation according to the recent census.

"The 2016 census disclosed a startlingly abrupt change in patterns of belief in Australia. Just five years before, in 2011, 61 per cent of Australians identified themselves in the census as Christians. In 2016 this number had dropped dramatically to 52 per cent. In 2006 the figure had been 64 per cent, so in the half decade after 2006 there was a gentle decline. In the half decade after 2011 there was a radical decline. Nearly one in ten fewer Australians identified as Christian than five years earlier. One in ten!" -- *God is Good for You* by Greg Sheridan.

Greg Sheridan, acclaimed foreign affairs journalist with *the Australian* newspaper, in his excellent 2018 book, *God is Good for You: A Defense of Christianity in Troubled Times*, points out that, "In Australia all these factors have played out. Now the state is starting to restrict Christianity. These are small steps so far, but they will become bigger steps in time. It is difficult now to teach scripture in a Victorian state school. Queensland education bureaucrats moved to discourage children from mentioning Jesus on the playground. Anti-discrimination bodies are receiving cases where the complaint is that a church institution has taught traditional Christian doctrine."

Mr. Sheridan points out the important role that faith groups play in Australian life. For example, the second biggest deliverer of social aid in Australia is the Catholic Church and other providers such as

Anglicare and the Salvation Army are essential in the support structure for our community. "Catholics also educate seven hundred and sixty thousand students in more than one thousand seven hundred schools. Every one of those students represents a subsidy paid to the state by the Catholic education system, because the students at these schools cost the government less than the students at state schools. All this vast force of human solidarity proceeds directly from people's faith in Christianity." (pp. 26–27) There is now also a welcome influx of faith-based schools of other religions in Australia such as Islam, making a positive contribution to our society.

He makes nations great

There is no doubt that devout faith in God is what built the foundations of this great country. The overwhelming majority of Australians were church-going believers throughout the period between and during the First and Second World Wars and up until the 1960s. Much of the governing systems, including universal health care, the welfare safety net and government supported education, which we take for granted today, originated in decisions of leaders who were, in the main, believers in God. My father and his mates who fought in World War II put their lives on the line daily for years, forging a relationship with God. My mother prayed for his safe return; shortly after the war, he did, and they celebrated their union at church. Our family was built on faith in God as were those of so many other "baby boomers."

Certainly, religions over the ages have made their fair share of mistakes and caused untold misery, but we must be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. Humanity's essence is good, but we have free will unlike the other creatures on earth. We just need to clean up our act. Fast forward to the modern world today and its preoccupation with the material and the mundane. God is nowhere to be seen in our media-driven society. It's all about entertainment and indulgence. Where will I travel to next? What am I going to eat tonight? What car will I buy? What new gadget do I need? Unchecked, the lust for material "things," without a healthy balance of living for the sake of others, leads, for many at least, to a gradual numbing of the core of our essence, the Godliness within each of us.

"Materialism, the most boring as well as the least accurate way of experiencing the world and recording experience, is the dominant mindset of the Western intelligentsia in our day." -- A. N. Wilson, *The Book of the People*, 2016

Where is there a place for God in this modern world, distracted by the allure of glamour and wealth? Ironically, the holy sites and temples of affluence and materialism, such as New York, Paris, London and Milan, seem to be the prime targets of this dreadful disease. Greg Sheridan underscores this. "Perhaps the most important challenge was sustained affluence. It contains an especially alluring falsehood -- the idea that some people don't need God's mercy. Every human being, and the universe they create, stands always on the brink of extinction. And every human being is in need of mercy. But widespread affluence, with all the good things that it brings, helps disguise death and hides it in nursing homes and hospitals, and keeps people distracted, ever more distracted."

Will we transform?

It seems the worm has turned [those who have silently taken abuse, have begun to fight back] with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. People's lives have been, or likely will soon be, turned upside down. Doubtless there will be many who will endure extreme suffering and grief here and abroad with the loss of loved ones. We need to pray for our healthcare heroes as they care for the sick, our scientists to find a vaccine, our leaders to guide us through the turbulent times ahead, as well as our loved ones.

It is an old joke that one's prayer life often improves dramatically when, during an air flight, the captain announces that the aircraft is about to crash. When one is suddenly hovering on a precipice, one tends to get a little more serious. I believe the Covid-19 era is such a time. The question for me is, out of this horrible event, will this crisis be the catalyst to usher in a better world in which people become more grateful for the precious life they have? Will they prefer kindness and caring for one another to greed and lust for wealth? Clearly on the difficult road ahead over the next year or two in our world an opportunity exists for positive progress and development. I guess it's up to each one of us to take some time to reflect, to pray, to connect to the God within, and to decide whether we would like to be the change we want to see in the world.