

ASSI ESSAY CONTEST 2020

COVID -19 Pandemic: Tapping the Opportunity in the face of Adversity

Dr. Rohit Amritanand

In the Spring of 2015, Bill Gates delivered a remarkably prophetic TED talk. He predicted that it would be '*microbes not missiles*' that would cause the next worldwide catastrophe. He went on to lay out an effective 'anti-virus' program. How ironic that a computer geek anticipated what the medical fraternity did not even contemplate. Either way, once again this billionaire philanthropist was spot on. Unfortunately the world in idiosyncratic style turned a deaf ear to his warnings. Fast forward five years. The world is being ravaged by a highly infectious and near perfect killer, the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Since its appearance in December 2019, more than a million people have died and countless more have lost their livelihood and loved ones. The world has never seen such a complete devastation of its economic and social order. Leave aside the relentless and mind numbing statistics of death and destruction, today we witness the human race cowering behind a mask, slithering into full protective gear at the smallest provocation. Simple social gestures like a simple smile vanish behind the sealed confines of an N-95 mask, a firm handshake is a gentlemanly gesture of the past, a hug is met with shocked recoil and a sneeze is seen as a mega social faux pas. What is most paralyzing is the fact that there is no end in sight to this torment. We are in a free fall, begging to hit rock bottom since then at least there will be an end to our misery.

So in the midst of these overwhelming odds, what hope is there? What do we learn? Could there be a message emerging from this mayhem? In fact, can we be so daring to think that there may be opportunity in the midst of such overwhelming adversity. Or does that thought sound downright mercenary, opportunistic, and perhaps even sacrilegious to those who have surrendered everything to this ghastly pandemic. I believe not. Human beings are hardwired to survive. This primeval instinct is what separates us from the many extinct forms of life on Earth. In times of crisis we are able to marshal our resources and eventually prevail. As members of the medical fraternity we are favorably positioned in social order, leaders in many a situation. In such a crisis, it is the nature of leaders to look for ways to lighten the load of people, to keep morale up, to peer beyond the dark clouds of despair in order that they may be the first to see the silver lining. I believe that besides death and destruction this pandemic offers us opportunities to *Reinvent*, *Rethink* and *Reconnect*. Let us consider where these opportunities are.

Reinvent ourselves: The overwhelming totality of the early 'lockdowns' left us staggering like a punch drunk boxer crashing to the canvas. With the absolute cessation of our daily routine, surgeons like us who flourish on algorithmic routine, found ourselves at a complete loss. With no patients in clinic, no surgeries performed and no inspiration for the creative flow of academics or research, it felt like the world had stopped turning. The sun rose every morning and eventually set, but the hours in between were filled with emptiness and crippling anxiety. The future seemed bleak. As government and hospital administrations grappled with the virus

and issued, and then reissued new protocols every day, just keeping up with these diktats was like riding a roller coaster. Solemn and learned Epidemiologists would pontificate upon words like 'R-Nought' and create complex mathematical models to predict when the pandemic would peak. Figures today would be revised tomorrow. Average intellects like us would listen in awe and bemusement. In the midst of all this uncertainty, the need to quickly seek alternative ways to offer assistance to our patients, to teach medical students as well as to reach out to colleagues became an immediate need. We were further challenged by the fact that this needed to be accomplished while obeying the boundaries of social distancing. Our hitherto slumbering streak of Innovation awoke! We discovered a new medium of interaction to reach out: video conferencing in Medicine. Though technology may have birthed this invention, necessity nurtured it. Today videoconferencing has opened a whole new world of safe, speedy and virtually free professional and personal interaction. With the opportunity of hundreds of people from all over the world to join in, view and converse with each other real time, I am sure this audio visually appealing medium of communication is here to stay. In fact I wonder why we didn't hit upon this idea earlier! I suppose it took a splash of cold adversity to awaken our senses to alternatives to the status quo. But aside from the many virtues of videoconferencing, I suggest that the more valuable lesson learnt through the events of the past few months has been the realization that each of us has an amazing ability to reinvent ourselves when the game is not going our way. Einstein said 'adversity introduces a man to himself '. How true! The pandemic has given each of us the opportunity to relearn our own capabilities. Some have decided to lose weight, exercise more, learn a foreign language, learn a musical instrument or learn to cook. This spirit of reinvention maybe one of the most useful skills we will carry away from this pandemic. Truly an opportunity to reinvent.

Recalibrate our priorities: Our life before March 2020 was buried within a wish list of goals, achievements, tasks and accomplishments. We had our agendas. Our priorities were firmly stated. We knew what we wanted and how we were going to get it. We drew up long term plans and strained every sinew to stay focused. Then came COVID 19! This microscopic menace showed us how little we were in control of events. The ensuing periods of lockdown and enforced idleness gave us time to consider 'Other Things'. Distant concepts like health and wellness, family and friends, suddenly seemed to be the only thing that really mattered. When all around us news of sudden sickness of even healthy people set in, we realized that life can be mercilessly unpredictable and in the final analysis things like relationships were vastly more important than scrub lists and seminars. We began to appreciate the value of family time, the value of being a helpful neighbor, the value of checking up on aging parents and family members, of walking the extra mile to help out a stranger who was left stranded thousands of miles from home without food and funds. Strangely, it took a malady to uncover our humanity. The pandemic has given us time and opportunity to rethink and recalibrate our priorities.

Reconnect with Nature: This pandemic has once again reinforced that we cannot abuse and exploit nature and get away unscathed. Too long we have had a reckless attitude towards our natural resources. Rampant destruction of flora and fauna alike is par for the course. The

anomalous cross species transmission of the Corona virus serves as a warning to us that when we do terrible things to Nature, it too will respond in equal measure. Tons of plastic waste have bubble wrapped the earth in a toxic embrace. In a deadly reversal of roles, Nature has unleashed a virus that now demands us to be donned in layers of asphyxiating synthetic gear. We hope this pandemic has given human beings the time and awareness to restore our relationship with Nature. All of us would have appreciated the cleaner air and bluer skies that appeared during the lockdowns, thanks to the cessation of traffic and industry. We have had time to appreciate how fragile the relationship we have with Nature has got. I pray that this pandemic has given us a chance to reconnect with Nature and the opportunity to make our peace with an infuriated world.

This horrendous pandemic is not done with us as yet. No doubt it has been an extraordinarily challenging year for all of us. But I see quite clearly that there is still a lot that we can discover from these events as the months move on. Like precious metal that is forged and purified under conditions of intense pressure and heat, the human spirit too is strengthened most in times of such stress and adversity. It is up to us to discover the nuggets of opportunity that lie hidden with the painful circumstance of this pandemic. Personally I have used this time to reinvent myself, recalibrate my priorities and reconnect with what's important. I pray you discover your own pearls along the path of this pandemic. Stay safe!