

Tapping the opportunity in the face of adversity

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In one of his inspirational speeches delivered in 1959, the late American President John F. Kennedy gave a new interpretation to the term “crisis”. He pointed out the Chinese equivalent of the word, which involves two brush strokes, one of which means danger; and the other stands for opportunity. Although the Chinese meaning put forth by the President was not factually accurate, relevance of these phrases in the current phase of pandemic cannot be understated. The essence of humanity and its evolution over the past millennia have been established on its ability to stand tall during diverse vicissitudes of situations, transcend sufferings and metamorphose into a wiser species. Time and again, we have been astounded by the multitudinous benefits ushered by calamities and the manner in which lessons of the past get bequeathed onto future generations. At the denouement of every crisis, there is a questioning of existing paradigms, alterations in prevailing motivations, collective intensification of adrenaline rush and cumulative focus of the entire mankind towards solutions; which eventually triggers the emergence of incredible opportunities, innovations and even creation of new systems.

Being an Orthopedic Surgeon, I would confine my arguments to the arena of surgical science and the influence of past catastrophes on the same. The most recent global cataclysms which still remain afresh in our minds are the two World Wars. At the back drop of major devastations brought out by them, the entire specialties of Orthopedics and trauma care, which were still rudimentary during that age, made humungous progress. The crisis served as a crucible where all scientific discoveries and innovations in medical care were put together, catalyzed and applied to war surgery. The time-honoured “Thomas splint”, which still remains the popular way to immobilize femur fractures, was an exceptional benefaction of the World War-I. The paradigms of wound management, antisepsis, emergency care, transfusion medicine, fracture management and rehabilitation made huge strides during this era of disasters. Likewise, every segment of human activity and every domain of scientific

and technological pursuits of humanity reaped huge benefits in the aftermath of these crises.

COVID crisis

Cradled by the Brobdingnagian growth in virtually every sphere of technological endeavours over the past three decades, human species was “sitting pretty and pampered” at a time when the second decade of twenty-first century was coming to a close. Humanity was unquestionably faced with relatively-miniature crises like economic turmoils, population explosion, poverty and related health hazards, as well as political tumults. Nevertheless, the manner in which we began to dominate our surroundings, predict and understand various aspects of nature (including weather), enable communication across the globe in a way which was heretofore unconceived and made a total joke of the distances across earth (and the space beyond) gave us a pseudo-sense of total control over the world. At a time when we imagined that we could even hegemonize the whole macrocosm, an invisible organism gave the humanity a huge jolt in a totally unprecedented manner. Our collective complacency made us trivialize the enormity of the problem at its beginning. Today, when we are already close to a year since its emergence, we still continue to vacillate regarding its source, patho-physiology, transmission, complications and long-term effects. Although administration-engineered actions all over the world like travel restraints, social-distancing and enforcement of use of masks and hand sanitization have remained our major defence, there is still a long way to go for the establishment of concrete prophylactic (say, vaccination) and remedial (like, antiviral therapy) measures.

How the pandemic unfolded in my life?

Personally, the time the pandemic emerged in my life was crucial, as I had just stepped into my career as a spine surgeon after my fellowship training. At a time when I was invigorated to toil hard and was beginning to burgeon in my métier, the nano-sized villain appeared from nowhere and the whole world came to a complete

halt. It was as though the almighty had applied emergency brakes to my vehicle at a time when it just beginning to accelerate and my career graph plummeted even before it could rise. The initial few weeks of this unprecedented situation were bewildering. Added to this, my land lord asking us to vacate our house, abrupt slashes in salaries (at a time when we had important financial commitments), and frequent accounts of kith and kin falling sick did not help my cause. I began to let myself get engulfed by the sense of gloom and disquietude unfurled by the pandemic.

What proved to be the turning point in this circumstance?

It was not too long before I could realize the two glaring truths of the situation. Firstly, this problem was definitely not unique to me. In fact, I was in a much better position to face this calamity than a majority of others around me. Secondly, the situation was going to remain unfavourable for longer than anyone could have anticipated and it was going to be a while before things returned to normalcy (if at all they ever would...). The plights of impecunious daily wagers and quandary faced by the migrant labourers were heart-wrenching. There were clearly just two options ahead of me; to continue brooding over selfishly or whole-heartedly accept the situation as it was, be thankful for every single day I was alive and do my best to ameliorate my life as well as the others around me. I thankfully chose the latter option. Looking back, I feel proud on my ability as a mini-chemist to transmute some of my adversities into opportunities over the past few months.

How did I move ahead?

The biggest blessing of the pandemic was the enormous amount of time it offered me for pondering inward and realising what mattered to me the most. I took baby steps of improvement on *personal*, *familial*, and *social* fronts, which will go a long way ahead in life. I began to realize that the two crucial initiatives, which could potentially help me in my quest for self-improvement, include maintaining a strong body and a tough mind. I learnt to devote a few hours every day to practise yoga and

cardio exercises. Gradually, I brought healthy changes to my food habits too. I could also experiment with diverse meditative practices and have learnt to understand the true joy of being at peace with myself. I have become so accustomed to these activities that I continue with them regularly till date. I began to engage in multifarious creative and leisure activities like painting, drawing, writing poems, reading books and cooking, which had remained neglected for ages. The cooking recipes, which I learnt, remain my favourites till date.

I suddenly realized that I had a lot of time for my family. I still cherish the beautiful moments I could spend chatting with my wife and playing with my son. I was astonished to comprehend how quickly years had rolled and my son had grown from an infant to a 6-year old. I had never given myself enough opportunity to give these little miracles around me a thought; and COVID provided me the right set of circumstances to enhance the intimacy among us as a family. With nowhere to travel and no friend to visit, for the first time in my life, I gave myself the chance to read stories for my son, indulge in games and creative activities, bathe and dress him up; and help him with school lessons. I could also re-connect with my parents, sister, close relatives and friends during these days; and I take pride on how I utilized this window to make my familial bonds grow stronger and more amicable.

One of my neighbours has been running an orphanage over the past few years. The pandemic significantly affected the donations and day-to-day functioning of the organization. I had the opportunity to contribute in different ways to help the Institution survive during its “tough times”. The pandemic just opened many doors in which I could start being useful to different components of the society.

Overall, the pandemic helped me immensely in getting rid of my “habit” of self-pity and egocentricity, realize the significance of every single moment I am alive, give priorities to things which truly matter to me, apprehend how blessed I am, understand how to look after myself and surroundings better, and grow personally in every aspect of my being. Here I am now... gradually getting back to practice, although the “little guy” is still around. There is still colossal uncertainty everywhere.

But I can perceive that every single progress that I made outside my “operating-room” has unquestionably ameliorated me as a surgeon too!

The true test of leadership is how well you function during a crisis. The current situation is such that every person must take upon oneself the responsibility of steering us out of dark times. The way we behave ourselves and guide humanity at this juncture will be remembered by future generations for ages to come.