

The Karma of COVID

Harlan Gilbert

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Good evening to both all of you who are gathered here and people from many places out in the world. [The lecture audience included both those in the hall and many watching online.]

It's a solemn time, a difficult time in humanity's existence, and I just want to consider for a moment how rarely we have a moment that affects virtually every member of humanity, wherever they live. In a sense, this moment has intervened in the whole history of humankind on many levels.

First of all, this universality. Deep in the heart of the Amazon, there are tribes that have barely any contact with humanity and yet have been fighting COVID. In the expanses of the oceans there are islands which seem tremendously isolated, and yet are fighting COVID. This geographical universality is one aspect, but the depth of the impact is another aspect. This illness has been felt on so many levels: there are the health effects, the deaths, acute illnesses, chronic illnesses, and light brushes with a new illness in humanity's existence.

There are the psychological and social effects, the social isolation, reliance on virtual technologies for work and study, the biographical effects, the economic effects, and perhaps most unfortunate, most hard to bear, the loss of an ability to support and be supported by those we treasure, those we love.

Here I would like to gratefully acknowledge the tremendous efforts of the healthcare workers throughout the world who have sacrificed so much, in some cases their lives and their own health, to help those people who needed help in these times.

There are events that are of karmic significance to an individual but don't mean so much to others around them. There are events that are of karmic significance to a nation or group but are of relative unimportance to other peoples, and there are moments, we are living in such a moment, which is of memorable significance to all of humanity. In the future each one of the people living today will look back and recall the time of COVID; it is a decisive moment in our destiny. Tonight, and for the next two Tuesdays, I would like to consider the nature of this intrusion in our destiny: where it came from, what we've been confronting, and where it might be leading.

As many of you also did, as a child I heard of the Black Death, the Bubonic Plague, all these mysterious illnesses that almost seemed like they were from a fairy tale, a time that could never

come again, when people perhaps had to wear strange masks and hide from the world, be isolated, because of their illnesses. This seemed like a world that had gone, that had passed away. I could never have conceived that I might be living at such a time, and yet we look around: we are in a sense reliving a medieval experience today. A huge difference between today and those times is our understanding of how to prevent and heal illness. So many people have been enabled to come through what would have been a far more tragic time because of this understanding. In the second of these lectures, I would like to talk a little bit about what it means to have medical technology, a medicine that is able to transform human health, to support human health.

Before I start looking with you — and I'm going to ask for your help in a moment to picture some aspects of this destiny we're living through — I feel the necessity to speak of a parallel disease assaulting us today: a more interior and essential crisis in human relationships: the disease of divisiveness. It has driven our civilization as strongly or more strongly than the virus itself. It strikes more deeply at our hearts and more desperately constricts our ability to breathe the common air than COVID-19. I would characterize this as a tendency toward us/them thinking, a polarizing attitude whose tragic symptom is the loss of a desire to comprehend the other, to empathize with our fellow human beings.

This crisis can and will only be overcome when people of goodwill on all sides make real efforts to overcome this polarization, to trust one another to work together in unity. The higher goal of these three evenings is actually to experience a path to resolving this deeper illness in our social life, the more dangerous of the two crises, the breakdown in society, by practicing a contemplative and phenomenologically grounded approach to our common experience of our shared situation and thus to realize that we have more in common, all of us, even—no, *especially*— in areas whose complexity allows viewpoints to diverge. For it is exactly where the world becomes complex that we are in need of multiple viewpoints to comprehend the reality we are facing: for society is healthiest when in each human soul the whole community finds its reflection and when in the community the virtue of each person is living.

I would like to start our contemplations today by asking you to picture the whole nexus of complexities that have arisen in these last years: the deaths, the illness, the social isolation — all of this together. Picture this now as the deed of a spiritual being, for we know that the entire existence of the world and of humanity is guided by good spiritual forces who bring to us what is necessary for us to face. So, the first question, of overwhelming power, a riddle really, is: *How can the good forces that lead humanity confront us with the terrifying and existentially threatening power of illness and fear?* How can this be?

The first time this question was raised consciously for European philosophy was perhaps in the 1500s, when a terrible earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal, and the people of the town wondered: *How can a good God destroy or strike down those who most believe?* This is the mystery of the goodness of God in an apparently evil world, a world where it appears, at least, that there are at times evil consequences.

We're living as powerfully in this question today as ever humanity has. This will be the underlying mood I would like to hold through a set of three lectures. This question of Spiritual

Beings and the temerity we have trying to understand their deeds, the necessary temerity, but they are far larger, these deeds are far larger than our consciousness can ever completely grasp. I am very humbled tonight in trying, with your help, to begin to find a picture of some aspects of what is far larger than us. Terrible events may have a good purpose in human destiny: They may be there to teach us lessons we might not otherwise learn. They might be there to bring us to new realizations and to bring us away from old commitments.

Many of us either have been through an illness ourselves or seen others go through an illness, have watched our loved ones struggle or depart this world, and through these experiences come to a deeper relationship to ourselves, to our humanity, and to the karma of the future, and I want to keep those in balance because we often think about what our past deeds must have been to cause something that happened today, but that is only one possibility. Parts of our experience are calls from the future — new moments that don't depend on any past and are not responses to something we have done, or others have done before: they're doors and windows opening into the future, chances for a new beginning whose consequences will echo on in the future. I would like to go through these three aspects of time with you today:

- *What from the past is working into these events?*
- *What is the present that we are faced with, what kinds of decisions are we called upon to make in the present because of these events?*
- *And what is the future that is being called forth by these events?*

In particular, we can ask the following questions:

- What led the world to be susceptible to a pandemic at this time or to this particular pandemic?
- What free will decisions have you made in relation to and in response to these events?
- What decisions have you been faced with, forced to confront?
- What changes, perhaps long-term changes, have you been stimulated to make in your life or (looking further into the future) lives?
- What future world aim is hidden in these events? If there is good guidance of the universe and if these, as all events, are being brought to us by that good guidance, what purpose would this have, how will the present moments affect the future?

I ask for your help now in turning to the first question: What led us to be susceptible to a pandemic of this kind or this particular pandemic. I would ask you to contemplate that and then to offer your thoughts on what is coming from the past of our society or individualities, what is it from the past that opened up this possibility that something of this nature could enter in.

[The audience offered the following]

- Air travel
- Interwovenness of our society
- Environmental pollution: Air, water, poisons, electromagnetic pollution
- Humanity's divisiveness
- Egotism

- Climate change
- Distancing from nature due to technology
- Consumption of fast and cheap food
- Mass production, factory farming, we could say
- One-sided materialism
- When COVID first started in China, the thought that it's their problem, it's over there. That's all related to egotism in a certain sense, that the first awakenings of COVID were not our problem because they were far away
- The urge to control
- Corporate greed
- Overuse of technology, specifically electronics technology
- The exploitation of, especially, disadvantaged people and of the vulnerable
- Bigger and more and better at all costs

I'd like to add a few elements here: due to age—never has humanity had so many elderly—due to health conditions, and due to (this relates to some of the other things that were mentioned) lifestyle choices that have led people to be more vulnerable in their health, we have a very frail population today in many ways, and these are the people who have been most affected by COVID: the vulnerable.

A medicine which emphasizes fighting illness rather than nurturing health, I think we could say, forgetting the need to nurture health. There's this wonderful word, "salutogenesis": care of health. A consciousness of where or how health arises has been lost or forgotten.

I'd like to add a few more elements:

- the treatment of habitats, a loss of healthy habitats for so many species which has driven many wild species into closer contact with humanity.
- The ways that animals have been held in unhealthy conditions, in close proximity to and sometimes for consumption by human beings—which actually relates to factory farming—so that unhealthy animals are being consumed or there has been contact with them.

We have a fragmented society because of divisiveness, trying to deal with a disturbed nature with a tremendous amount of illness coming to us from its [nature's] disturbances. The great majority of illnesses in all of humanity's existence have been zoonotic, that is to say, they come from animals to human beings. COVID-19 is no exception. This probably arose first in bats; whether the virus was affected by human intervention or not is unknown right now. Whether it was or not, the illness originally came from animals. And we have a vulnerable population, we have an interwoven society, with air travel connecting every part of humanity. There's never been an epidemic before that spread so widely. So, this is a picture of how the past influenced our susceptibility to such a virus.

Perhaps I could add one last element here: a concentration of the elderly in institutions where COVID could spread rapidly from one to the other, instead of being cared for in families or in smaller settings, a remarkable change in our social patterns.

Can we awake to the nature of the preconditions that will lead to such events? This is not the only such event that will happen. We are actually very fortunate that COVID-19 was relatively low in mortality; it is estimated that around 1% of the people who have it die. There are illnesses that kill 30 or 50% of the people who have them. And COVID-19 is not highly transmissible; measles, for example, is far more transmissible than COVID-19. There's no reason to expect that the next encounter will be, and I realize the paradox of saying this, as mild as this one has been.

We have to recall that we live on a continent where approximately 400 to 500 years ago, illnesses from Europe swept through the population; it's generally estimated that about 90% of the indigenous population of North America and possibly South America as well were decimated by new illnesses they had never encountered before.

Addressing the precursors, the parts of our societal, individual, and natural lives, that allowed this event to arise, perhaps one thing we might bring out of this encounter, if we are wise, is this: To know history avoids having to repeat it, while not knowing history is to be threatened with repeating it. There are so many aspects of that, but connected to this divisiveness is, on the one hand, misinformation, which has been extremely prevalent, and, on the other hand, sensationalism that has not aided our ability to come together in a common purpose. I realize that misinformation means different things to different people; that's okay. But everyone agrees there was misinformation.

Okay, there are probably many more factors. I'd like to pause here. Militarism was also mentioned: there are so many factors that are disturbing our society today. And you could imagine that the virus in a way, in a larger sense, feeds on these forces. These have been the forces that nurtured, that fed, the virus.

Viruses are tremendously mysterious things. We'll talk about that in the second lecture: they actually originate within ourselves. Outside of us, they are completely dormant, they don't change, they don't grow, they don't form. They only form and reproduce inside living cells. Thus, they are the product of life, they are our product: we, the living creatures, are responsible for their origin. A tremendous mystery.

Why do living cells create these entities? Nobody quite understands the full range of that question. Some years ago, bacteria were considered to be pathogens, only negative; we now know that there are tremendous numbers of healthy bacteria in our body, in fact, far more than negative ones. There are also huge numbers of viruses that live within us. We do not know, at this point, what positive influences they also have. Simply unknown: we don't know what most of them do. But we produce them. They come from us.

This particular virus fed on the factors mentioned above and became a negative influence, I would suggest, because there was so much negative in our world and society that it could feed upon. That's a bit of the karmic past of the COVID epidemic. It's a dour picture, but it also can give hope because if you understand what creates something, what nurtures something, or would allow something to exist, you also understand how you can overcome it, how you can prevent it, how you can create a world that would be better.

I'd like to leave the past for a moment, and come to a mystery of time: the infinitely small moment of the present. It's already passed. We live in a constantly transforming world where the future comes towards us. We have a moment of decisive action. And then it's past, become immutable again.

Everything before us, not yet realized, is pure potential. What will happen in the future?

Everything behind us is fixed. It's done. We can't change. I wish I could go back. A few years ago, there was a popular catchword, "rewind." If you made a mistake: "rewind," as if you could just go back and fix it. Well, it's impossible. Isn't that frustrating? What's past, what's fixed, what's done, is immutable, unchangeable, but the future is all potential. But it's not yet here, it's ungraspable.

The only moment we actually have within our power is the present.

And I would like to ask you to contemplate this for a moment—I'll give you a moment of silence to think about this—: *What decisions has this pandemic, have these events, forced you to confront? What decisions have you made as a result of the experiences of the last few years?*

Keeping those decisions in mind, I would like to inquire: *On what basis those decisions were made?* Each of those decisions was different for all of us. What they have in common is they were made out of certain feelings, motivations. I'll say a word more about what I mean by that, but: *What were the factors that led you to make the decision in the way you did that led you to decide this way, or that way?*

And I would invite you to call to mind, those of you who can picture it, Steiner's sculpture of the Representative of Humanity. And there we find a middle way, being tugged by two opposing forces, being polarized in two directions, and trying to hold the balance. For our purposes now I would describe these two polarizing forces as, on the one hand, fear, and on the other hand, egotistical pride.

Between these we find conscience, empathy, and wonder. Conscience, empathy and wonder, and fear and pride. Which decisions did you make out of fear? Which decisions did you make out of an egotistical sense: It's just about me, I can make this decision purely for myself? And which decisions did you make out of conscience, empathy, and maintaining a sense of wonderment about the mysteries of the world?

Fear of the virus and fear of the vaccine: we think of these as opposing: Some people are afraid of the virus, some people are afraid of the vaccine. It's all fear, so much fear. In this sense, these are not opposed, but share the same motivation, a single kind of motivation, falling into a reactive relationship to the world, where human autonomy gives way. This is also the realm of misinformation: misinformation is there to stir up fears.

A second factor is egotistical pride: I can do whatever I want. I have rights without responsibilities, everything is my personal decision. I defy the community. And I know that there is one right way and I know what it is. Another temptation.

Between these two, a middle path? Yes, there is much to be afraid of, but I do not give way to fear. Yes, I have rights and autonomy, but I feel a connection to the community and responsibility for others, to engage in the conversation, not knowing what will come out of it.

Someone once recently used the phrase: "inquiry before advocacy." Aristotle said the first virtue of all virtues, the one out of which all others are born, is prudence. That's a funny word to us today. It's a name no one would call their child anymore: Prudence. It's a virtue we don't think of, it's something we don't think about a lot. But prudence is neither fear nor rashness. It's careful consideration, responsible relationship to the world.

This balance between personal responsibility and responsibility for the community: What is my prudent response to that complex situation? I have my life to care for, I have this community to care for, I have the world to care for. Perhaps one counterbalance to fear is trust in one's destiny and in the good guidance of the world.

To live in the present is to be challenged to find one's way among these forces. It's a beautiful image, of course, that when we walk, we never are in perfect balance. We move between fear and pride, left and right. And it's the ability to play a little bit that the child must acquire, to be able to walk, to try out a little bit moving to one side, to try out moving to the other, and yet to come back into a balanced relationship to the whole.

To deny this polarity is to lose the wholeness of our being. The fears are justified, the pride is justified. We are wonderful beings. We do have terrible things happening in the world. Yes, those are both true. We can explore a little bit. But somehow, somehow, as a society, we have to find our way back to the middle way, to the center, to the ability to hold those polarities from pulling us apart.

Each of us can only do that as an individual, but if enough individuals take up that task, I do believe we will transform this very challenging social climate of our times in radical ways, in human ways.

I'd like to mention four or five different levels of response to the epidemic. We've all been challenged to maintain our balance in each of these levels.

Some of these are unrecognized frequently in the public discussion, which is focused in a one-sided way on fending off the outer sources of infection. Not that that's not necessary but that's a single aspect of the world. And I'll come to that as the last of the five.

First, I'd like to mention that there's a call in any illness, in any confrontation with challenge, to find a spiritual response, a sustaining, moral and spiritual practice, seeking wisdom, seeking empathy from the good forces that guide our lives as individuals, as groups, and as all of humanity.

Second is the level of personal responsibility to act transformatively in the world: Are you going to be the agent of change you would like to see happening? There's a beautiful saying that, if you wish to change the world, first sweep your own doorstep. Can you act transformatively on

your doorstep, in your immediate horizon, in positive ways, taking responsibility for your actions while having empathy for the other?

On the soul level: can we conquer these two forces of fear and prideful individualism to have a balanced, vigorous, and prudent soul life?

As I've mentioned before, another level is salutogenesis: the importance of maintaining a healthy body, which includes a healthy immune system. One of the wondrous things that illuminate human existence is that acting selflessly for others is one of the healthiest things you can do for yourself.

And finally, there are the hygienic measures that we're called upon to use in order to protect ourselves and others: the social distancing and isolation, the masking, the travel restrictions. These are purely physical, they're on a purely physical level, and yet they are also helping that the illness is not spread. We should not disregard the physical level of our lives. There's a wonderful saying: "trust in Allah, but tie up your camel." I don't quote Steiner very often, but here's one quote that I'd like to offer you from Rudolf Steiner because it is so mind-blowingly powerful:

"People perishing in a natural catastrophe has led to these people feeling connected at a later time and through their common destiny, proving strong enough to unify in a common purpose."
I'll read that, again: *"People perishing in a natural catastrophe has led to these people feeling connected at a later time and through their common destiny, proving strong enough to unify in a common purpose."*

What an extraordinary thing that the whole of humanity is going through a natural catastrophe together. Could this possibly be a way to give us a common purpose in a future life? Not just one particular group of people who experienced this earthquake in Lisbon or Haiti, this volcano in Iceland, but all of humanity to be forged together into a common purpose.

I'd like to mention a few historical events that make me think this is plausible.

The first is a little speculative, but there are many historians who believe that the plague in the Middle Ages led to labor saving inventions being economical. If you have a lot of labor, free labor, cheap labor hanging around it's not worthwhile to make an invention. In one sense, the entire industrial revolution emanated from a plague, bringing our world forward in important ways. Imagine your lives today: spending your day washing your clothes by hand, farming with simple tools, walking everywhere you went. Our lives have been transformed in powerful ways by the new tools the industrial revolution brought.

The second image I'd like to give is a contrast. In the 20th century, two powerful wars swept through Europe: World War One and World War Two, which brought huge numbers of other countries [outside Europe] in their wake. These became World Wars. But what were the consequences?

After the First World War, the victors decided that they would take retribution upon their enemy. They laid down heavy penalties. They broke apart great empires that were interethnic,

interestingly enough, into ethnically fragmented units. They emphasized fragmentation and enmity. And as a result, Europe plunged into a second catastrophe, worse than the first.

At the end of the Second World War, and here, extraordinarily enough, America led in unbelievably positive ways, there was something called the Marshall Plan, where the United States said: Germany and Japan are two great countries, which need to be built up in healthy ways and restored to their full health in the community of nations. Enormous funds, enormous resources, human resources, advisors, were sent over to enable these countries to grow back together into the web, the healthy web of nations, the community of nations.

And it worked. Germany and Japan became good friends of the United States, of England, of France, of all the countries involved in that war. And as a result, for 77 years now, none of those countries have fought each other, the countries that were centrally involved in those conflicts.

How you come out of a catastrophe is perhaps more important than the catastrophes, events themselves. So, the question I would pose for all of our futures is, how do we come out of this? We're still in the midst of it. But we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel perhaps. How will we transform (or not transform) the preconditions inside of us and outside of us that could lead to such an event? How can we become healthy as individuals on all these levels, healthier societies on all of these levels, and weave the world back together?

One of the most terrible and comical aspects of these last two years has been the attempt of nation after nation to deal with this locally. *We will solve the problem in our country.* It's like Whack-a-Mole. New Zealand had no more cases. But the rest of the world had plenty. What happened to New Zealand? Cases came in, the problem is still there.

For the first time in humanity's existence, we are interwoven in ways that preclude any solution to certain problems that doesn't involve cooperation on an enormous worldwide scale. Another, similar problem is climate change. There are countries that have remarkably reduced their carbon footprint. Carbon dioxide diffuses with incredible speed. To reduce carbon dioxide production in one country is fruitless in terms of affecting climate change even in that country. It is a small contribution to the general well-being of the planet certainly. But unless all the world unites to solve problems that are worldwide, we'll be playing Whack-a-Mole with human existence.

I'd like to offer two polar images of the future, a negative and a positive image to close, and then there'll be time for questions. The negative image is from the wonderful poet Yeats, many of you know his work. It is an image of how things we hope will not go, but of how our society is threatening to turn.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹*

There is a future we risk if we do not take up our lives with full consciousness, with wonder, compassion, conscience.

The positive image is a little philosophical. It's from Hegel, one of my favorite philosophers. "*Necessity is blind only insofar as it is not comprehended.*"

When we comprehend what is coming towards us, we gain the tools to transform it.

I'll leave it there for tonight and take up these themes next time.

Time 00:01

¹ From "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats