



“... the great irony, like so many hero/villain narratives, is that we ... are not that different [from COVID-19] ... Each disease we have faced in the past has made us more resilient as a species in our understanding of how we can coexist with and control the natural world.”

COVID-19. This virus is not the real enemy, but our approach to it could be

COVID-19 itself is just doing what it has evolved to do. To spread, replicate, and spread again. In many ways simply mimicking the organism that it finds a home in. In semantic terms, it is a name we give to a biological entity that now competes with us for the life we believe we want to lead.

But COVID-19 is not just this biological reality that we now stand toe to toe with: it has become the umbrella term by which we package all our hopes, fears, and uncertainties. COVID-19 is the manifestation of the shadow that stalks all of us, both individually and collectively. It is the other, the unknown, the promise of annihilation, the loss of control, the bogeyman, the monster under the bed, the ghost in the hallway.

Human life has always defined itself by its opposition to the threats it's faced. We are always classically asked to choose a side in warfare, rivalry, race, culture, sport, and so on, and this is the beginning of who we now believe ourselves to be. On what these others might try to take away.

COVID-19 has the capacity to take it all away from us: our loved ones, our bodies, our security, our freedom of movement, our money, our frenetic lifestyles, our desire to do what we want when we want. Hanging above all of us right now is the deep possibility of the loss of an old way of life that we didn't even know we took for granted. COVID-19 is the manifestation of the scattering of total biological chaos among our ordered pigeons.

Yet, at the same time, we have chosen this disaster. The conditions for COVID-19 to thrive could not exist without the way we have structured the world. In another epoch it would have been localised, wrought havoc, and then died with those unfortunate enough to have caught it. But the majority of the human world is so small now, so reachable. This is a virus born of our own evolution; having spotted the weaknesses to exploit, it has done so quite magnificently.

Throughout the history of life, creation and destruction have walked hand in hand.

Human progress is as much thanks to disaster as it is to ingenuity. Each disease we have faced in the past has made us more resilient as a species in our understanding of how we can coexist with and control the natural world. Disease and evolution, it could be argued, need each other.

To all of us, COVID-19 will mean something different as the reality of it emerges from the shadows we all carry. It threatens to reveal all the aspects of ourselves that we can keep hidden and maintained under the guise of a controlled and ordered society. All of us will fear its arrival differently, all of us will be tested differently, all of us will be unmasked differently.

Arguably, the only enemy here is ourselves, in our refusal to see this situation for what it is and our lack of respect towards what we need to do to stop it from overwhelming us.

Yet the great irony, like so many hero/villain narratives, is that we and COVID-19 are not that different. Simply doing what it is in our nature to propagate, spread, reproduce, and evolve. And meanwhile, as this titanic battle for life begins to emerge, the rest of the natural world watches impassively on, perhaps wondering what all the fuss is about.

They say that, for the first time in years, the birds in Wuhan have been heard to sing.

Giles Dawnay,
GP ST2, Wye Valley NHS Trust, Hereford.
Email: gilesdawnay@gmail.com

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