



“How has a virus seized our daily existence? And how can we reclaim it? Language. The very tool that expedited our species will be the thing that saves us again. Language is our fundamental software. The operating system that supports our thoughts and actions. In the COVID-19 battlefield, language is our greatest weapon.”

Language is our greatest weapon

Human being. A member of any of the races of *Homo sapiens*; person; man, woman, or child.¹

But, what does it mean to be human? Philosophers and scientists alike have struggled since time immemorial to capture the vastness of the human experience and answer this very question.

Let us start with the fundamentals. We are a primate, not the fiercest animal but blessed with an unusually big brain that allowed for the monumental development of language. Our brains became powerhouses that allowed us to not only survive, but to dominate the planet. In time, we could speak of danger or how best to create tools. And later still, we could speak of concepts, hope, and love. As we evolved, bolder questions were asked such as ‘what is a good life?’, ‘what is the best way to live?’. Later still, science revolutionised our culture, and we became able to utilise the planet’s supplies to have enhanced, longer lives. The digital revolution shrank the world yet smaller over the last half a century. Limitless longings can be just a click and a heartbeat away.

There is no denying that our tale is extraordinary. Certainly, when you compare the human complexity with a virus, you would think there was no contest. A virus is, after all, just a submicroscopic infectious agent. It is therefore astonishing to realise how the COVID-19 pandemic has hijacked our world. Thousands upon thousands have died, there have been unparalleled curbs on our freedom with global lockdowns. Disquiet and apprehension have become endemic in the global community; we can only guess what tomorrow and next week may bring.

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First, we have the language of science; the ability to share ideas and knowledge to the masses. Scientists the world over are communicating their understanding and informing political and healthcare decisions. Science and its language are locked into the public conscious at present. Every day we

learn more about this catastrophic virus.

Then, there is the language of social media. Distanced from our loved ones, millions are relying on the power of technology to keep them connected. In isolation, we are having to refrain from doing what is inherently human and seeking solace in one another. Instead, we have chatted, laughed, or sobbed over FaceTime or Skype. Our practice will not be alone in having a WhatsApp group to offer peer support during these tumultuous times. With the need for social distancing, telecommunication has allowed us to reach out to patients, while protecting ourselves and others. The last few weeks has seen the entire landscape of general practice change. Video and voice calls with patients have become the norm and not the exception.

Finally, there is the language of kindness. History has taught us that time and again, challenging times have brought out the best in people. And this COVID-19 pandemic is no exclusion. It would be easy to cast around and observe how people have hoarded, and thwarted government distancing advice. But such careless behaviour, I believe, is the exception. For every person stockpiling into their supermarket trolley, there are thousands of hospital cleaners keeping our wards sterile; and for every park sunbather, there are kind volunteers in their droves delivering food to the vulnerable. The words of gratitude for NHS staff and key workers spreading contagiously across our nation are a testament to this. Every moment of darkness has been matched by a moment of light with gestures of compassion. The language of kindness has connected communities, and people are literally singing from their rooftops to keep unity and good cheer alive.

We are human. And this COVID-19 pandemic has certainly confirmed just that. Undoubtedly, we are not the fiercest creature occupying this planet. But we have the power of language.

I hope that the very tool that allowed us to dominate our beginnings will be the force that allows us to overcome this pandemic.

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