

## XIV.

### The Meaning of Life \*

Rabbi Michael Lerner imagines an education for the future where students would learn to engage in studies that would prepare them for spiritual transformation. In alignment with our consideration of “*incarnation*,” one of the topics students would explore is “*Meaning of Life*.” Lerner explains this below:

In this stream, students would learn about the various ways people have sought to discover a framework of meaning for life. Students would study art and poetry, music and dance, world literature and philosophy, religions and forms of spirituality. They would be encouraged to consider their own paths for finding meaning, and to develop rituals, poetry, music, and dance that fit the lives they are shaping for themselves or as part of ongoing communities of meaning.

Students would also be exposed to the range of human suffering, projects and strategies for ameliorating or reducing suffering, and the range of responses and attempts to give meaning to the suffering and the attempts to be with suffering without giving it any larger meaning. They would also be exposed to the ways people have sought to find meaning through community action, mutual support, and love. Many students will have already had their own exposure to suffering in their families and communities, but the school situation will give them a different take: an opportunity to reflect on suffering and its meaning. So, too, students will explore experiences of unity, mystical luminosity and joy that are as much dimensions of life as suffering and cruelty.

Finally, students would be encouraged to prepare a rite of passage that they, together with parents and teachers as advisors, devised for themselves: a kind of “*hero’s quest*” in which they were initiated into the realities of some aspect of adult life. Adapting from suggestions made by [Zen Roshi] Joan Halifax, I suggest that such a rite of passage would involve going through a process that would include:

- 1. Plunging into some (carefully discerned) arena of activity - allowing oneself to separate from familiar paths and ways of coping so that one can “*not know*”.**
- 2. Allowing oneself to experience confusion, fear, and disorientation without jumping into denial or easy resolution of conflict.**
- 3. Healing oneself and incorporating into one’s being the knowledge learned as part of this process.**
- 4. Ending with a firm determination to liberate oneself and the world from suffering.**
- 5. Commitment to healing oneself and making a commitment to liberation for self, others, and the world is an essential part of spiritual transformation.**

While it could be argued that many students have already gone through stages “1.” through “3.,” few get to “4.” or “5.”

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\* From: Richard Rohr’s daily on-line meditation (CAC - Dec. 28/19). Rohr notes: “*Michael Lerner is an American rabbi at Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in Berkeley, a political activist, and the editor of Tikkun, a Jewish inter-faith magazine. Lerner has shared my own work with his audiences, noting the message of love and justice that flows through all the Abrahamic faiths and touches on all the great religious and spiritual traditions.* [Michael Lerner, Spirit Matters (Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.: 2002).

## XV.

### PRAYER IN A TIME OF COVID 19\*

Forgive us - As we have feared others, and in doing so, have contaminated our hearts.

Forgive us - As we have hoarded our resources, And in doing so have abandoned our witness.

Forgive us - As we have desired control, And in doing so, have not loved our neighbour.

Comfort the afflicted among us - In their loneliness - provide care. In their sickness - provide health. In their weariness - provide rest.

We grieve the contagious fear that we consume and spread -Soothe our anxious minds as we read viral headlines. Protect those who have been victims of racism and fear-mongering because of our dread of the unknown.

Protect us from the evil one - Who aims to use each update, not to inform or guide, but to stoke the flames of chaos and confusion.

We thank you for health-care workers who care for the sick and tend to bodies and souls with great compassion and commitment. Give them stamina. Give them wisdom. Give them grace.

We pray for those who lack access to health care, Or safe places to rest their heads.

We pray for the vulnerable: The sick, The disabled, The elderly, The uninsured. For the Kingdom is theirs.

We pray for the mother working paycheck to paycheck, Who worries about her children The job she can't afford to take time off from - For she reflects Your image.

We pray for the chronically ill fighting invisible battles, Hour by hour, day by day. Nourish their bodies; Protect their souls. For they are never out of your sight.

We lament our roles in an empire That values profit over human life, And takes advantage of our anxious spirits.

We acknowledge that we are not immune to the human condition, And we repent from ways we have benefited, from dehumanizing systems and structures.

We ask for your Holy guidance as we journey into the unknown. Ignite in us a spirit of generosity; Of hope and mercy; Of grace and truth; Of gentleness and self-control.

Cleanse our spirits, Comfort our minds, Care for our bodies, and make us new.

We give thanks that you lavish your grace onto us, Not pushing us into shame, but providing a steadfast comfort. When all else falls away, we turn to You and You alone.

We pray this in the name of Jesus, Who healed the sick and sat with the poor.

Amen.

\* This prayer was written by Kayla Craig of *Preemptive Love*, a peacemaking organization working to end war. She co-founded and hosts *Upside Down Podcast*, a place for conversations on faith and justice. Her prayer was published in [redletterchristians.org](http://redletterchristians.org) in Mar. 2020.

## XVI.

### Coronavirus Will Change the World - It Might Also Lead to a Better Future!

Thomas Homer-Dixon - Special to *The Globe and Mail* - March 11, 2020\*

**What's happening in response to the worldwide spread of the SARS CoV-2 virus (and COVID-19, the disease it causes) is a vivid example of a global 'tipping event,' in which multiple social systems flip simultaneously to a distinctly new state.**

What a difference seven days make. Shopping for groceries at a big box store near Victoria during the last week of February, I found nothing amiss. Shelves were well-stocked, people's carts contained the regular assortment of necessities and goodies, and everyone seemed to be happily going about their daily lives.

A week later, I stood in front of the same shelves, expecting to find them filled with the usual staples – flour, pulses, sugar and the like. But they'd been stripped bare. Now, shopping carts were groaning under giant bags of potatoes, stacks of packages of frozen chicken and large jugs of water. People kept their distance from each other in the aisles. No one was smiling.

Four days earlier, news had broken that the novel coronavirus had been spreading undetected for six weeks in King County in Washington State, just spitting distance across the water from Vancouver Island. Suddenly, what had seemed to be a remote problem was right in our back yard. And people rushed to prepare.

The coronavirus emergency is going to manifest itself in these kinds of micro-details in our day-to-day lives – in bare shelves, anxious conversation with friends, and the trials of juggling life's essential tasks and making ends meet when workplaces and schools are closed. But we should also take some time to see the larger picture, because this global health crisis is revealing critical vulnerabilities in humanity's planet-spanning economic, social and technological systems.

This larger picture is mostly painted in dark hues, but there are also some surprising silver linings around the coronavirus clouds swirling on our horizon. What's happening in response to the worldwide spread of the SARS CoV-2 virus (and COVID-19, the disease it causes) is a vivid example of a global "tipping event," in which multiple social systems flip simultaneously to a distinctly new state.

The most recent event of this kind was the 2008-09 financial crisis. It marked an abrupt shift in the world economy from a state of relatively high growth and modest inflation to a state of much lower growth flirting with deflation. The world economy has never returned to its pre-2008 state.

The relatively new science of complex systems shows that such tipping events are made more likely by the unprecedented connectivity in the networks that humanity has laid down in a dense web across Earth's surface – air traffic, financial, energy, manufacturing, food distribution, shipping and communication networks, to name just a few. This science also shows that until we manage this connectivity better – which could mean, among other changes, reducing our international travel, simplifying global supply chains and bringing some production processes closer to home – we're likely to experience more frequent tipping events of ever-higher destructive force.

The new coronavirus has properties that make it an especially powerful tipping agent. Most of us know the basic statistics: About 80 per cent of visibly infected people develop relatively mild symptoms; some 15 per cent become seriously ill; 5 per cent critically ill; and (according to the latest World Health Organization numbers) slightly more than 3 per cent die. This reported mortality rate will probably decline as specialists get better at counting infected people with mild or no symptoms.

But here are some less-recognized facts: The incubation period of this coronavirus is usually under two weeks, but data from China indicate it sometimes extends over three weeks. Infected people with no symptoms can transmit the disease. The virus appears to be present in at least some infected people's saliva, urine and feces. Similar coronaviruses can survive on surfaces for up to nine days (much longer

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than the flu's usual 24 hours). And while this coronavirus's current mortality rate is far lower than that of the 2003 SARS coronavirus (10 per cent) or Ebola (about 50 per cent), it's 30 times higher than that of the typical flu (0.1 per cent).

Perhaps most important, in the people with mild symptoms, COVID-19 often mimics everyday respiratory infections such as the common cold or the flu. This coronavirus is a stealth bug. Its relatively low lethality makes it more dangerous, not less, because it makes identifying carriers harder, giving them more opportunities to spread the virus.

The Harvard University epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch told *The Wall Street Journal* that he expects "a global pandemic" with 40 per cent to 70 per cent of the world's population infected within a year. Other experts agree, estimating an "attack rate" (the percentage of people who develop the disease) of 60 per cent to 70 per cent.

To estimate the disease's potential impact, let's be conservative and cut the proportion of humanity infected to 30 per cent and the coronavirus's lethality from 3 per cent to 0.5 per cent. In a world population of nearly 7.8 billion, these perhaps optimistic assumptions still produce an estimate of nearly 12 million deaths worldwide. If, instead, we use a 3-per-cent lethality rate and the experts' attack rate of about two-thirds, the estimate rises to more than 150 million. So it's entirely reasonable to say that tens of millions of people could die from this disease and – not to be overlooked – hundreds of millions could become seriously ill.

The attack rate might be substantially lowered if many countries impose draconian measures to contain the disease: shutting down transportation networks; banning large gatherings; closing schools, universities, and factories; and rounding up all suspected carriers or forcing them to self-quarantine. But such measures carry their own immense costs, especially in a world economy that depends on constant, high rates of consumption. China may be containing the spread of the virus, but the government has had to turn off parts of the economy to do so. Even if COVID-19 doesn't kill you, notes Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize winning economist, "it might kill your job."

The new coronavirus is also likely spreading fast in parts of the world – South and Southwest Asia, north and sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Latin America – that are saddled with governments of limited competency and resources, poor public-health infrastructures, and severely compromised urban water and sanitation systems. We don't know what's happening in many of these regions. They're literally blank spaces on the global coronavirus incidence map, because health agencies there often lack capacity to detect the disease.

At the beginning of February, just two labs in the entire continent of Africa, home to 1.2 billion people, could test for this virus. While the situation is better now – in recent weeks, the World Health Organization has dispatched testing kits to dozens of African countries – it's fair to say that more than half the human population will face this illness with little or no advanced medical help. These regions also risk becoming "epidemiological pumps" – vast reservoirs of the disease that reintroduce it regularly, in mutated form, into parts of the world that might have otherwise brought it under some control.

When we look at this larger picture, we see a striking reality: The SARS CoV-2 virus seems well-tuned to exploit the specific characteristics of the world we've created for ourselves – with our massive population tightly linked together by air travel, exotic tourist excursions and just-in-time supply chains, and marked by brutal inequalities in health care and physical well-being. Taken together, humanity is now among the largest bodies of genetically identical, multi-cellular biomass on Earth; all told, we weigh nearly a third of a billion tonnes. Combined with our proximity in huge cities and our constant travel back and forth around the globe, we're now an enormous petri dish brimming with nutrients for cultivating new diseases.

Complexity scientists aren't surprised by this kind of precisely tuned exploitation – it's exactly what one should expect in constantly evolving living systems. New viruses survive or fail by Darwinian logic. In recent years, countless viral mutations have certainly arisen and then vanished without a trace,

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because they weren't "fit" enough to survive – that is, they couldn't successfully reproduce in the specific world we've created. But now SARS CoV-2 may have our number.

Two key factors – high connectivity and high uniformity – make up this number, and together they leave us increasingly vulnerable to global tipping events. First, we all know that compared to, say, 50 years ago, connectivity between people, groups, technologies, organizations and companies around the world has soared not just through flows of information – phone calls, text messages, torrent downloads, financial transfers and the like – but also through flows of materials, energy, goods and people themselves.

But we've paid less attention to the rising uniformity of our species' institutions, practices, technologies and ideas. Nearly everywhere in the world, for example, national economic systems, including central banks, ministries of finance, and the like, now have similar designs. Financial instruments such as stocks, bonds and their derivatives are similar nearly everywhere, too, as are computer hardware and software, social-media platforms, antibiotics, core industrial processes, germplasm for essential crops and livestock (including humanity's 22 billion chickens, 1.2 billion sheep and 1.5 billion cattle), fast-food restaurants, clothing, dominant political ideologies, languages of commerce, consumerist notions of the good life and even blockbuster movies.

Research shows that high connectivity and high uniformity can combine to make large systems – such as our global financial, energy, food and information systems – far more susceptible to rapidly cascading change, in which shocks propagate like a row of dominoes falling over. A research team I led has also found that this combination boosts the risk of synchronized crises across normally independent systems. Between January and June of 2008, for instance, as the U.S. sub-prime mortgage crisis was reaching its climax, world energy prices soared – the international price of light crude oil rose more than 60 per cent to more than US\$140 a barrel – and the price of grain worldwide shot upward, too, triggering food riots and violence in dozens of poor countries. Our analysis shows that these three crises were intimately linked.

In the current coronavirus crisis, dominoes may soon start falling in major financial systems, especially in the heavily indebted Chinese economy, as the downturn caused by the pandemic drives up the proportion of non-performing loans. But cascading changes in our global social systems don't always have to be so pernicious. Some might be virtuous, and it's here where we can glimpse those silver linings.

Today's emerging pandemic could help catalyze an urgently needed tipping event in humanity's collective moral values, priorities and sense of self and community. It could remind us of our common fate on a small, crowded planet with dwindling resources and fraying natural systems. We won't address this challenge effectively if we retreat into our tribal identities and try to wall ourselves off from each other. COVID-19 is a collective problem that requires global collective action – just like climate change.

As with climate change, we need the best science we can muster. While humanity waits on tenterhooks for treatments and vaccines, we need to rebuild our collective trust in scientists, the scientific method and scientific findings. So, I place my own hope in the possibility of virtuous cascades of such positive, "normative" change. The coronavirus emergency is already causing terrible human suffering. But it's also just possible that it could put us, together, on a far better path into the future.

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*\* Thomas Homer-Dixon holds a University Research Chair in the Faculty of Environment at the University of Waterloo and is executive director of the soon-to-be announced Cascade Institute at Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C.. He authored the book The Up-Side of Down in 2010 and his new book, Commanding Hope: The Power We Have to Renew a World in Peril, will be published in August.*

**A Prayer for Our City - Richard Rohr (CAC) – Jan. 11/20\***

Jesus never told us to separate ourselves from the world. That's why St. Francis of Assisi and his brothers would not be monks. The Franciscan friars were a totally new religious movement, living in the middle of cities, right with the people, refusing to separate themselves. Francis didn't hate or avoid the world. He said we had to find a way interiorly to love and have compassion for the world. "*The whole world is our cloister,*" he taught us. Our friends at Mile High Ministries in Denver, Colorado, have written a beautiful prayer, adapted from Walter Brueggemann's *Prayers for a Privileged People*, that we would like to share as inspiration for this year's meditations on Action and Contemplation. We invite you to use place names specific to your location and read responsively in a group, though it may also be prayed alone. No matter the setting, allow the ground of silence to hold these sacred words until they birth compassionate action in the world:

**Loving God, you have set us in families and clans,  
In cities and neighbourhoods.  
Our common life began in a garden, but our destiny lies in the city.  
You have placed us in Victoria. This is our home.  
Your creativity is on display here through the work of human hearts & hands.  
We pray for Victoria today – for Saanich, Oak Bay, Langford and Esquimalt;  
For Highlands, Colwood, Sidney, Sooke, and the Gulf Islands.  
We pray for indigenous neighbours, for powerful people in banks or offices.  
We pray for those who live in parks and on streets, and for the new urbanites.  
We pray for Victoria's's neighbours:  
Vancouver and Seattle, Beijing and Nairobi, Mumbai and San Salvador –  
And a thousand other cities connected to us.  
In our neighbourhoods this day there will be callous moneymaking;  
There will be powerful people unable or unwilling to see the vulnerable  
Who are their neighbours.  
But there will also be beautiful acts of compassion and creativity  
in these same places – perhaps real forgiveness and generosity;  
Citizens will work together for the common good and more just relations.  
Help us see this city as something other than *us* and *them* ...  
Where imaginations are not limited by win/lose propositions and rivalry.  
Show us a deeper reality, God:  
Show us all your playground and invite us to play.  
Like the city of your dreams, make the Capital Region a just environment,  
Where those who were once left out enjoy the fruits of their labour;  
A place where children doomed to misfortune now play safely in the streets  
under the watchful eyes of healthy seniors;  
A place where former rivals and natural enemies work together in peace;  
And where all people enjoy communion with you.**

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\* Adapted from: [1] *Beyond Our Efforts: A Celebration of Denver Peacemaking* (Mile High Ministries: 2019), 251; and, [2] Walter Brueggemann, "This City . . . of God," *Prayers for a Privileged People* (Abingdon Press: 2010), 157. Victoria place names/local references were added by ML (LJR editor)

## XVIII.

### Oh Lord ... How Long?\*

I toiled for a not-for-profit provider of long-term care services for seven years in Alberta at one point during my rather chequered career. The work was both rewarding and difficult. For four of those years, my father lived in the very facility where I trained staff. He died there at age 95. I was grateful to see Dad every day; and I witnessed many heroics performed by many of the lowly-paid personal care attendants (PCAs). But, bottom line -- I was part of an under-funded, inadequate care system for the frail-elderly! One of Canada's leading gerontologists, **Dr. Samir Sinha**, described Covid 19 as a wake-up call -- noting that the growing throngs of longer-living geezers could potentially bankrupt our health-care system, if we don't fundamentally overhaul it. Journalist **Alan Freeman** wrote: "*Once the Covid 19 emergency is over, it will be high time to rethink the whole model of senior living! Healthy seniors are clearly best off in their own homes and apartments, in mixed communities of all ages. Corraling them all together is unhealthy for them, and bad for society!*"

Nursing (long-term care) homes have perpetually been the poor step-child of Canada's universal health-care system. Providers of long-term care (public, non-profit and private) have lamented for years that they do not have "*enough resources*" to do the job better. Part of the underlying problem is that long-term care is a "money maker" for some corporations. (In June 2019, for example, U.S. property firm Ventas paid \$1.8 billion for an 85% interest in Groupe Maurice, a Quebec chain of 35 seniors' properties.) Back in 2007, just as my Dad was getting his *weekly* bath from a frazzled, under-paid PCA in our non-profit facility, Alberta's "*compassionate*" government said **NO!** (again) to raising royalty rates for oil companies! No money? Indeed! As Mr. Freeman laments: "*Our seniors' complexes are like giant beached cruise ships, with large numbers of elderly people trapped as the COVID-19 infection runs rampant!*"

Our long-term care homes are notoriously understaffed and personal-care aides are poorly paid, forced to take shifts at more than one facility, and sometimes with private clients, as well. And even still, in the middle of this terrible pandemic, there are reports of inadequate personal protection for these workers. As we've seen in the recent Quebec case, adequate PPE was provided only when an outbreak was confirmed, and it was too late then. Kind LJR readers, please remember -- this is Canada we're talking about here, not Botswana or Guatemala! Can't we do better than this?

Once the Covid-19 disaster is over, we will have to seriously rethink the whole model of "*senior living*". Healthy seniors are clearly best off in their own homes and apartments in mixed communities of all ages. Corraling the frail elderly together (in what my 90-year old neighbour calls "*holding pens*") is exceedingly unhealthy for them, and not at all the hallmark of an innovative and compassionate society. Hand-wringing aside -- what's next? Mr. Freeman says: "*Multi-generational living in large extended families may still exist among new Canadians, but this ideal is not going to come back for most of us.*" There are obviously times when dementia and serious physical ailments require our elderly to move into specialized, long-term care homes, but this should happen only when absolutely necessary!

Fortunately, there are models, says Alan Freeman! Thirty years ago, when **Norway** was creating a "sovereign fund" for its oil wealth (and coincidentally, Alberta was squandering its own public nest-egg), **Denmark** decided to concentrate its health-care investments on home and community-care sectors, believing that the elderly are better taken care of "*at home*". The country hasn't built any new conventional nursing homes in 20 years, and the elderly still receive excellent care by well-trained staff - where they live! Danish law requires each municipality to offer at least one pro-active visit per year, by a community-based professional, to *every* resident aged 75 and over! When they do build new facilities, the intrepid Danes opt for smaller, independent apartment units, linked to a common kitchen and garden, where seniors can age independently in a protected environment. The result is that only 36% of long-term care funding in Denmark goes to special buildings like nursing homes, with the remaining 64% going to home and community-based care! That's the opposite ratio to what occurs in most OECD countries, including Canada!

Freeman concludes: "*Just as the cruise-ship business will need a complete rethink after the end of the corona-virus pandemic, seniors' housing and long-term care in Canada require reform from top to bottom! It's the least we can do for our senior citizens, who will have paid such a high price for our short-sighted policies.*" Oy Vey! Most of us at St. John's are elderly, and they'll likely be hoeing our row next! This means we must start demanding better NOW -- both for our generation, and for those who will follow us, hopefully, into some more humane, just form of long-term care!

\* This opinion piece was written by LJR's Editor, Murray Luft. Alan Freeman's article: "*It's Time to Re-think Seniors' Housing and Long-Term Care in Canada*" can be found at: [iPolitics.ca](http://iPolitics.ca) (Apr. 3/20).

A Poem: By Nadine Anne Hura \*

Rest now, e *Papatūānuku* (1)  
 Breathe easy and settle  
 Right here where you are  
 We'll not move upon you  
 For awhile.

We'll stop, we'll cease  
 We'll slow down and stay home  
 Draw each other close and be kind  
 Kinder than we've ever been.

I wish we could say  
 we were doing it for you  
 as much as ourselves  
 But *hei aha* (2)  
 We're doing it anyway  
 It's right. It's time.

Time to return  
 Time to remember  
 Time to listen and forgive  
 Time to withhold judgment  
 Time to cry  
 Time to think  
 About others  
 Remove our shoes  
 Press hands to soil  
 Sift grains between fingers  
 Gentle palms

Time to plant  
 Time to wait  
 Time to notice  
 To whom we belong  
 For now it's just you  
 And the wind  
 And the forests and the oceans  
 And the sky full of rain  
 Finally, it's raining.

*Ka turuturu te wai kamo o Rangī  
 ki runga i a koe* (3)

*Ranginui* is our sky father,  
 it is common to refer to rain as  
 the tears of Rangī for his beloved,  
 from whom he was separated  
 at the beginning of time  
 (in order that there could be light  
 in the world).  
 Embrace it.

This sacrifice of solitude we have  
 carved out for you  
**He iti noaiho** (4)  
 People always said it wasn't possible  
 To ground flights and stay home  
 and stop our habits of consumption  
 But it was  
 It always was.

We were just afraid of how much it  
 was going to hurt -  
 and it IS hurting and it will hurt  
 and continue to hurt

But not as much as you have been hurt.  
 So be still now  
 Wrap your hills around our absence  
 Loosen the concrete belt  
 cinched tight at your waist.

- Rest.
- Breathe.
- Recover.
- Heal.

And we will do the same.

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**Maori Translations:**

(1) Mother Earth

(2) never mind / no matter

(3) tears from the eyes of Ranginui drip  
 down on you

(4) A small offering which is a treasure

\* This poem by Nadine Anne Hura was read recently  
 by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand.  
 Ms. Hura has a background in journalism, education  
 policy and *kaupapa* Maori research. Her work  
 explores themes of identity, biculturalism, politics  
 and parenting.