

Remember the Black Death and Be Thankful This Isn't It

As an example of biomedical catastrophe, the Black Death of the 14th century stands unmatched. The coronavirus, whatever global havoc it might wreak, is not even remotely in its league.

During a four-year period between 1347 and 1351, one quarter to one half of Europe's population died of the plague, with great variations by region. The highest mortality rates were in cities. By reputable estimates – they are rough – England, then about 4.2 million strong, lost 1.4 million people. Florence's population was nearly halved in the year 1347. And the plague was a terrible way to die. Boccaccio writes:

In men and women alike it first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg...black spots or livid making their appearance in many cases on the arm or the thigh or elsewhere, now few and large, now minute and numerous.

Acute fever and vomiting of blood followed. Most victims died two to seven days after the initial infection. In the pandemic's second year, observers noted a distinct form of the disease that infected the lungs and led to pneumonic plague. During the plague's advance across Asia, then from one Mediterranean port to another, and trading cities across the continent, initial fear and community action turned to obsession with one's own safety.

[Boccaccio's own Decameron](#) was devised when 10 nobles fled plague-ridden Florence to a deserted villa in the hills to wait out the disease. The rich and privileged took their precious possessions and took off for the countryside, [just](#)

[like New Yorkers last week.](#) When private schools closed in New York City on March 6, the exodus began, and elites took shelter in Palm Beach and [the Hamptons](#), leaving doormen and the elderly to fend for themselves.

During the Black Death, doctors turned into helpless laughingstocks. Derided or assaulted, clergy were declared charlatans. Rulers and the rich deserted their polities, seeking haven from contagion. The plague did not make people nicer. And there were scapegoats: Jews, Arabs, lepers, vagabonds, and pilgrims took the heat. The lives of laborers and tradesmen who lived sometimes improved, since wages and terms of tenancy rose. Yet land values declined. Large parts of Europe were poorer for a generation.

Said Johan Huizinga in his 1924 classic *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, the late medieval vision of death was macabre. Gruesome and horrid, death underscored the frailty of human glory.

This thought line – *memento mori* – has been discarded by worldly therapies seeking salvation on earth. When longevity is a religion – as aisles of potions and elixirs at Trader Joe's attest – death at any age under any circumstances is macabre...or wait, did something just go wrong with the workout program and protein supplements?

In the era of plague, the Meeting of the Living and Dead motif was a favorite literary and pictorial theme. According to one version, three noblemen are hunting when they find themselves in an old cemetery, halted by putrefying skeletons in their coffins. The cavaliers are repelled. One holds his nose; another tries to run away. The first corpse, a duke, recalls his riches, handsomeness, and youth. The second, a count, notes that when rich and poor are dead, as skeletons they look alike. And the third, a marquis, begs the young men to repent: "You will be like we are; first look at yourselves in us." In another version, a wormy king, prelate, and peasant lie side-

by-side, equal before death. The *danse macabre* – not hortatory or admonitory but fatalistic – arises and endures from [Hans Holbein](#) to [Ingmar Bergman](#). Death, the great leveler, spares no one.

We should be grateful for advances in sanitation and water purity. The filth of preindustrial Europe is simply unimaginable to us. The importance of hygiene was recognized only in the 19th century. Until then, streets were commonly teeming with live animals, with an abundance of dung and water-based parasites facilitating transmissible diseases. Making things worse, during the Black Death and in subsequent plagues, people fearful of contagion avoided public baths. Infrequent bathing became a European habit for centuries.

The coronavirus might not be the Big One, but lives are more precious today than they were eight centuries ago, and most Americans (and everyone else) want to keep things that way. Mass burials are unlikely this summer, but it might be weeks or months before infections crest, even under optimistic scenarios. In the meantime, activities to which Americans think they are entitled are curtailed, a recipe for anxiety. Those who claim they're living in "a Stephen King novel" are as yet unable to imagine what's really coming to Main Street and to Madison Avenue.

The virus's impact will be more stark, mundane, and personally disruptive than any fiction or cinema. The world is undergoing a self-induced economic collapse, and we don't yet know whether it will be short-term or not. The re-pricing of assets and speed of contracting wealth after a decade of uneven, counterfeit prosperity is unprecedented. Diminished opportunity and public capital will weigh heavily on Millennials. The immediate future will favor competence, industry, and mental stability.

The U.S. is destined for a reality fix. This microbe will be a fun spoiler, fear inducer, and social destabilizer. Closures

and furloughs will leave millions idle and indefinitely unemployed. Let's work for quickie tests, ample N95 masks, and surplus ventilators. The impulse to blame is instinctive, but automatic Trump hate is not useful or appropriate. During the Black Death, a venerable University of Paris panel blamed the plague on Saturn invading the house of Jupiter. Expect just as valid pronouncements coming from viziers and opportunists in coming weeks and months.

In the 20th century, microbe hunters were able to vanquish bacterial disease. Since the advent of antibiotics in the 1940s, scourges of the past have been simply forgotten. We moderns with high-tech hospitals and our dazzling pharmacopoeia are not used to this scale of viral assault on the human species.

Many pathologists think global population overload will sooner or later end in a massive viral cull. The virus now spreading worldwide at exponential rates is not the Big One, however, and we should be immensely grateful for that. Yet nature is hard to control. It plays the long game – and well. Like many of us, I am looking for an upside to alarming medical and economic events, and right now, that's hard to find.

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