

Things change so quickly in this era; events of such enormous significance seem to happen every day – so much so that news that broke just one week ago feels as if it happened last year. And phenomena that impact thousands of lives – not just the coronavirus, but the fires still raging in California, new hurricanes on their way to the Gulf Coast, anxieties in certain states or regions over whether their elections will take place smoothly and fairly – get underreported due to the fierceness of people’s feelings (one way or the other) about the personality of the president and about the issues related to the 2020 presidential race.

Of course we all know by now that President Trump is battling the coronavirus himself; and even though he returned last night from Walter Reed Medical Center and is being cared for in the White House, his doctors say that he is not yet “out of the woods.” Whether one is a fan of this president or not, pretty much everyone I know is praying for his recovery, so that, one way or another, we as the American people can make a decision via the upcoming election based on *which direction we want to move in as a nation* – not based on whether one candidate is incapacitated or not.

Today’s *Washington Post* includes a thoughtful “opinion essay” by the journalist Fareed Zakaria about how this global pandemic may affect the behavior of the world’s nations going forward. He declares that “nothing is written,” but that it is *up to us to choose* whether to work together to solve both this global health crisis and other pressing crises – such as climate change – or to look at the rest of the world suspiciously, with an “us-or-them” attitude, trying to “win” for ourselves, while many or all of the other nations “lose.” In his closing paragraph, Zakaria writes:

*...this ugly pandemic has created the possibility for optimism, change and reform. It has opened a path to a new world. It’s ours to take that opportunity or to squander it. Nothing is written.*

Yes, it is “ours to take that opportunity,” but it is difficult for the American people to make any unequivocal decision because we are so divided. So often I hear senators, representatives, or other politicians invoke “the American people...” as if they are speaking for all of us. And yet I have never gotten a phone call or a letter from one of these politicians asking what I want or what I think. The truth is, we

can only make our voices heard by *voting*, and sadly, even then many opportunities get squandered because of the nature of politics, with all of the money and other influences behind the politicians' campaigns, and with all the compromises that inevitably get made in order to pass legislation or come to other important decisions.

In the 2016 run for the presidency, the slogan used by one side, "Make America Great Again," harkened back to a not-precisely-identified time period when the United States was "winning," when we seemed to be undisputedly stronger and more economically robust than the rest of the nations of the world. I presume that the time period that most people think of when they hear that slogan is the post-World War Two-era. Europe was in ruins and greatly dependent on us to help them rebuild. Japan had been brought to its knees by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. China and India were the most populous nations of the world, but also the poorest, and undergoing tumultuous times politically (with no small amount of violence to their people). The Soviet Union was experiencing a devastating famine under Stalin. It was a time of great suffering for much of the world – but here in America, the soldiers were back and going to college on the G.I. Bill, getting loans to buy homes (the white ones, at any rate), starting families, starting up new industries...the economy was booming.

The question is: can we only "win" when others "lose"? Or to turn the question around, do *others* have to lose in order for *us* to win? When the population of the *whole world* is at risk from dying of the coronavirus, or from the adverse effects of climate change, it seems to me that there is no such thing as "winning" unless we *all* win. Neither the effects of climate change nor the virus that has spread across the globe will respect human-drawn borders; only a coordinated global effort offers us a chance of setting our planetary home in order.

This situation reminds me of something I read recently in a book by a colleague of Mark's and mine. Tirza Firestone, a psychotherapist and rabbi (ordained by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi), after treating many Jewish patients who seemed to be carrying a burden of anger, fear, sadness and guilt that somehow was handed down to them by their Holocaust-surviving parents or grandparents, began to grapple with how this "inheritance" impacted these patients, and what could be done to ease their psychic load. In her 2019 book, *Wounds into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*, she mentions in passing how her patients seem to react in one of two ways to traumas like the Holocaust.

One way that some of these patients reacted (not necessarily consciously) was to try to build up a strong wall of defense, and to suspect that the “other” (i.e. non-Jews) might do it again – to never wholly trust others. In this scenario the mantra *never again* means *we should never let any other people do this to us again!* This way of looking at the world is concerned almost wholly with the self and with other Jews, and especially with Israel. It does not entail the practice of putting oneself in the place of some other people who might be suffering a similar fate (such as the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar or the Uighurs in China); the lessons that were imbibed by these “wounded” descendants of survivors all stemmed from the impulse of *never letting such a thing happen to us again.*

The second type of patients had developed a different coping strategy. And that was to reach out to others who were suffering, to identify with them, and to try to work together with other people (both with Jews and non-Jews) to try to make a safer, more humane world for all of us. In this scenario *never again* means that *we should never let such a thing happen to anyone or any people again.* This second group of “wounded” patients knew, or learned over time, that none of us can be “safe” until *all* of us are safe.

Of course such humanitarian work is work-in-progress. We *try* to keep genocides and the imprisonment of people in concentration camps from happening again – but we have not succeeded. It is still happening. The world is large, there are powers that will not back down when the U.N. or some human rights group calls them out on their crimes; and of course we have our own lives to live, our own careers and children to take care of. Sometimes we feel powerless to make an impact.

Nevertheless, these two fundamentally different strategies for securing safety and a livable world for ourselves and our children are in large part what will be on the ballot in our upcoming national election. Some may see me (and Fareed Zakaria) as naïve – see this second strategy as dangerously exposing ourselves to the risk of other nations or peoples taking “advantage” of us to our harm, leading to the diminishment of the U.S. economy and standard of living. But I can’t see how we can “live long and prosper” on a planet where we ignore disease, suffering, and climate devastation in other lands, expecting them never to reach our shores. These things are *already here.* We can only keep our boat afloat if we pay attention to the *whole ship*, not just our little part of it. In past crises, we have pulled through, we

have made sacrifices, we have helped others, saving not only their people, but our own nation as well.

What will we do this time? Only time will tell.



*Dinghy at low tide near Wellfleet Harbor, Cape Cod.*