

Reflections on a virus

by LAURA CAMPBELL

Last Thursday evening, I felt a deep wave of dread and panic wash over me. I still managed to make a broccoli soup, but between dealing with the news cycle (especially word of what was happening in Italy) and the apocalyptic lineups in the grocery store, I didn't serve dinner until 9 p.m. My poor children.

I went to bed at 1 a.m. but woke up feeling some resolve. The terror of deciding to close our family restaurant had subsided, as I realized that public safety was more important. Our healthcare system and its capacity to care for my friends, family, neighbours, and fellow Ontarians, was the most important thing to consider. There was clear consensus between my husband and me. This was the right thing to do.

On Monday morning, we waited to hear from our Premier, and Prime Minister. We expected a clear call to close all non-essential businesses. We had done so voluntarily, but for it to be effective, other restaurants, bars and pubs would have to close, too. But to our dismay, both announcements were muddled directives to 'stay home if you can' and 'get home if you're abroad.' Since then, the measures from our governments have grown more substantial, and both the Premier and the Prime Minister are doing everything they can to get this crisis under control (and I commend them both for making all of these difficult decisions). Such developments are a testament to how quickly the situation has evolved.

I don't think it's too early to say that all of us will now divide our lives into two distinct periods: before the pandemic & after the pandemic. Writing these words is an out-of-body experience. But what this crisis has crystalized for me is that we are now, at long last, faced with the realities of how terribly distorted our 'forever-growth, consumer-debt-fueled' economy has been, for decades. This economy was never designed to weather a storm like this.

There is no question that this virus could lead to a recession (many indicators show that this will likely happen, even if consumer spending remains robust & especially as the price of oil falls). But then again, everyone could stay home, save their money, and pay off their credit cards? This could help avoid a credit crisis. Maybe. All of it is mostly impossible to predict. Markets hate that. Unfortunately there's more to this financial crunch than the official economic consequences, like the GDP and so on: there are many terrifying potential outcomes for small and medium-sized businesses and the individuals who rely on them for their livelihood. While the Federal government seems to have a plan to tackle this crisis (\$25 billion), there is not real clarity (yet) on what those measures include.

But for individual families, this time at home and without a steady income could mean that they learn to enjoy the very simple pleasures that the 21st Century has allowed us to forget. Board games, outdoor play, planting seeds, reading books, cleaning, learning new recipes, writing letters to friends, quiet time, movie nights, and so on. All of it forces us to practise mindfulness but without much of a price tag. You see, my generation is constantly working (as much as some pundits like to say millenials don't know the value of a hard day's work). We call it 'hustling': our work follows us home, into our evenings, into our bedrooms- as we answer emails from our ipads at 1AM. All of the patched-together gigs, or massive workloads at our 9-5, rob us of the time we need to learn not only mindfulness, but also the skills of survival.

I know a few folks in their 80s who scoff at the young men and women who can't start a fire, who can't bake a loaf of bread, who can't replace a spark plug on a lawn mower, who can't fix a toilet, or build a shelf, or knit a sweater, or mend a sock. Are we lazy, entitled, disconnected? Or maybe we just don't have the time. If this crisis affords us anything, perhaps staying home will mean that we can become more resilient human beings. Perhaps we can master systems of food preparation that avoid colossal waste? Maybe we will learn to enjoy our local hiking trails instead of seeking vacations in far-off places that contribute to the warming of our planet? Maybe we can figure out how to save money on things we don't need, and invest instead in solar panel systems for our rooftops? Or maybe we can turn front lawns into vegetable gardens?

At this point, while we mourn the loss of many of the world's elders who are dying and continue to die from this scourge of a virus, we must also find the small opportunity to make our world a better place. This is a painful cleansing of western culture. May we all take pause to learn the lessons, as there are many to go around, for me, for my friends, for my parents, and for our leaders (here's looking at you, Premier Ford).

We must take care of one another.