

#BUILD BACK BETTER

Barry Knight

 compass

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Coronavirus has changed our world forever. Plans made a few weeks ago seem outdated at best or undoable at worst. The speed of this has been remarkable. In a recent article, former UK prime minister [Gordon Brown quotes Lenin](#): ‘There are decades when nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen.’

Those of us working towards a good society need a new framework. Traditional approaches have been set back decades. It is hard to think of a long-term future when people are struggling to survive and there is so much distress. At the same time, we should remember Rahm Emanuel’s exhortation to ‘...never let a serious crisis go to waste’. Dawn Shackels, director of peacebuilding and communities at the [Community Foundation for Northern Ireland](#), cites one of her grantee partners as saying ‘adapting to survive is not enough; we need to adapt to thrive.’

At the same time, we must first get through this dystopian nightmare that every day seems more like something from a J.G. Ballard novel.

Drawing on lessons from the past can help. Large-scale disaster is a central feature of human experience, and [history has provided many examples](#). The first 20 years of this century have produced, among others, 9/11 (2001), the Indian Ocean Tsunami (2004), Hurricane Katrina (2005), the financial crash (2008), the Haiti earthquake (2010), the Nepal earthquake (2015), and the Puerto Rico hurricane (2017). In the same period, we have had outbreaks of SARS, ebola, cholera, dengue and yellow fever. A list of natural disasters can be found [here](#), and of epidemics [here](#).

The current situation is different because this is the first time in our lifetimes that we have experienced a global pandemic. To find an event comparable to what we are experiencing now, we have to go to the global influenza pandemic of 1918. More than 50 million people died worldwide, 228,000 of these in the UK.

So, we are in a unique situation, but there are perhaps three lessons we can learn from other disasters. The first is that we are almost always unprepared. As Julia Unwin has pointed out, [we have known for decades that a global pandemic was coming](#), we have modelled for it, and yet it comes as a total shock. The second is that the human race has survived every disaster so far, but society has always been profoundly changed as a result. The third is that decisions taken during the process are critical to laying the foundations for a better society afterwards.

In the remainder of this article, I want to consider how we might approach some of the actions we need to take if we are to flourish afterwards. This is no easy task because taking decisions in the middle of a crisis is fraught with danger.

Decision-making in the limen

Our difficulties in taking decisions stem from the fact that we have entered the 'limen'. A term first used in 1909 by Arnold van Gennep, a French anthropologist, in '[The rites of passage](#)', the limen denotes an ambiguous zone of change in which time feels elongated and all outcomes are unpredictable. The limen destroys our frameworks, causing feelings of panic, fear, loss and confusion; it is scary because it threatens our identity, our living patterns and the social order. We fear total collapse of everything we know and hold dear, and we just want to go back to the security of the way it was.

Yet, the limen has an upside. It is the source of all radical change. Piecemeal reform never gets to the roots of a system – no matter how rotten it is. The limen uproots everything and forces us into new assumptions.

In his 'crisis theory', Gerald Chapman suggests that when we meet a hazard that is bigger and more complicated than we have ever met before, we cannot use our customary method of problem solving. A period of disorganisation ensues during which many abortive attempts at a solution are tried. Eventually, some kind of adaptation is achieved, and this can lead to an entirely new way of seeing.¹ In their book *Guard the Chaos*, Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild extol the virtue of the limen because it can be the threshold to a new world order.² Since the limen opens up new possibilities for humanity, they suggest that the wilderness it creates is both a dangerous place and a sacred one. As poet W.H. Auden put it, 'the distresses of choice are our chance to be blessed'.

So, how do we navigate the chaos? Again, there are no easy answers, but once again we can turn to the experience of previous disasters. While each disaster is different, Melissa Crutchfield suggests that there are [recognisable stages](#) in the process towards recovery: survival, resilience and reconstruction.

Phase 1: Survival

This phase involves immediate responses to the emergency, efforts to minimise the damage and to rescue people. At this stage, people have little capacity to think beyond issues of survival and there is little point in thinking about long-term reconstruction. People take one day at a time, retreating into a defensive core, armed against adversity. A key text is *The minimal self: psychic survival in troubled times* by Christopher Lasch.³

Hunkering down is an effective strategy. In *Goodbye to all that*, his account of trench life in the First World War, Robert Graves attributed his survival to laser-light focus on what was in his immediate sight, rather than nostalgia for the past or dreams for the future. This

echoes the Stoics' use of the dichotomy of control. To retain inner equilibrium under extreme stress, it is vital to focus on what you can do and change, while ignoring what you can't.

Phase 2: Resilience

The second phase is about the development of 'disaster resilience'. This is the ability of individuals, communities, organisations and states to adapt to and recover from hazards, shocks or stresses without compromising long-term prospects for development.

Increased resilience enables people to transition into a recovery phase, in which systems are in place to guarantee survival and people can turn to rebuilding their lives in accord with the new reality. People feel more centred in themselves and have their lives more under control. At this point, some balance has been restored, so that it is possible to begin to plan for the future.

Phase 3: Reconstruction

Then, there is the long term. It is difficult to think about this at the moment. Over the past two weeks, I have held online group discussions with more than 80 people from NGOs, universities, foundations, community groups, and other civil society organisations from all over the world, and it is clear that people are in survival mode, desperately seeking means to become more resilient. This is difficult because life is tough in many places, with food shortages, medical systems close to collapse, economic meltdown, rising domestic violence, feeble government assistance, increased militarization and human rights abuses.

At the same time, people say that they are willing to engage in conversations about long-term futures, even though these are difficult because there are so many unknowns. As yet, we don't know the size and scale of the epidemic, how long it will last, how much damage there will be, or even whether basic supply chains will remain in place to feed us.

However, one thing is certain: we face a choice between trying to rebuild the systems we had or building new ones. In our discussions, we have not found anyone who would like to go back to the way the world was. People want to 'build back better'. The remainder of the article draws on those conversations, beginning with why going back to the old order is not an option.

Building back the old order

The financial crash of 2008 offered the prospect of building a new world, but instead we shored up the banks and went back to the old

one. Many commentators suggested that this would lead to another collapse and here we are. Going backwards would do nothing to fix the underlying problems in the world: rampant inequality, the climate crisis, and the rise of extremism in politics, to name a few.

Yet, even now, there is evidence that powerful interests are beginning to manipulate the situation as they did in 2008. Drawing on the thesis in her 2007 book [The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism](#), in 2017 Naomi Klein wrote [how power profits from disaster](#):

‘I started to notice the same tactics in disaster zones around the world. I used the term “shock doctrine” to describe the brutal tactic of using the public’s disorientation following a collective shock – wars, coups, terrorist attacks, market crashes or natural disasters – to push through radical pro-corporate measures, often called “shock therapy”.’

On 27 March 2020, Alexander Kaufman and Chris D'Angelo noted [Trump Goes Full ‘Shock Doctrine’ As Pandemic Rages](#). They report how the Trump administration has just deregulated clean air and water controls, enabled self-regulation of standards in abattoirs, and relaxed fuel economy standards on new cars. They comment:

‘The moves offer yet another jarring real-time example of what the author Naomi Klein dubbed “the shock doctrine”: the phenomenon wherein profiteers and their allies in government exploit the mayhem of a public emergency to push through unpopular policy changes that benefit industry.’

There is much money to be made in disasters. For example, as businesses go to the wall in a recession, hedge funds and other financial institutions can pick up their assets cheaply and make huge profits as the economy recovers. Such developments could be made worse by nationalist politicians who take advantage of the command and control measures they have already taken to stabilise their economies to tighten their grip on control. We may see a new form of top-down state capitalism that treats citizens as pawns in an Orwellian dystopia. Such trends would almost certainly treat human life as collateral damage on the road to enhanced individual wealth for some, but ultimately destroy our planet as untrammelled capitalism wreaks havoc on nature.

Building back better

Turning to the alternative, our consultations suggest that coronavirus has had a profound effect on hearts and minds. Forced to slow down, people have time to reflect, to question everything and to examine their values.

People are recognising our universal vulnerability. They see that love matters more than money. Life matters more than wealth. Amidst all the fear and upset, people want a different future, and one that is

not about who has most toys when you die. Relationships – family and friends – matter more than growth. Life is precious but fragile.

Such a perspective casts the economy as a means for life, not as a goal in which statistics such as GDP rule. For example, people in the UK are coming to see that people who do [essential jobs](#) are the most important in our economy and that many highly paid professions are of marginal significance. These people are the backbone of the country and, along with the 750,000 people who have volunteered to help the UK's National Health Service, are evidence of huge assets in our society that are worth way more than year-on-year economic growth.

The most commonly used word in our consultations was 'solidarity'. This notion is based on the idea that self only matters in relation to others and the key pronoun is not 'I', but 'we'. This opens the door to a different kind of agency. If we didn't know it before, we now know that community is central.

Although we are in the midst of a crisis that is set to last several months at the least, people who want to see a better world need to plan and organise now. This is the moment to act. Since most activities have been cancelled, many of us have the time to do it.

We are not short of ideas. Over the past two years, the [Rethinking Poverty discussion hub](#) has published pieces from many writers setting out promising ideas to realise the society we want, including the Green New Deal, universal basic income, universal social services, devolution, community development, #ShiftThePower, 45 Degree Change and many more. What is missing is an overarching story to bring them together to develop an overall plan for our society.

The fact that there is no overall plan shows a structural weakness in the way that those who wish to see a good society organise themselves. To take an example of what is wrong, in September 2016, three large non-profit organisations based in the UK launched reports on poverty, each spending large amounts on press, publicity and dissemination, but with no reference to each other's work. Such competition is rife and benefits no one.

If we want to succeed, each person needs to be, decide, act and communicate differently. We need to banish egos, logos and silos that pit people who are essentially on the same side against each other.

We need to create a seamless movement based on what early feminist writer Mary Parker Follett saw as 'power with' rather than 'power over'.⁴ 'Power with' sees power as a self-developing capacity, rather than a fixed asset or possession that can be divided, shared, transferred or conferred. This means that power is something developed between people rather than possessed by an individual, organisation or government. In this model, power is constantly

reconstructed in the relationships between people. Such a sharing approach will overcome what 13th-century poet Rumi called the 'thieves of the heart' – greed, ego, anger and insecurity. There are many social movements that have managed this approach. Let us join them together.

Important conversations about this are already under way across the world. We are taking an active part in those organised by the Global Fund for Community Foundations, PSJP, Compass and others. We would like to learn about others, and to investigate how they might be joined up. If we do this, we can travel together and co-create the society we want. That would really #ShiftThePower.

We would like our readers to tell us about conversations you are involved in, and how you might become involved in this process going forward. Please respond here <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/YFPNXTH>

Endnotes

1. Gerald Chapman (1964) An approach to community mental health and principles of preventative psychiatry, London: Tavistock
2. Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild (1995) Guard the chaos: finding meaning in change, London: Darton, Longman and Todd
3. Christopher Lasch (1984) The minimal self; psychic survival in troubled times, New York: W.W. Norton
4. Mary Parker Follett (1995) 'Power', in P Graham (ed), Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of management: A celebration of writings from the 1920s, Washington DC: Beard Books, pp 97-120.

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