

Five things coronavirus can teach us about life and death

April 15 2020, by Tony Walter



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The COVID-19 pandemic and the wall-to-wall news coverage that has come with it has changed many of our lives seemingly overnight. In the UK, as in many countries, this news coverage includes a daily death toll.

For the first time in many people's lives they are having to face their own mortality and that of their loved ones.

Facing up to this fact can be painful and disabling, but in my work as a professor of death studies I have found it offers an opportunity to rediscover truths about life—both individually and in society.

Below are five positive things death can teach us about life.

1. Your life perspective changes

Shared adversity can foster a sense of community and affinity with others that can be masked in normal times. The challenge is to sustain this after adversity ends. And just as personal encounters with mortality can transform a person's life, a societal encounter with mortality has the potential to transform the life of society.

Disaster, pandemic and war can destabilise everyday social arrangements and assumptions, and catalyse profound social change. Arguably the [Black Death helped end feudalism](#), the Chernobyl disaster [helped hasten the collapse of the Soviet Union](#), and the experience of community solidarity and [state intervention during World War II](#) helped fuel the UK's desire to set up a [welfare state](#). This pandemic has potential to [change society for the better](#), if we are able to seize this opportunity.

2. It highlights the power of nature

Many like to think they are masters of the physical world, including their own bodies. The deterioration of the body—whether through illness, disability, old age or ultimately death—reveals the limits of this assumption.

On a wider scale, humans are devastating the natural world, causing the extinction of thousands of species at an ever-increasing rate. Now, nature, in the form of a tiny virus that particularly threatens humans, is giving us a taste of our own medicine. The virus—like earthquakes, floods and other natural disasters—is reminding us that humans are also part of the [natural world](#).

3. And the power of connection

[New forms of heroism](#) are emerging among frontline health workers, cleaners, delivery drivers, cashiers, refuse collectors and volunteers. From the clapping for carers that neighbourhoods in some countries are doing to the resurgence of neighbourliness and volunteering, the pandemic has created webs of giving and receiving. Distant family members and friends from the past get back in touch. What people do now counts, and can provide a meaning to life sadly absent in many nine-to-five jobs.

Sociologist and thinker Michael Young (Lord Young of Dartington) spent his life documenting and fostering social solidarity in Britain—he helped found the welfare state in the 1940s and then wrote a sociological study of family and kinship in east London. In the 1990s, he wrote in a [study of people dying of cancer](#) that [death](#), while sundering relationships, can also bring people together: "Death is the [common experience](#) which can make all members of the human race feel their common bonds and their common humanity."

My own research confirms this [to be true](#).

4. This is an opportunity for review

Facing up to mortality prompts us to reevaluate our lives. There are key

times in the life course when this is likely to happen. One is the mid-life crisis, another is when [entering old age](#) – people look at what they have done so far, and may find themselves content with this, or decide to change, or regret that it seems too late to change.

The pandemic may cause some to review their lives while they still have enough decades left to act on their review. Not only whole societies, but some individuals may decide to live in new ways.

5. Death needs to be talked about

Facing up to mortality also has some simple practical implications. However fit and youthful you are, you should write a will and [talk frankly and openly](#) to those closest to you about your thoughts, hopes and fears.

Talk about what treatment you would or would not want if you catch COVID-19 and deteriorate. But be aware that with both [health services](#) and families stretched, there is no guarantee your wishes will be carried out—though discussing them first certainly helps.

Death's lesson here, perhaps, is about the limits to our control over our own life.

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