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The World at a Distance: Corona and the Year of Silence; A Myriad of Opportunities

Eric Byler¹

“There are opportunities even in the most difficult moments.”

- Wangari Maathai.

The novel coronavirus certainly provided myriads of opportunities to decipher what is the best thing to do for communities. At first, lockdown was readily accepted as the neighborly thing to do, but as time went on and people grew more and more restless, isolating people from each other came under question.

The film *The World at a Distance: Corona and the Year of Silence*² made significant use of imagery and music to convey emotional meaning to the viewer. The sadness, anxiety, and loneliness came in waves, evoked by a slow pace to the film and solo shots. Interspersed throughout the film were episodes of joy and beauty signaled by dancing and partying. That is a lot like life during the pandemic. The slow pace of the documentary made me feel restless even after living through these many months of the pandemic.

Life did not slow down for everyone. I have heard some say, especially with having to learn to do so many things online and adjusting to a new work environment, that people are spending more time to get the same types of things done. Instead of there being more time to be with family, there was more work-related stress and personal languishing that consumed people’s mental energy. Needless to say, people kept talking about how we all should have more time on our hands. Because that wasn’t my reality, I felt like an anomaly. Perhaps others were feeling the same way. There was a sense of guilt, that I should have more time for my family, because that’s what others purported. However, it seems that others really did have a different experience than I; the pandemic has supplied them with more time and energy.

The coincidental, or is it providential, situation that went along with that increased supply of energy is that there was more stillness and space in the media, and in people’s minds and lives, to address issues of injustice that came to the forefront. Communities learned how to care better because they had more time to listen and understand. The stillness has created more space for the marginalized of our society to have a voice. I am not saying that these things happened perfectly and justly in all cases – there was still plenty of silencing and injustice. But the message of the need for greater awareness of ongoing injustices did get communicated in a way that we may not have seen before.

I hope that we have learned how to care better by being silent more. Good psychotherapy involves plenty of time for quiet contemplation. It is in the quiet moments that we can really attune to what's going on inside ourselves. Too many of us fear silence because of what it will say to us. My hope is that the pandemic will last long enough that

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² *The World at a Distance: Corona and the Year of Silence*, directed by Jobst Knigge and Cristina Trebbi, produced by The Ontario Educational Communications Authority (TVO), aired March 21, 2021, on TVO docs, <https://www.tvo.org/video/documentaries/the-world-at-a-distance-corona-and-the-year-of-silence>

people will come to face the silence – and the things that it is telling them. I hope that people's resistance to silence will be wore down by the sense of its healing power. Personal silence gives us the opportunity to reflect on our values and identity, which are so important for knowing who we are within community. Society-wide stillness gives us the opportunity to hear the voices that have long been silenced.

I also hope that the silence and separation show people how much they need connection and community. We are not people by ourselves; we are only people in community. As *ubuntu* teaches us, we need a sense of belonging; we need to matter to others in order to know who we are. This was beautifully portrayed by the tango dancing in the documentary. The old line is true, *it takes two to tango*. It takes two (and more) to be human.