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COVID-19 & Capitalism

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Paradoxically today's global viral pandemic is an opportunity to fundamentally change society for the better.

I teach courses about population health in the public health school at the University of Washington in the region where the initial cases of COVID-19 disease appeared together with the first deaths.

What we needed to learn from this pathogen is that we have been destroying natural habitat at an increasing pace that has led to dire conditions producing global warming, greater vulnerability to infections, increasing economic inequality and the loss of our ability to work together.

Habitat destruction began when we left the hunter-gatherer era which has been our most successful human adaptation, one that nurtured us for perhaps half a million years. Then we lived in small groups, with gender equity, and shared scarce resources, namely the occasional bounty brought home by hunters. The domestication of plants and animals ten thousand years ago profoundly changed human health and relationships. The neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky said agriculture allowed the stockpiling of surplus resources and it has been their unequal stockpiling which led to the stratification of society and the invention of classes and of poverty. In Sapolsky's words, "When humans invented poverty, they came up with a way of subjugating the low-ranking like nothing ever seen before in the primate world." This invention has profoundly changed the world, and led to massive exploitation of people and the planet.

Today's coronavirus pandemic resulted from mammoth deforestation around the world which resulted in less room for other animals. Bats, the source of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, came into increasing contact with us and live markets allowed these living creatures to be taken home to slaughter and eat.

I see economic inequality as the root problem we have to grapple with. It has led to most of the world's problems as I see it and I'm not alone in having this perspective. In 2014 Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* was published and went on to sell some 2.5 million copies. Piketty highlights the history of rising economic inequality around the world through various phases beginning with what he calls ternary societies (nobility, clergy and the masses, also called the Third Estate), then into ownership societies and then into today's hypercapitalist regimes. His solutions sound utopian as he calls for a participatory socialism for the 21st century. Some of his ideas, however, like a wealth tax, have been voiced by some politicians recently.

Political and economic systems were vastly transformed during the neolithic, the period when agriculture was developed. This trifunctional classification had various forms throughout the world, any of which justified the hierarchy or inequality that became embedded into society.

Piketty then considers slave and colonial societies which allowed great wealth accumulation by a few. I have come to see that both colonization and slavery have had long-lasting effects on the health of societies impacted by these processes. Regions where slavery predominated, such as in the U.S. South continue to have worse health today.

The great transformation of the last century was the advent of ownership societies. On the eve of the World War I private property reigned supreme on a par with the colonial empire such that the propertied had assets unequaled even to this day. In the few years after the end of World War II private property was gone in large parts of the world, such as the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. Colonial empires were also soon dismantled.

The global ideological competition between communism and capitalism, Piketty says, led to a victory for capitalism and an increase in inequality to stratospheric heights.

Inequality has waxed and waned through the last ten thousand years. It declines with plagues such as the Black Death in the Middle Ages, as well as during wars, revolutions and state collapse. Recovery from these events leads to inequality increases.

Today's income and wealth inequality around the globe is greater than it has ever been led by what is called hypercapitalism. Some social democratic societies and post-communist societies have tried to reign in inequality with limited success.

Before I go further with this line of reasoning let me summarize a few principles of population health, namely what makes one population more or less healthy compared to another. I have focused on mortality as a measure of health, not because most of us would rather be alive than dead but because death is hard to fake. All rich countries accurately record births and deaths and even poorer nations have good estimates allowing us to focus on killer facts.

Population health fact number one. In a society health stratifies along an economic gradient, meaning that poorer people have poorer health. This is true in general and for almost all diseases. Expect it to be true for COVID-19.

Poorer people will be more affected and be more likely to die. When you find a counter-example, such as that Latinx have better health than non-Latinx whites in the US, there will be discernable reasons. In my years as an emergency physician I never saw a Latinx patient come in alone. There was a whole bunch of family and friends crowded around the stretcher with the patient. Meanwhile nearby would be a sick white guy moaning alone.

When we investigate this phenomenon we come to a second fact. Social relationships, friends, family, social cohesion trump personal behaviors in producing health. The strengths of relationships among Latinx people are vastly more health enhancing than among non-Latinx whites. These concepts are not addressed in medical school or further training, at least not in this country. Why not? Medical care is there to diagnose and treat illness and injury. Nothing more. To ask why the illness or injury occurred is pointless since doctors and nurses have no tools in their medical kit to address those factors.

Poorer people have poorer functioning organs. We will find that poorer people are more likely to die from COVID-19 when all the data have been collected and analyzed. Reports in the United States demonstrate a class divide in access to care for SARS-CoV-2. The rich have concierge medical care. They can bunker down in specially constructed shelters to quarantine if necessary. Manufacturers of so-called safe homes can't keep up with the demand. The Great Gatsbys can escape in private jets to their earthly island paradises or the Hamptons and bring the nanny with them. Hamptonites are sitting pretty. Their children go to private schools and have all the distance learning conveniences. But with public school closures around the country access to the internet is spotty in poorer areas where the students are also not likely to have access to computers. Libraries are closed limiting that option. Day cares are a thing of the past. Forget it if you have a special needs child. For poorer folk who still have jobs, their children will remain at home unsupervised. If you managed to get your child into having music lessons, the chances that you can afford virtual teaching are slim for most folk. The rich enjoy a white-collar quarantine. We see a COVID-19 caste system. Higher castes are not only less biologically vulnerable, they enjoy pandemic privilege that we don't.

Fact number three: Inequality kills. That is more unequal societies, typically measured by income or wealth distribution, have worse health than more equal ones. At least this is true among rich nations where we have the best data. How does inequality kill? There are a number of mechanisms. One is that we suffer from increasing stress and frustration when living where there is a big gap between rich and poor. One example is road rage and air rage and rage in other situations when we are not treated fairly. Some reprisals are clear. There are more mass shootings in counties with a big rich-poor gap alongside great wealth.

Another way that inequality does its job is how the rich and powerful get their way and won't share what they have with others. They get laws passed cutting their tax liability. The price of the 2017 tax cut legislation in the U.S. was supposed to be \$1.5 trillion but more recent estimates put that much higher. That is before factoring in the recent \$2 trillion stimulus legislation.

Although inequality leads to poor health it does not appear as a cause of death on a death certificate. Those deaths result from structural violence, which are the conditions a society imposes on itself that lead to death for some. Will the exacerbating effect of inequality hold true for diseases such as the coronavirus infection? We don't know yet but if the question is asked I feel confident of what the answer will be.

Population health fact number four. Early life lasts a lifetime. It is the first thousand days after conception when roughly half of our health as adults has been programmed. Healthier societies privilege that period in various ways such as providing time to parent and financial support for families. We will find that children born of mothers who were around when COVID-19 was raging are more likely to have compromised health. Escaped slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass said "it is easier to build strong children than repair broken men." We spend more repairing broken men and women through medical care than the rest of the world combined.

Population health fact number five. To echo real estate sales principles: location, location, location. Where you live matters tremendously. In Japan the toll on men smoking cigarettes is considerably less than the toll here for men of the same age. This phenomenon is difficult for someone to consider if they don't have international experience. Seymour Martin Lipset, the esteemed political scientist said: "those who know only one country know no country."

I gained my experience having lived for decades in Canada, a decade in Nepal with significant stays in China, India, Japan, Ukraine, Western Europe, Central and South America. In the population health courses that I teach, where the country is the unit of analysis, I work hard to learn about Africa, for example, where I have no personal direct experience.

So how do you expand your understanding if you have lived all your life in one country? Get to know others who have spent considerable time elsewhere. We have so many ways of doing this without necessarily meeting them on the street. Personal connections, and especially now the internet, provide so much material. Find sources that you feel comfortable engaging with. Podcasts, youtube videos, and various social media platforms. Use these to develop your sense of how the world works and why we are in this mess.

I predict that in some countries the impact of the virus will not be equally severe. We also can see this now comparing South Korea with the U.S.

Before saying more about the pandemic we need to how we come to know something is true? As Mark Twain once said, “it aint what folks don’t know that bothers me but what they know that just ain’t so.” Never more true today.

I try to speak to as many different audiences as I can about my ideas and try to understand the perspectives of various groups. I was once in a privileged grade 8 class at a private school in Seattle. It is difficult to talk in public schools as they are almost entirely focused on teaching to the test, and my topics just aren’t on those standardized tests. In this grade 8 class as I was talking about inequality’s effects on society, I could sense that the ideas weren’t coming across. So I stopped and asked: “how do you come to know something is so?” Silence followed, and silence continued. You know how uncomfortable that can be. The quickest way to deal with unending silence is to break it and move on. But I stayed with my discomfort. After what seemed like an eternity, a boy raised his hand and said “if our parents tell us when we are very young, if our teachers and friends reinforce that, and if we experience it we know it to be true.” I’ve never heard a better answer since.

We need to hear it from trusted people, early in life. It is difficult to change your beliefs as you get older. Those beliefs need to be reinforced by peers and elders. But as the student pointed out, that isn’t enough. We need some experience before we can be sure. Much of what I will say, indeed much of what has obsessed me for 25 years is difficult to experience directly.

Right now, in the thick of things it’s difficult to figure out exactly what we are experiencing. The news is mostly unbearable. There aren’t many cars on the road. Stores are closed. Sporting events and meetings are cancelled. People aren’t walking around much. When you see them they look glum. But most of us don’t see dead bodies on the street, or hanging from life buoys or in morgues. Our lives are mostly sheltered from the tragedy that is unfolding. There are websites of course, some continuously updated with COVID-19 cases among countries. When I started checking them a few weeks ago, we were 8th in what we should call the COVID-19 Olympics. But now we are number one. We have more cases than any other country. Yet this impending horror of our times, these terrible facts, are not readily apparent unless we are working on the front lines in hospitals. If you are outside in American cities you don’t find corpses strewn around, nor do you see sick people on the streets as in old paintings of the plague in Europe.

What people know that just ain’t so is clear from surveys of Americans that consistently find about a quarter of adults believe the sun goes around the earth. The experience is obvious. There it is in the eastern sky in the morning, and in the western in the evening. Only astronauts and those who study astronomy can really experience the actual reality. If you find that hard to

believe just search “American beliefs that the sun goes around the earth” it pops right up. Are Americans especially vulnerable to untruths? Hard to say but there was a study in the journal *Science* in 2006 that surveyed beliefs about evolution among 35 nations. The United States was at the bottom along with Turkey, having less than 40% believing evolution was true.

There is a great deal of information or news, or facts out there on COVID-19 that is likely not true. Who are you going to trust to understand what is going on today? Why should you believe me?

I’ve been looking at societies, populations, countries, as my patient for 25 years. Before that I treated sick individuals in the emergency department and would sometimes describe the work that I did as putting a bandage on someone which they then removed after they left the facility. In other words, I wasn’t saving lives although that was the metaphor I was indoctrinated in as a doctor on the front lines.

The current coronavirus pandemic likely began in December in Wuhan China, in wet markets where live bats were sold. Such live markets are the norm in much of China. That’s not a totally unusual practice. As a child in Toronto, my father once brought home a live chicken and slaughtered it in front of me. I’ve never liked chicken meat since.

The ease of global travel made the virus spread everywhere. Some countries reacted quickly to limit the spread of COVID-19, which is the disease caused by the virus named SARS-CoV-2. China and South Korea used quarantine, testing and early aggressive treatment. Note that we don’t know what treatment works at this point and it is unlikely that we will for a long time. However, finding infected people through testing and then isolating them has been known to be effective in pandemics for more than a century. What happened in South Korea, and is happening in Singapore and Taiwan requires strong leadership and trust among the people. Both are sadly lacking here.

The thought of what many coronavirus patients are going through in hospital isolation is concerning. As a five-year-old, I was quarantined in a hospital in Toronto for fear that I had polio. My parents would come to a balcony outside my window and peer in at me, and wave well-wishes. Not a comforting situation although self-quarantine today is more humane.

Here in the U.S. the CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, knew of the threat in mid-January. But it took another two months for a federal response. Why there was such a disastrous delay is not clear but one likely reason is that the CDC had its funding slashed in the last few years and staff there were muzzled by the executive branch of our government.

How did we come to this situation? We have had such wanton natural habitat destruction that has recently accelerated massively. I lay the blame on our capitalistic

market system. Capitalism doesn't require that we account for the true costs of an economic transaction by ignoring what are called externalities. When you destroy a forest for food, fodder, fuel and lumber products, the cost to humanity and the biosphere is not estimated in the cost for that transaction. Instead, later, humanity pays the price.

Our capitalist system is driving us to an early grave in many ways. Economic booms and busts are an inherent feature of capitalism. That the next one would soon follow the banking crisis in 2008-9 has been predicted for several years. COVID-19 makes this prediction a grim reality. If we don't change the system, it will likely be worse next time. The systems analyst, Immanuel Wallerstein, pointed out that capitalism's days are numbered. What will replace it is unclear but it is a certainty as no global system lasts forever.

Let's consider how capitalism has served us for the past century. Capitalism's incredible inequality in the Roaring Twenties led to the stock market crash of 1929. President Roosevelt wanted to save capitalism so he brought in the New Deal legislation to support people through minimum wages, job creation, Social Security and many other factors some of which have slowly been dismantled. FDR has been the most popular president in our history because he put through social legislation in our time of need.

We couldn't count on capitalism for getting us through World War II. Instead we had a form of a command economy producing for the war effort. Examples include the image of Rosie the Riveter, the cultural icon of the War as she worked in factories and shipyards and produced war supplies. Inequality was drastically reduced during that period, both here and around the world. Capitalism was asleep at the switch.

Capitalism also failed us as we invaded Vietnam in the sense that war production industries profited greatly while millions lost their lives in Indochina. And we lost that conflict. The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq represents another. There are many other examples of how capitalism has failed us.

As I said, the most recent failure, before today's debacle, was with the banking crisis of 2008-9. What happened then was an offshoot of the 'greed is good' mentality as the banks loaned continuously to people who they knew could never repay. That led to a huge financial crisis. What did we do? The February 16, 2009 cover of *Newsweek* has a red hand clasping a blue hand with the headline: "We Are All Socialists Now." If we trusted capitalism we would have let the banks fail and markets would be vastly different today as they adjusted to the new system. Instead we allowed one financial institution to close, a form of financial quarantine. Mostly we used our money to bail corporations out and their bosses used our funds to give themselves huge bonuses for performing so poorly. So, we used socialism, the public purse, to bail

out capitalism, namely the rich who profited off it. Not the poor whose homes were foreclosed.

Capitalism has totally failed to prevent or treat our current pandemic and we are again reverting to socialism to bail out our corporations beginning with a \$2 trillion dollar bailout. There is talk of federal infusion of funds into Boeing, the company that killed so many through faulty plane design which they knew about but pursued vast profits instead. There will be many more handouts to the already rich and powerful, and market discipline for the rest of us. Let me say more about our current situation, the pandemic, before we explore this most recent and ongoing failure of our economic system.

Here we are today with most of you likely practicing physical distancing to avoid becoming infected. You are struggling as your employment is precarious and likely to be even more so as time passes. With the closure of restaurants, except for take-outs, most stores, pretty well all schools, and various meetings cancelled, and the ability to escape limited by travel restrictions, we are hurting.

I'm not going to give you individual behavioral advice as there is so much of that out there. Yes, wash your hands for 20 seconds, disinfect everything you come into contact with. No physical socializing.

Those with the internet, those with phones, and other communicating devices. These are important ways to stay in touch. We are seeing the growth of this socialization at a distance. Given the importance of social relationships for our health mentioned above, this is really good.

But so many are left out. What about the unhoused? We have huge populations of such poorer homeless people who are more susceptible to getting COVID-19 and spreading it given their living 'rough', the British term. There is talk of having shelters for them. But should it require a pandemic of this sort to make that happen, if it ever does?

What about testing? We were very late in this country to begin testing, and still far behind. Knowing who is infected is key to avoiding spread of the infection. Here in Washington state where the infection first took hold and likely spread elsewhere drive-by testing began in a parking lot at my University of Washington where they can administer 5000 tests a day with reporting in a day or two. It began with a doctor's initiative here rather than federal support and was an important start. But the response needs to be national, or better still global. It clearly is not.

What about masks and sanitizers? They are mostly unavailable even for the most vulnerable, those treating us in hospitals. The co-instructor for my spring graduate course on population health has been treating COVID-19 patients at our trauma center without the major protective gear that would be ideal. Just a surgical mask and an apron as personal protective equipment or PPE. Why no backup supplies for this kind of emergency, which has been anticipated for a long time. The rich can spend

hundreds of dollars for a mask but it is unclear if it prevents infection - likely not. The federal government cut funding for a National Emergency Stock Pile. There is a bidding war now for supplies to treat the infection. Is this capitalism to the rescue?

We don't have the number of ventilators, breathing machines, to treat the number of cases requiring breathing support. There are workarounds but it is unlikely they will ever be used here. For example, while working in the 1970s in Dhorpatan, a remote Himalayan valley in Nepal, when a sick person required mechanical ventilation to survive, I would place an endotracheal tube and connect it to a respirator bag. We would then take turns compressing the bag to expand his lungs with air. Took shifts day and night. It worked!

There is a company near Seattle that is trying to re-tool to make ventilators. But once you have lost the production skills and equipment it is difficult to start again. Not impossible as we learned during World War II when almost the entire economy was placed into service for the war effort.

Another key concern is our low number of doctors and hospital beds. We have half the number of doctors per capita than some other rich countries. Whether primary care doctors or specialists we don't have as many as other rich countries. This is in large part due to our medical guilds keeping numbers low to reduce competition so that we can have higher profits for ourselves. Countries that have more primary care doctors have better health, too. The healthier countries have up to four times the number of hospital beds per capita than we do. And we have decreased the number of hospital beds per person by 20% since 2000. By contrast China in the same period increased its hospital bed capacity by 60%. We decreased the number of beds while China increased. No wonder we have a serious problem. One reason for the reduction is that fewer beds generate greater profits. Another troubling statistic is that we have over 500,000 fewer hospital beds than in 1975 when our population was considerably smaller.

Something else that is troubling. We spend more on health care than the rest of the world combined. In 2018 we spent over \$11,000 per person, while China spent \$668! That sounds astonishing but there are a variety of sources for this information. I use those from the OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. You could find similar numbers from the World Bank or the World Health Organization.

What about developing an effective vaccine for SARS-CoV-2? It certainly won't happen quickly. And in this country it would probably be produced by a pharmaceutical company. Trials are expensive so they would need government subsidies. The same goes for treatments or cures. Again, violation of capitalist principles. Effective treatments are likely to be

discovered although the history of other advances in medical care show them to typically take years.

Our economy, of course, is already hurting badly. We will certainly have an economic recession, and perhaps a depression. Will there be a New Deal to save us this time?

COVID-19 offers us an amazing opportunity to transform society for the better. The globe has entered a new phase in its human history with this scourge. If we don't respond in the right way to this incredibly opportunity to learn, we will get many more chances to discover something that may be much worse than what we face now.

The last such event occurred 102 years ago with the Spanish flu. It's unclear what lessons we learned right afterwards but research conducted up to the present has shown very long lasting effects among the survivors. We need to explore this event to understand what might be in store after COVID-19 has waned.

From the global 1918 pandemic, in the United States where there was reasonable data, about 25 million people became infected. It struck without warning in October 1918 and had largely dissipated here by end of the year. The Spanish flu killed more Americans than all the combat deaths of the 20th century. Deaths were concentrated in the prime ages of 25 to 35 years. The most vulnerable were pregnant women. Still births increased. For those pregnant women who survived, their children had shorter lives, more chronic problems such as diabetes, and heart disease as a consequence of what we now know about the influence of the in utero period on adult health. Males had more heart disease than females. As well these children as they became adults had lower educational attainment, more physical disability, lower height, lower income and socioeconomic status, and required more welfare payments than those born outside of the Spanish flu exposure. These conditions were seen even for those born to mothers who had only a very mild case of the flu.

Those who survive during periods of pandemics have compromised health afterwards. Peter Kropotkin described this eloquently in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*.

It is almost certain that today's pandemic will have similar future repercussions, no matter what government policies are brought into place to help the economy. You can't build resilience after the fact.

So something major needs to be done now to avoid the next such pandemic which won't take a century but will come much sooner. But I'm not talking about having enough masks and ventilators in storage.

Dealing with this scourge will require co-operation at a level never seen among human societies. The only somewhat similar event was WWII which led to creation of the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

Through that war the U.S. became the major superpower, but a Cold War followed with the Soviet Union which our leaders used to create fear amongst us.

Since the end of the Cold War thirty years ago U.S. world leadership has waned and we have retreated into nationalism. This is more likely to now be accelerated. China will become the superpower unless we dismantle the global hierarchy that gives rise to national advantages.

The current pandemic is creating massive divisions, political polarization and hostility among nations at a level not seen since perhaps the first part of the 20th century. In the United States we have already retreated into political tribes with considerably less ability to work together. Increasing income inequality has facilitated our two major parties voting in opposite directions. This is a huge contrast from the 1960s when Democrats and Republicans worked together.

These divisions have become international to everyone's detriment. A good example that really hampers relations with China is how our leader calls SARS-CoV-2 a "Chinese virus." How would we feel if AIDS were called the American Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome, not an unreasonable name, since it became prominent in San Francisco.

Identity politics has also splintered our society by making it difficult to work together. Populism, a novel concept, divides people into two antagonistic groups, those who are good and the others who are corrupt. This leads to tremendous distrust of elites and institutions. At the same time populism embraces the image of a strong leader whom we must follow, no matter where that person is going. A good example is rising approval ratings for our president despite all his faults and errors which are increasingly apparent. We also need to be vigilant to not have someone become leader for life as has happened in China, and in Russia. The forthcoming national election is uncertain at this point.

I sometimes ask: Are you a fox or a hedgehog? Isaiah Berlin pointed out that a fox knows many important things while a hedgehog knows one important thing very well. Hedgehogs tend to have a focused worldview, an ideological leaning, strong convictions while foxes are more cautious, more likely to adjust their views, more pragmatic, more prone to self-doubt, more inclined to see complexity and nuance. We need to become foxes and figure out from experience how society works even though imperfectly. We must become public citizens.

As events unfold in the United States you will hear of so many policies being rushed in, on a minute to minute basis including paid family leave, paid sick leave, and so many others that could be valuable. Even if these are maintained after the pandemic wanes, something that is very, very unlikely, they take years to operationalize. It is all too little, too late. Recall that we are only one of two countries globally without a nationally mandated paid

parental leave policy. The other is Papua New Guinea, half of a large island north of Australia.

Consider the most probable future scenario. Corporate bailouts will vastly increase our national debt as will all the other policies being proposed and voted on. Expect what has happened in Europe, namely austerity, to follow here. Whatever policies passed in the near future that might help ordinary people will be truncated as belt-tightening kicks in. There will be moves to cut Social Security under the guise of privatizing it as President Bush attempted.

All the other rich countries have some form of universal health care or medicare for all. We do not even though we outspend all others on health care. Would universal health care solve our problem? Most certainly not. Italy which is now the country with the most COVID-19 deaths has universal health care. Why didn't it work there? Italians are an incredibly social people. Before you can get down to business with someone from there, or of Italian heritage, you have to sit down, eat together, and spend considerable time getting to know one another. So Italy, with its culture, was a good breeding ground for the virus. But our country, the United States, with its record poverty levels is also a good tissue culture for coronavirus.

Public health as a complex in this country is mostly unknown to folk here. They associate public health with public toilets. Funding has been cut drastically and we are paying for it now.

We also must recognize that health and health care are vastly different concepts. I ask people in this country: "Do you want health or health care?" They are confused. I make my students, when they use the term health, ask if they really mean health care? Do we access health? Pay for health? Get health? Insure health? Therein lies a major problem in this country: we fail to address health instead of pushing for health care.

Now that I have seriously depressed you, where is the silver lining?

In addition to all the hardships and tragedies this pandemic has the potential to bring real social, economic and political change to this country. It is up to us to determine what kind of change that will be.

We are on the verge of a new world order. One that can feature cooperation, caring and sharing with one another, and a new political system that doesn't have a name now. No one called it capitalism four hundred years ago. That evolved. Piketty in his *Capital and Ideology* book talks about participatory socialism coming next. What it is called will become clear in the next decade or so.

The new order should feature pre-distribution, rather than re-distribution. It begins with a level playing field so that Robin Hood won't have work to do.

As Ralph Nader has observed we only need one percent of the people on board to change society.

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, noted "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Now is the time we have been waiting for. There is every reason to hope.

To change dysfunctional social systems in the United States, John Kingdon pointed out that not only must we be aware of the problem, and agree on a solution, but a transforming event is required. COVID-19 is that transforming event. How might this come about? Well, we are the ones we have been waiting for. We must be here now. We have to mobilize support however we can. We have to point out the toxic effects of income and wealth inequality. There is no time to lose. This is the lesson of our life. What are we waiting for?

Change can happen quickly, as is the case with our increasing support of LGBTQ rights.

Goethe said: "Knowing is not enough, we must apply. Willing is not enough, we must do."

What must we do? In the courses I teach about population health at the University of Washington, the students have to do a community outreach exercise. Normally they organize a community event, a real-time gathering, and present what they have learned in the course. They all do this as it is a major part of the grade. In the virtual learning environment of the COVID-19 period they still have to do it, but in whatever creative virtual way they can. They work in groups, again online. I make my students create and practice elevator speeches, something that will grab attention once we go back to using elevators. Begin by saying: "We have this amazing opportunity to transform society so this pandemic doesn't happen again." Add your own words. Practice when you receive a marketing call, especially the kind that is being recorded for quality assurance purposes so that person won't hang up. Stand in front of a mirror speaking. Use an audio recorder to refine your speech. Then recall the words of circus founder, P.T. Barnum, namely, "without promotion, something terrible happens....nothing." You have to promote yourself.

Examples of what my students did in the winter quarter included Instagram bombardment, and using other social media, as well as creating websites. Today's youth are incredibly skilled and creative. For digital immigrants like me, I resort to whatever channels I have. So I teach, write and talk. Now the talks are virtual. My first talk on Alternative Radio was in 2003. I've covered many parts of population health and how the U.S. is doing. They are all available on the web. I've written op-eds and major stories for newspapers. I've done TedX talks. Of course this is not what normal academics do which is to publish so as not to perish. My aim is to reach the public, not academic audiences.

Can you follow a similar pattern? My advice is to do what you love, do what you have skills for, and can do for a long time without being paid. Consider the groups you

belong to. Church groups, hiking clubs, or whatever club suits your fancy. They are not now defunct, but many are dormant. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, clubs will come alive again. Start one amongst you friends or co-workers today if you still have a job. If you have lost your employment, then call up your neighbor or your former workers and see where that leads. Build a network to saving our planet. Not just humanity but the planet. It is our rapacious capitalism that has brought us to the brink of possible extinction.

I have proclaimed in this talk that the COVID-19 disaster provides us with an opportunity to dramatically realign society. However, such a realignment will never occur if we are blind to a harsh reality: the existing power compact is strongly entrenched and very skilled in maintaining the status quo. What will it take to overthrow this power nexus? Maybe it will take massive civil disobedience or a widespread refusal to pay taxes. Maybe it will take a fire-breathing young politician to galvanize the movement. Maybe it will take an outright revolution. I can't say. What I can say through the actions I have prescribed above is that as individuals we can lay the ground. We can work to realign our fellow citizens' thinking. Let's not sneer at the concept of socialized medicine or of a welfare state, that we as Americans have been brainwashed to do. Let's not blindly follow authority figures or institutions. What's good for General Motors is not necessarily good for the country. It's probably bad! The people we elect to be our political leaders or to occupy the White House are not automatically wiser or more competent than us. Such a rethinking should not be hard to achieve at this point in American history. Let's not consent to being led like sheep to the slaughter in the next plague or war.

We have to act fast. As an emergency doctor, I had a rule of the fearsome fours. Four minutes without air, four days without water and four weeks without food. We have four months to turn this pandemic around. So far this is just a talk. Let's make sure that what Aesop said 2500 years ago isn't true here which is that when all is said and done, more is said than done. Let's turn that around! Let's do more than we say.

Thank you for listening.

Outro music – Loudon Wainwright: A Hard Day on the Planet

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