

# THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC

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There are some people who are using the current crisis to take up new hobbies, write more papers, bake bread and brew beer. They are exercising in new and exciting ways, learning the guitar from YouTube videos and finally finishing that book project they've been working on for the last few years. They are not just thinking about these things as possibilities or ideas, they are actually doing them. If you are one of these people: this post is not for you.

This post is for those who find themselves overwhelmed by this new strange reality, who feel they have been subscribed into a Dalí painting of melting days and deformed environments where the end of the street has become the end of the world. In this world, it has become impossible to get things done in normal time frames. It is the morning and then dinner time arrives: as though the middle of the day (like much of life at the moment) was cancelled without prior notification.

When I talk to my colleagues, friends and family almost all of them – the COVID-flourishers discussed above excluded – mention this experience of being inexplicably unable to accomplish their usual daily jobs, professional or domestic. In some cases, time has been cruelly overburdened as people struggle to do two jobs at once: fulltime childcare or care for a vulnerable relative, along with their usual job (but under the most unusual conditions). In other cases, there are aching worries about loved ones either in at-risk groups or working in frontline services. But neither these preoccupied nor time-poor people are the only ones complaining of a lack of concentration and a slow-down in productivity. Almost everyone mentions this weird inability to focus and to complete everyday tasks. What is going on with this existential mud we have to drag ourselves through at the moment?

There are a few responses that come to mind. The first is that this situation is stressful. Obvious perhaps, but no doubt true for us all. We are stressed about someone we care about getting the virus, being unable to see someone we care about with the virus, getting the virus ourselves, unknowingly giving the virus to someone we may or may not know merely by going to the supermarket. We are stressed about our job if we are lucky enough to still have one, we are stressed about not having a job if we have lost one, we are stressed about the economic needs of our loved ones and our capacities to meet those needs. We are stressed about the daily death toll, the number of people in ICU, flattening the curve and the availability of PPE. We are stressed about being stressed.

Stress makes life difficult to navigate, it makes the borders of ordinary things fuzzy and unclear and overlaid so that we can't quite separate out our various commitments into an easy tick-list of tasks.

But I think there is another response that explains the current out-of-focus nature of our daily lives and that is our new relation to time. It shares certain traits with the experience of grief. One part of that process, of grieving, is the challenge to imagine a future without the person we've lost. The future stretches ahead of us in mourning like a ticker tape of events that a punch-hole has attacked – there are gaps at all the marks of life events: birthdays, holidays, children starting school... all now shaded grey by the absence of someone who should have been there. This future marked by an absence makes the present feel unstable. Similarly, memory suddenly takes on the role of unbidden projectionist – randomly playing past images of the deceased (sometimes ones we didn't even know we remembered). This unsolicited flickering of the past overlays the present so that it becomes slightly distant and hard to take hold of.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger described our usual experience of time as 'ek-static'. What he meant by this Greek term was that we experience the present through drawing on the past and

projecting into the future. In some sense we are 'outside' (*ek*) each 'stasis' of time – past, present, future – and in another sense we are time itself insofar as we bring these three temporal streams together in our everyday experience. We do this in both mundane and profound ways. If I am hungry and leave my desk to make a sandwich, I find myself in the kitchen holding onto my past desire to eat, my past knowledge of sandwich making and using those pasts to create a future in which my hunger is satisfied. Or, if I am looking for a new career, I revisit my past professional experiences that I enjoyed and imagine different futures where I can have more of those experiences. These imaginative acts allow me to engage in a training course in the present to reach a career in the future that I will enjoy.

Crucial to Heidegger's account is the relationship between how we understand the world around us and the future. In every act, we project into the future, short-term and long-term. We are future-oriented beings and we understand the world *in terms* of our future projects. I enter a room and the armchair by the fire stands out to me as somewhere comfortable to sit and read my book, which itself might be part of a longer-term project of learning a new language. Or the armchair stands out as something to stand on to reach the light fitting and change the bulb. We are always ahead of ourselves, pushing into the immediate future with an eye further ahead, using the things around us in the present as means to get to that future goal.

On this account, the future is never set in stone, there are many different choices we can make towards many different futures depending on how we use our past experiences and present situation. However, we do always move forward, even without a long-term goal in mind we are always moving into the future relentlessly. In cases where our usual temporal experience is disrupted – in the case of grief, for example – we struggle because our projects are so often caught up with others whose absence in death makes new futures hard to envision.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought grief in various guises. Many have lost loved ones and have lost them without any of the usual rites and rituals that if nothing else occupy the grieving for those initial days of shock. Many are unable to be with loved ones who are critically ill or who are at substantial risk of becoming so as residents of long-term care facilities. Many more have lost jobs and are not only grieving that loss but also worrying about the future losses that will come in its wake.

But the lack of focus that seems to have afflicted everyone, even those of us lucky enough to have not been directly affected by the virus, is different to grief in an important way. Whereas in grief our future landscape is missing something or someone important; the current situation seems to leave us with no landscape at all. It seems to me that we are struggling because there is no recognisable future into which to project – all the usual structures that are normally just there in the background are now gone. Our everyday world – of shops and bars and cafés, of greeting friends with hugs or kisses, of travelling to the city centre for a stroll, of chance encounters over the coffee machine that turn into half hour chats – all of this normality, that scenery from which and into which we paint the stories of our lives, is gone with no promise of return. Faced with an almost blank canvas we are set adrift.

And this is dangerous – or, it is hopeful.

A radically ambiguous future like this gives room for new visions and right now those visions are up for grabs. We are facing a choice about how to populate our future landscape of the everyday. It is strange not knowing what the future will look like, but we need to remain vigilant in our blurry state – there are some who are seeking to fill this void with the false security of blame and exclusion. As at sea as we might all feel, perhaps we can hold onto this ambiguity and use it in the new future that awaits. Use the fact that this disorientation has arisen in large part as a result of an unbelievable effort of millions of people to save the lives of strangers. This element of altruism is as much a part of our current state as any of its other more threatening or depressing aspects. And perhaps holding onto this fact gives us not only some grounding in the present but also something worth taking with us as we project into a new future.