

A Time for Respect

Volker Brendel: Borrowing from a famous commercial years ago, I could say: “Hello new world!” We are obviously faced with a somewhat dramatic situation with the coronavirus pandemic. This is literally affecting everyone on earth, to some more tangibly at this time than to others, but nonetheless affecting anyone, everywhere. And all of this has developed at breathtaking speed. There are many factors to encompass; certainly, more factors than I personally can encompass on my own. So, we’ll spend the hour slightly differently from other times. I will open our consideration with some remarks to set a framework for our consideration, and then we’ll open it up earlier than usual for others to contribute in recognition that this situation requires many voices, many experiences, many insights; channeled, though, through a common framework of spiritual identity.

Let me begin by just describing my own situation. It is a beautiful spring day in Bloomington, Indiana. I am at home, in our beautiful house on a property that includes nine acres of woodland, abutted by more woods. I would say I’m one of the luckiest people on earth if one has to isolate oneself! It is rather quiet here. That said, you will have noticed that my wife, Nikki Pohl, called in from Vienna, Austria. She is in the midst of a trouble spot, having arrived as a Fulbright scholar to teach at one of the local universities a few weeks ago and now being caught up in the whirlwind there. So, unfortunately, we are not together to experience this challenge.

My work at Indiana University, like in many other places, has moved to work from home as much as possible, and to teach online; but overall, spirits are high, and we are adjusting very well. As it were, my teaching this term is a computational genomics class given to biology undergraduates, and the outbreak of the coronavirus came in handy, in one sense, for teaching purposes. From the beginning in January, we’ve been following the developments, and I’ve been giving students exercises to work with the data as they are coming out. I will mention that again a little later.

This is an extraordinary development that is putting pressure on all of us. As most of us well know, whenever there is external pressure, there is an opportunity as well to meet it with increased internal pressure. This is not in a literal sense, but in the sense of reflecting on our core values, on what we know and what we can contribute and how this opportunity provides avenues for spiritual expression. One of the factors that has come to my mind is to meet this crisis with great respect. Initially it’s respect for people. We easily have great respect for the

healthcare workers who are tirelessly and strenuously putting in efforts to help everyone who is physically affected. I'm sure many of you have seen the extraordinary pictures from Spain where essentially the entire population is under quarantine. Through social media, people organized to show themselves at their windows and balconies at an appointed time and give a standing ovation to the healthcare workers out and about taking care of people. This was an absolutely wonderful expression of a fine spirit of appreciation and going on with life even under these circumstances, offering praise and thanksgiving.

In my mind, there is also the need for great respect for people who have to make decisions, including healthcare officials high up, politicians, and local functionaries—respect for them independent of whether they hit the right tone or not in the moment. Many of them are not well prepared to make decisions in the rapidly evolving scenarios. Inevitably, looking back, one would say, well, this decision was not right or that decision was poor judgment, or we may praise somebody else who in retrospect did make the right decision. Whatever it is, respect is one spirit that needs to be extended. Also respect for all the people who are affected in different ways. There are those who are physically ill, but there are also a lot of people whose livelihoods are threatened. There are businesses suddenly without customers. There is a lot of hardship still in the offing. We need to have respect for the people who are disadvantaged to start with to meet something like this. There are many people in this country without health insurance, or without proper documents, who are afraid to ask for help because they can't afford not to show up for work to make the next paycheck, or who cannot afford to be found out as being without legal documents. Everyone is in this together.

Now there is also, and most importantly, the need for respect for life, respect for truth. There is a larger picture to be seen. The usual human approach might be to curse the virus and say it shouldn't be there, it interferes with what we need to do and want to do (yes, it does!).

This is not the first virus known to us. Remarkably, viruses are essentially small pieces of nucleic acid, be it what we call DNA or in the case of coronaviruses, RNA, consisting of a string of chemical elements called nucleotides. For the coronaviruses, this is only 30,000 units long, or one hundred thousand-fold shorter than the human genome. Moreover, this small piece of virus has only what is called borrowed life; it cannot do much on its own, but rather must infect a host and borrow the host cellular machinery to make more copies of itself. You might say, well this is a very nasty thing; but very few things are nasty in biology, life. There is a design in life, some of which we perceive and some of which we are pretty ignorant about. But one factor in life is that there is balance. This may be easier to understand and acknowledge in the classical predator-prey situation. Let's say you have a family of foxes on

your property. Well, the foxes are hunters, so they will go after the rabbits. Now, if they manage to eat all the rabbits, there is no more food left, and that's to the detriment of the foxes. In any such situation there is a balancing effect such that rightly a steady state emerges of having just the right numbers of foxes and rabbits.

Human beings, we, have ignored this basic principle of life to a large extent. A few weeks ago, we were talking about climate change and overpopulation. Are all those problems gone now because we have the coronavirus? No. In fact, these problems are tightly related. In our university class, while studying this piece of RNA, one of the outcomes that was immediately clear is that this virus is very closely related to coronavirus in bats. This is of course known by the scientific community, but it's very easy to see for yourself. Thus, the source of the outbreak is a jump from the virus from bats to humans. Normally, this would never happen but in that particular area of China where it did happen, there is a very high concentration of people and there are essentially no restrictions on people hunting everything and anything for food. The Wuhan seafood market is not just selling seafood, but anything that can possibly be eaten gets mixed in; and so natural boundaries between animal and human communities get crossed. Then, having the high population density in the area and, on a larger scale, the high frequency of travel and high density of population almost everywhere else leads to the situation we have right now.

From a large perspective, you might say maybe Earth is fighting back. The resources of the earth are put under great stress by selfish human beings, particularly this generation which seems to have an unbridled appetite for taking as many resources as they possibly can for themselves, with little concern for the future. That is unsustainable. We have talked about this in other ways many times before. We know that the demise of the human-ego approach to everything is inevitable. Population numbers will have to come down, and human beings will have to fundamentally change, starting with an acknowledgement of their participation in the larger design of life; but more to the point, acknowledging their identity and role of stewards of the life processes. As it was put, to tend and keep the garden; to be caretakers and stewards, not exploiters.

Whether this balancing process will come dramatically or gently may still be up to us. I know that in decades past, thermonuclear war was the topic of the day. Mind you, this is still a danger; not what we would call a natural disaster, but entirely man-made: incredible destructive power coming out of the same mis-identity that is the cause of all human strife and conflict.

There are many other possibilities of getting the balance back in order. Viruses may be one way. There is no need to judge and no need to be afraid. I think we can rejoice in the power of spiritual expression in any circumstance. It is rather remarkable to have this wonderful demonstration of how quickly the whole world can be touched, maybe by a piece of RNA, maybe by new policies, maybe by fear, maybe by anger. But why not in the same vein by assurance, by love? I have full confidence that the same way of touching everyone is just as accessible for good. If there is a reconsideration of who we are and how we need to interact with the world in terms of our health habits, in terms of our eating habits, in terms of our ecological approaches, then our greed can be curbed as an outcome of all of this. Well, what wonderful outcome that would be! I'm sure many of you have seen satellite pictures early on of the infected areas in China that were isolated and where industrial production slowed to a minimum. Suddenly, the air quality changed dramatically for the better! Well, maybe that is something we can recognize and agree that, yes, very quickly our environment, our societies can change to a more balanced and healthy approach. These are my thoughts. There is much more to be said but my own view, expressed with great confidence, is that indeed all is well; life can be trusted, and if our interactions and our personal conduct can send a message of assurance and a wave of healing radiation into the world, then let's offer that.

Note: For an audio recording of the ensuing discussion by participants from many different places, please see: <https://toneoflife.org/volker-brendel/a-time-for-respect/>

March 15, 2020

Volker Brendel: 4419 S. Inverness Crest, Bloomington, IN 47401