

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Tragedy of the Commons revisited

There's talk these days about "getting back to normal." This is often said wistfully, recalling a nostalgic past as sunny as a Norman Rockwell painting. If all goes well, somewhere down the line we'll likely refer to our pandemic experience as "good old days" too, forgetting present peril the way grizzled veterans reminisce regarding their wartime experiences. It's built into us, I suspect – our selective memories only partially regard the truth.

On the contrary, as Heraclitus said centuries ago, it's not possible to step into the same river twice, meaning the way back home may be difficult. We'll be relieved to get the coronavirus off our collective backs. But wait a moment: this particular monkey – our virus – hasn't gone anywhere, though politicians have tapped into their reservoirs of magical thinking to pronounce that the pandemic is gone. Hello endemic?

Meanwhile more of us than ever are in hospital, vaccinated or not, and we've consistently underestimated the virus's ability to undergo serial mutations that can sweep the globe in short order.

Kudos, of course, to the remarkable science and scientists that have produced vaccines in short order and to the yeoman efforts of health care workers and other essential folk, but failing grades to many politicians, to the information-resistant, and to the crass opportunists who consider truth an inconvenience.



If the beneficence of vaccination were truly shared, without the pushback of persons trumpeting their rights, and if all believed in equitable access, our problems with this coronavirus would be long past and we'd enjoy more usual lives (banner image credit: Spencer Davis, pixabay.com)

Where are we in this tangle? It's difficult to say, but I'd guess somewhere between muddling through – crossed fingers – or perhaps bracing ourselves, waiting for another

shoe to drop. If anything has saved our collective butts, it has been the remarkable success of vaccination efforts generally everywhere, in spite of generally minor differences, and the need to update our vaccines as mutations require.

An explosion in Covid cases, as with a new variant – or heaven forbid, a new contagion – would be a gut punch at this time, and then there's the matter of our indebtedness. The global financial frameworks we rely on have stayed sturdy through our long preoccupation, but the news is not rosy. Corporations and individuals benefitted when the fiscal floor fell away early in the pandemic, and governments stepped in to infuse public funds, but larders are mainly empty.

Most disturbing have been tales of corporate – and personal – misuse of funds meant for rescue purposes, as per the headlines that announced that [bonus plans](#) would be maintained for many corporate executives. Lest this be thought of as an oversight or small potatoes, *USA Today* has recently revealed that the [richest 10 people](#) in the world doubled their personal fortunes over the duration of the pandemic. Not so for folk at the bottom of the wealth ladder, or the 40% of the world's population living on less than \$5/day, who've seen their [meagre assets slump](#).

Our extreme behaviour with respect to poverty and wealth must be addressed, along with issues we've set aside: climate change, opioid deaths, nuclear threats and the funk of our mental health. Indeed there are common features to our diverse dilemmas.

[Biologist Garrett Hardin](#) wrote *The Tragedy of the Commons* over 50 years ago, and it remains compelling. Imagine, according to Hardin's metaphor, a resource such as pasture land that is available to all, in other words, a "commons" and that herdsmen keep cattle on the land. It can be reasonably expected that each herder will want to feed and keep as many cattle on this land as possible. Things may go well for a time, but there will be a day of reckoning. Over time, each herdsman will look to add yet another animal until the carrying capacity of the land will be exceeded. Once this happens, however, it will still be reasonable for each herder to add another animal and then another and so on, since given a "commons," the cost of overgrazing will be borne by all.

Once we have exceeded certain limits – here it's the ability of the globe to shrug off the burden of too many people chasing finite resources – Hardin argues that progress is no longer possible with purely technical or technological change without a shift in general values or morality. In the context of pandemic, our patchy success administering vaccines is a good example. If the beneficence of vaccination were truly shared, without the pushback of persons trumpeting their rights, and if all believed in equitable access, our problems with this coronavirus would be long past and we'd enjoy more usual lives.

The myriad problems presented by climate change are similar. If we could all agree that 8 billion of us must share the planet – and the operative word here is *share* – there'd be less contention regarding fossil fuels and planning to avert catastrophe would be more feasible. No one has suggested this would be comfortable or easy, but as docs are wont to say, "Drastic illness requires radical measures."

Standard economic theory says we're all in a race, competing for limited resources, and success is measured through accumulating "stuff." No question, but this competition has delivered mountainous wealth for some, yet interminable poverty for others. The costs of growth have begun to outpace any real or imagined benefits given our plunder of the environment and growing inequality, yet we are capable of filling the needs of every man, woman, and child wherever they live. Our reality, however, is contrary and awful. Most of us suffer the so-called diseases of abundance or excess; others die of too little.

The Achilles heel of our current economic system is the exponential need for growth that attempts to maintain the status quo, however poorly justified by the theory that trickle-down benefit will occur. We commonly look for 3% growth rates in GDP on a year-over-year basis. If we [do the math](#), this requires the economy to double every 20 years, grow 16-fold in 100 years, and a mind-boggling 5,000 times in 300 years.

It's unsustainable. Our overwhelming need is for an environment that has fresh air, clean water, arable land, stable communities and good stewardship. This is quite a different matter than "stuff," and it turns out, we've been measuring the wrong things. Given our situation, beleaguered with problems, we tend to be glib and dismiss even the possibility of major change as naïve. As philosopher and biologist [Rutger Bregman](#) has pointed out, though, many of our utopian goals are more realistic than attempts to maintain our present circumstances.

Turns out the major change we need is pretty much an extension of The Golden Rule – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" – if we could only apply it all round. Our ethical and religious teachings have long held that we borrow the planet "from the seventh generation," and the wisdom of Jesus, Martin Luther King, Karl Marx and others can coexist. Add Mark Carney to this list. Past governor of the Bank of Canada and the Bank of England, Carney has recently [published his own assault](#) on the rise of a market society and the accompanying decline in values.

To sum up: it's time to redefine what we mean by the term "civilization," and it's time we acted on it.

We have no alternative.

Editor's note:

The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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