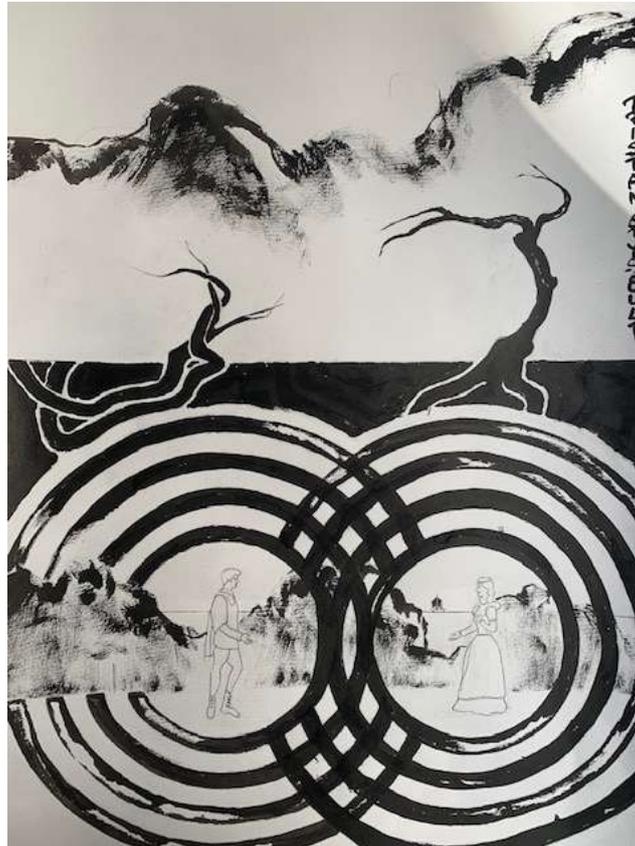


**LEADERSHIP NARRATIVE SERIES**

**LEADING IN EXTRAORDINARY DISRUPTIVE TIMES (Part 1/3)  
YESTERDAY – LEARNING FROM WHAT HAPPENED**

*By Frederic Nortier and Stuart Walkley,  
with the collaboration of Jayne Carrington and Dominique Christian  
May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020*



*“Tristan et Iseult in confinement” by Dominique Christian – April 2020*

During the Spring 2015, Bill Gates challenged leaders at a TedX conference in a speech called: *“The next Outbreak, we are not ready”*. He took the role of Casandra to raise the growing risk of a global pandemic to come.

In May 2019, during a meeting at the ICRC’s (International Committee of the Red Cross) headquarters in Geneva, Yves Daccord, the Director General, talked about the Humanitarian trends and challenges for the future. At one point, he talked about the impact of global warming, and how this is breaking the silos among humanitarian expertise while deploying humanitarian operations. One aspect of it was about the importance of quickly engaging discussions with veterinarians to know and understand the local animal pathogens. Why? Simply because global warming is increasing the risk factor of zoonosis – an infectious disease caused by a pathogen that jumps from non-human animals (usually vertebrates) to humans.

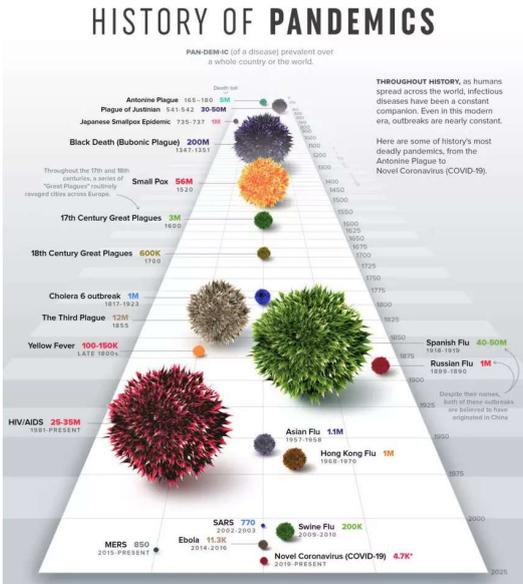
What is striking, perhaps, is that both Yves Daccord and Bill Gates were almost alone voices and at the time of their words had little impact beyond their immediate audience. We may have imagined threats to our world from chemical warfare, ill-fated terms “weapons of mass

destruction”, global terrorism, or new global economic crisis, but we would have seen risks from tiny pathogens as being the stuff of science fiction.

Yet here we are, in Spring 2020, less than a year later, with the Covid19. A pandemic which in the space of six brief months has impacted on the political, economic, social, and personal lives of almost every person in almost every country in the world.

**“Predictability today is far from everything!”**  
(comment from a humanitarian leader – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020)

This is not the first pandemic.



(source: World economic forum)

So, what is so extraordinary about this one?

In this series of three articles, our aim is to share our experience, views and questions, from an international perspective, gained from some key international client meetings, webinars and coaching sessions, that took place remotely between March and April 2020. These moments allowed interactions with leaders from Afghanistan, Belgium, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Lebanon, Mozambique, RDC, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, The Netherlands, Turkey, UK, USA. One thing that stroke us: it is a common global and simultaneous experience.

Why is the Covid19 having so much impact on all of us?

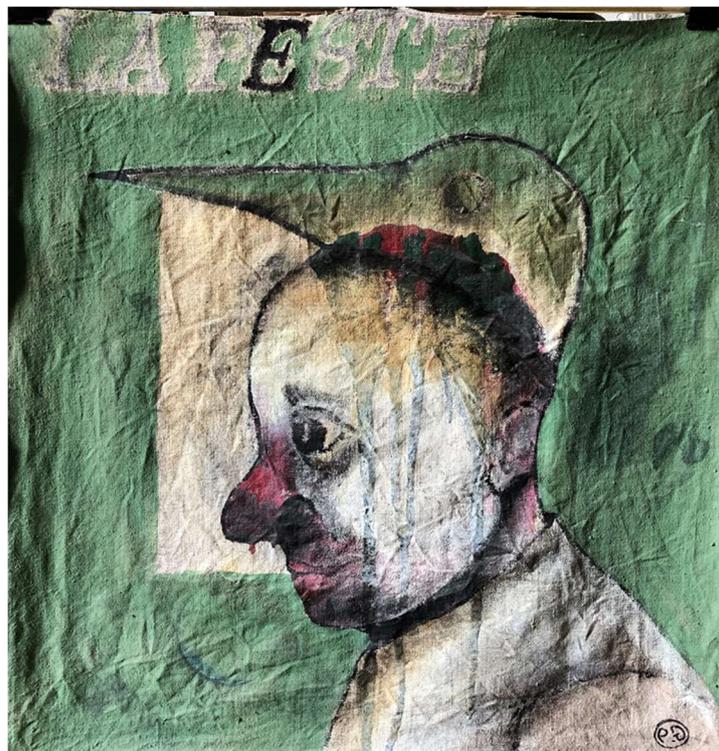
This may well be an existentialist crisis. The pace and intensity of the pandemic, which acts as a wakeup call for our mortality and our impermanence, forces us to think about “the human condition” should it be our individual, social or collective one. Jean Paul Sartre, in his writing about existentialism, said “*Existence precedes essence*”. Existentialism claims that an individual is defined by his/her acts, all under his/her full responsibility. General lockdowns and people confinement, at large scale for indefinite time, therefore, provoke an

**existentialism crisis** at individual, family, company, industry, country, and world levels. It is literally a threat to our very being.

Within just a few weeks we have seen the edifice of our international structures, our interdependent economies, our financial stability, our industries, our ease of travel, our freedom to meet, interact, live together in our familial and social groups, collapse in front of us.

This impacts on us emotionally because we recognise that we are staring in the face of death and the prospect of oblivion. All too often we react to world-events, such as forest fires, tsunami, air-crashes, as being tragic but as events which we can observe from afar. But Covid19 brings home to us the sheer proximity of the danger we face to our own lives, those of our friends and families. *"It could catch me. It could catch you."*

It is real and it impacts directly on each and every one of us. We see it, hear about it, talk about it incessantly through every possible media and social network outlet. We discuss it relentlessly with our family, friends, colleagues and neighbors. We are never more than a click on our Smart-phone, an Instagram picture, a WhatsApp update, or a TV or radio news. There is no respite from the relentless obsession we now face with our own mortality. Frustration and anxiety are increased while *our little daily joys - coffee breaks, informal chats, travel time, lunch and social interactions with family, friends, colleagues* are no longer possible. There are no usual stress 'outlets' such as exercise, sports and social events, and tensions and emotions are increasingly strained.



*"La Peste"* by Paco Gomez - 2009

People's dreams, aspirations, plans, careers, lifestyles, security, hopes are now under ominous threat from an obscure and barely understood enemy. We still do not know their origin. We still do not understand how the virus is transmitted. We still do not understand how the virus

operates on our body. We have no immediate preventative vaccine nor cure. We are facing uncertainty and forced to accept our human limitations. We simply do not know. We learn every day.

There is a cognitive disconnect for many of us between the greatness of our belief in “mankind” and our ability to construct our complex multi-faceted world and the stark reality all could be destroyed by tiny unknown pathogens.

The scale of so called “Covid19 crisis” is unique and daunting:

- Approx. 3,5 billion humans in lockdown simultaneously by March 30. 2020
- 4,4 billion humans either waiting, unaware of the pandemic or unable to confine

Approx. 3,5 billion humans experiencing confinement, without a clear start and end date. This is probably also the first time in human history to observe a one common reaction and behaviour, everywhere in the here and now, to cope with a common issue. Another extraordinary aspect of the situation we are in.

The sheer speed of the spread of Covid19 has been intimidating.

We have had no time to prepare. Early signs in the late autumn of 2019 in China did not hit our consciousness until the very last days of 2019. Still during January and early February of 2020 the world watched this threat from the safety of their own homes and security of their own lives as being some far-off event in what for most of us was a remote city in China. In January, many considered the Chinese decision to confine Wuhan as pure expression of a dictatorial regime. The same considered the Italian decision to confine Lombardy as a hysterical Italian reaction in front of a little mild flu. On March 14, French people were enjoying meals at the brasserie and talking about the election taking place on the 15<sup>th</sup>, not realising a lockdown would be announced the 16<sup>th</sup>. The USA were still in denial that it was anything more than a minor illness and, in the UK, crowds attended Race Meetings and Football matches oblivious to the risk of infection. There was no awareness than within weeks every continent would be in Lockdown.

At the personal level, the virus has impacted on people rapidly. Often asymptomatic, this killer virus spreads silently and strikes suddenly. Almost 30% of those hospitalized by the illness and requiring intensive care are killed by this virus within seven days.

So, are these the main factors/reasons explaining the extraordinary impact of Covid19 on us? Or are there other aspects?

*Our beliefs have trapped us.* The development of a one global world, connected and linking all societies and economies, has nurtured the belief that should there be a need in one part of the planet in terms of resources, services or products, the demand could be satisfied from anywhere. A belief that the satisfaction of the demand will be fast, cost effective and with little, if no constraints and limitations. Beliefs are our best friends as well as our best enemies, as all beliefs generate self-limitation. Since WW2 we have built a world on this belief. This

belief became the mother of globalisation, and as a side effect the mother of delocalisation of numerous industries, services and therefore knowledge and knowhow. And despite regular hiccups (petrol and energy, war) the global regulation mechanisms have always managed to keep the dynamic of the system. Covid19 acted as a global awakening at multiple levels, and as a reframing experience of our limiting beliefs. The system gets stuck when a global world needs the same resource instantly in massive volume, a resource that can only be produced in one place (protection and hygienic masks). The logic of the system explodes when global transportation and exchanges are no longer possible. The values of the system are being questioned when citizens from all over the world are in need of local resources, products and services. And this is where the Covid19 becomes extraordinary, if not inspiring, as it unlocks alternative beliefs at large scale: circular economies and “circuit court” commercialisation are vital in crisis times, “*Glocal*” is essential, single focus on cost reduction is a pernicious approach. Many questions arise. Strong and inspiring leadership will be key, more than ever.

The birds are back! Everywhere on the planet, in cities, in harbours, in the sea, in the forest and in the mountain, the wildlife is visibly back, and nature is breathing. Global warming has become a growing tension and area of concern for individuals, cities, industries, companies, and societies. If the global awareness of it is common around the planet, the debate regarding the real impact or not of humanity in the planet is still vivid. The threat linked to global warming and a pessimistic perception that it is too late to reverse the impact on the planet, have frozen many decisions and real actions. And here comes a brand-new pandemic forcing +3,5 billion human to enter 8 weeks + lockdown.... And with it comes the evidence that the impact is almost immediate: increased air quality, clean harbours, wildlife occupying their natural territories, species that had been identified as extinct reappearing. How many have and will be saved by this pause? A challenging evidence for both climate-sceptics and pessimists.

This unique moment in our world offers also a providential opportunity to reflect on a moral and ethical dilemma we have been struggling with in recent years. Materialism and mass consumerism have growingly governed our politics and economics nationally and globally since WW2, which has led to an environmental crisis due to over exploitation of our planet, generating global warming. In 2019, the Earth overshoot day was July 29 – while in 2000 it was November 1<sup>st</sup>! We live in paradoxical pivotal moment. On one hand, humanity is engaged in massive destructive actions, and on the other hand, creativity is on its peak, in terms of the greatest advances in science, technology, medicine, exploration, global awareness. Destruction & Creativity ... the two faces of Shiva in Hinduism. Both seemed to be linked in our western and global society model. Both require immense talent and skills. Which face will be worshiped in next future?

Everyone is familiar with the butterfly effect theory, based on the mathematician Edward Lorenz first principle: *A single butterfly flapping its wings in Asia, can create a tornado in South America*. But many ignore the second Lorenz principle: *If the flapping wings of a butterfly can create a tornado, it can also stop it*. Can leaders be the butterflies we need?

## How do we lead in such extraordinary disruptive times?

This crisis may never end. That is not an unduly pessimistic statement, but there is little evidence at present that Covid19 can be eradicated. It will become part of the new normal. Whilst we can pinpoint when its impact was first experienced, when the first deaths occurred, we may well not know a definite day when it is over and when we can breathe a sigh of relief. We are best to prepare as leaders for a future which is markedly different to both the present and the past and which will remain disruptive and extraordinary. How we do that will define us and shape the outcomes. As leaders we know the importance of making difficult decisions and facing our perception of reality. At the same time, we know the value of optimism, of inspiring hope and overcoming difficulties, to identify and accept the need for change. But this challenge is greater than any we have faced, more pervasive and more complex.

Certainly we can think about what leadership is required at the international and national level but really it is the bread depth of the leadership challenge that faces all of us, in all aspects of our lives, that needs to be addressed. Leaders of small and large businesses, community organisations, schools, religious groups, sport, culture, media, and at the personal level leadership in our own families and amongst our own friends. It is a time for collaboration, shared learning and collective intelligence.

Quick answers to complex situations are often false friends.

*“To every complex problem there is a simple solution, and its wrong”*  
(H.L. Mencken).

Leaders may be tempted to use old ways of thinking, old models, in the hope that they can help to make sense of the current situation. But simply seeing this in *“change management”* terms or as a test of *“resilience”* would be far too trivial. It is far more than business re-engineering; it is business reinvention. It is also society reinvention, whether we want it or not. This is a time for focused preparation and recovery as there may be the temptation for leaders to simply try to recreate the past, to go back to the *“good old days”* and seek to rebuild what was already there - a restoration of the old order (ancient regime).

But there is simply no way back. Should there be a precise *“day after”*, it cannot and must not be a return to *“the day before”* and in all aspects of leadership this will need to be a critical starting point.

This is the start of a new chapter in the story of our lives and our world. The narrative has changed. Leadership at all levels will have a key role to play in writing the new storylines in inspiring and purpose driven ways. And this starts now.

Our next two papers will not, therefore, provide simple answers or a route map to a known future. There will be no single leadership approaches, no one way ahead. But we do want to explore some of the questions leaders will need to be asking themselves, and more importantly be asking those whom they lead, on how they will at least approach the future.

We shall try to be constructive and practical, moving away from a preoccupation with theory or retrospection, but mindful that all of us will make our own ways through, not with the arrogance which so typified our exaggerated belief in our own infallibility, but with faltering and stumbling hope that we can collectively face a New World and an uncertain future.

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