

Coronavirus

by Bill Herbst

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Of the four generations that comprise about 95% of Americans currently alive and breathing — aging Boomers, mid-life Gen-Xers, young adult Millennials, and adolescent Centennials — none has ever been through a collective catastrophe. The traumas of our own Civil War, World War One, the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic, the Great Depression, and World War Two are little more than history to most of us, the stuff of books and movies. In terms of our direct experience, they might as well be fiction, like Grimm fairy tales.

Yes, 9-11 and the 2008 financial meltdown certainly count as serious shocks within America that provoked major long-term repercussions. In addition, numerous other crises erupted over the past two decades, including civil wars and conflicts in the Mideast, terrorism here and elsewhere, and various disruptive weather events around the world (droughts, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, fires, etc.). The vast majority of Americans witnessed all those events on television, at a distance, as a kind of virtual reality.

We may have been emotionally affected, and we noticed the resulting structural changes in society, particularly through increased security measures, but — for the most part — our day-to-day lives were not dramatically altered. Through it all, and even as America changed with astonishing rapidity through technology (smart phones, social media, online commerce, and the surveillance state, to list some obvious examples), the stunning increase in wealth inequality (the rise of the billionaire class), and cultural/political polarization (the election of Donald Trump), at least some semblance of normalcy remained.

Many commentators on American life insisted that this sense of stability was a fragile illusion that could not last. In my own public writing, I've struggled with the feeling of being a Cassandra or Chicken Little. Was I just an alarmist?

Welcome to the 2020s.

Among the neurotic beliefs embedded in my personal limbic brain are two worth mentioning here. (Most of us who are not flat-out, ego-driven narcissists — such as Donald You-Know-Who — are burdened by such beliefs. You'd think that we'd know better by now, but we still struggle.) The first of these two personal neuroses is the foolish belief that at the age of 70 I'm the only one of my peers who is aging, damaged, and increasingly decrepit. I seem to assume that everyone else I've known and loved is still 25, healthy, and vital. Despite overwhelming and, in fact, total evidence to the contrary, this belief is proving

difficult to uproot. I repeatedly cut the weed at ground level, but it grows back. I'll keep working at it, though, and without spraying my brain with Round-Up.

My second idiotic belief is that no one reads what I write. Apparently that's wrong, too.

Since the pandemic gained steam recently, I've been fielding questions from friends and readers, asking what I think. Some questions are simply above my pay grade. For instance, was COVID-19 engineered in a bioweapons lab? Quite possibly, but I can't confirm or deny that. While my authority in all such matters is highly suspect, I've been standing on my little podium for some decades now speaking my mind, so I guess this is no time to stop. I'll write a little in this commentary about two specific questions:

#1. How bad is the Coronavirus pandemic going to be in America?

That's a helluva good question. As far as I can tell, no one knows the answer. Not the talking heads on TV, not the medical professionals, not even the Wise Elders of Alpha Centauri. And I don't either, of course. Nonetheless, here's my take on where we're headed and what's likely to happen.

As of today, the number of confirmed cases of Coronavirus infection among Americans is more than 160,000. Two days ago, that number was reported as 80,000. Since we've bungled the testing and have no reliable or widespread scientific, medical, or demographic data, my guess is that the actual number of infected Americans may be ten times that, somewhere in the 1-2 million range.

Health experts talk about "flattening the curve" through the only means currently at our disposal — social distancing, staying home, restricting travel, limiting commerce, and curtailing public gatherings. Our connections to others must become virtual rather than face-to-face (and don't touch your own face...).

What seems obvious is that we're headed over the coming weeks or months into the full impact of the pandemic's first wave. If the number of positive cases for the virus is currently more than 1.5 million, within three months it might be 25 million, 50, or even 100 million. Assuming that the mortality rate is 1%, this could mean as many as one million dead Americans.

That number sounds dreadful, and it is. But compared to the longer-term threats looming on the horizon — economic collapse, catastrophic climate change, and nuclear war — it's actually quite mild. Yes, I know that sounds heartless, but I offer it from a very specific context. Americans had 40 years to change how we live, and not only did we *not* choose to live more sanely, we went hell-bent-for-leather in the opposite direction. *Let's party like it's 1999. Screw the future. Après moi, le déluge.*

From this point on, though, we no longer have a choice. We will be forced to change, to reconsider everything. Will everyone do that? Of course not. Many people, including a significant percentage of the ruling elites, will continue to

stubbornly cling to their fantasies of life as they want it to be. Some people will freak out and go crazy, acting out the worst facets of human nature. But a lot of us might — just *might* — come around enough to get our heads screwed on a little straighter.

From that context, the 40,000-volt cosmic cattle prod of a million American deaths is mild. And, quite possibly, *necessary*. (OK, I'm a monster. So sue me.)

2. When will the pandemic end and life return to normal?

The pandemic will end, but life is never returning to normal. Those days of business-as-usual are gone forever. American Exceptionalism is way past its shelf life and is rotting, even if many Americans keep eating it.

Considered astrologically — which actually means from my particular view of the astrology, since other astrologers may disagree or have a very different take on the symbolic information — 2020 is the first of four consecutive years during which global human civilization is notified that time's up and, more specifically, America comes apart at the seams. That's 2020 through 2023.

I'm not implying, however, that the virus will rage on until 2024. I doubt it. My thought is that the pandemic is the opening salvo of a siege-like cascade of major disruptions, with each round provoking the subsequent crisis.

So, I'm not predicting four years of unremitting medical shit. However bad the pandemic gets, we will work to get through it, and it will run its course, as pandemics always do. Yes, the viral spread could come in waves. The next two months will probably be a bitch, followed by a retreat of the virus, only to see it return with renewed fury for a second wave in the fall or winter. I don't, however, imagine that the pandemic will last for four years.

Other factors (forces, really, as in *force majeure*) will arise to humble us. And not because we deserve to be punished in some fundamentalist Old Testament vengeance from an angry God, but because those forces are the natural and inevitable consequence of what we've done and how we've lived.

Collectively, we've chosen fantasy over reality, and too many of our personal and collective dreams carry built-in toxic repercussions. The fantasies are great for awhile, seeming to change reality, but then reality bites back. Ultimately, reality always wins. And the sad truth of civilization, from its beginnings about 12,000 years ago down to its modern version of the past 500 years (and especially the past two centuries), is that we have acted collectively like spoiled, petulant children, displaying selfishness, greed, cruelty, short-sightedness, and a pathetic lack of understanding about the sacred interdependence of all life. The jig is up.

Humans may survive, or we may go extinct, but, one way or the other, our long childhood and disturbed adolescence cannot continue with impunity. I would prefer that we survive and mature, and without too much further human suffering or devastation, but I'm not in charge.