



A fresco by Luigi Varca depicting the plague of 1630. LeAgosini/Getty images

PANDEMICS KILL COMPASSION, TOO

by David Brooks

Some disasters, like hurricanes and earthquakes, can bring people together, but if history is any judge, pandemics generally drive them apart. These are crises in which social distancing is a virtue. Dread overwhelms the normal bonds of human affection.

In “The Decameron,” Giovanni Boccaccio writes about what happened during the plague that hit Florence in 1348: “Tedious were it to recount how citizen avoided citizen, how among neighbors was scarce found any that shewed fellow-feeling for another, how kinfolk held aloof, and never met ... nay, what is more, and scarcely to be believed, fathers and mothers were found to abandon their own children, untended, unvisited, to their fate.”

In his book on the 1665 London epidemic, “A Journal of the Plague Year,” Daniel Defoe reports, “This was a time when every one’s private safety lay so near them they had no room to pity the distresses of others. ... The danger of immediate death to ourselves, took away all bonds of love, all concern for one another.”

Fear drives people in these moments, but so does shame, caused by the brutal things that have to be done to slow the spread of the disease. In all pandemics people are forced to make the decisions that doctors in Italy are now forced to make — withholding care from some of those who are suffering and leaving them to their fate.

In 17th-century Venice, health workers searched the city, identified plague victims and shipped them off to isolated “hospitals,” where two-thirds of them died. In many cities over the centuries, municipal authorities locked whole families in their homes, sealed the premises and blocked any delivery of provisions or medical care.

Frank Snowden, the Yale historian who wrote “Epidemics and Society,” argues that pandemics hold up a mirror to society and force us to ask basic questions: What is possible imminent death trying to tell us? Where is God in all this? What’s our responsibility to one another?

Pandemics induce a feeling of enervating fatalism. People realize how little they control their lives. Anton Chekhov was a victim during a TB epidemic that traveled across Russia in the late 19th century. Snowden points out that the plays he wrote during his recovery are about people who feel trapped, waiting for events outside their control, unable to act, unable to decide.

Pandemics also hit the poor hardest and inflame class divisions.

Cholera struck Naples in 1884, especially the Lower City, where the poor lived. Rumors swept the neighborhood that city officials were deliberately spreading the disease. When highhanded public health workers poured into Lower City, the locals revolted, throwing furniture at them, hurling them down stairs.

The city thought the disease was passed on by people eating unripe or overripe fruit. The peasants responded by bringing baskets of fruit to City Hall and gorging on it in public — a way to hold up a defiant middle finger against the elites who were so useless in the face of the disease.

The Spanish flu pandemic that battered America in 1918 produced similar reactions. John M. Barry, author of “The Great Influenza,” reports that as conditions worsened, health workers in city after city pleaded for volunteers to care for the sick. Few stepped forward.

In Philadelphia, the head of emergency aid pleaded for help in taking care of sick children. Nobody answered. The organization’s director turned scornful: “Hundreds of women ... had delightful dreams of themselves in the roles of angels of mercy. ... Nothing seems to rouse them now. ... There are families in which every member is ill, in which the children are actually starving because there is no one to give them food. The death rate is so high, and they still hold back.”

This explains one of the puzzling features of the 1918 pandemic. When it was over, people didn’t talk about it. There were very few books or plays written about it. Roughly 675,000 Americans lost their lives to the flu, compared with 53,000 in battle in World War I, and yet it left almost no conscious cultural mark.

Perhaps it’s because people didn’t like who they had become. It was a shameful memory and therefore suppressed. In her 1976 dissertation, “A Cruel Wind,” Dorothy Ann Pettit argues that the 1918 flu pandemic contributed to a kind of spiritual torpor afterward. People emerged from it physically and spiritually fatigued. The flu, Pettit writes, had a sobering and disillusioning effect on the national spirit.

There is one exception to this sad litany: health care workers. In every pandemic there are doctors and nurses who respond with unbelievable heroism and compassion. That’s happening today.

Mike Baker recently had a report in The Times about the EvergreenHealth hospital in Kirkland, Wash., where the staff showing the kind of effective compassion that has been evident in all pandemics down the centuries. “We have not had issues with staff not wanting to come in,” an Evergreen executive said. “We’ve had staff calling and say, ‘If you need me, I’m available.’”

Maybe this time we'll learn from their example. It also wouldn't be a bad idea to take steps to fight the moral disease that accompanies the physical one.