

Camus on Coronavirus

By Alain de Botton

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In January 1941, Albert Camus began work on a story about a virus that spreads uncontrollably from animals to humans and ends up destroying half the population of “an ordinary town” called Oran, on the Algerian coast. “The Plague,” published in 1947, is frequently described as the greatest European novel of the postwar period.

As the book opens, an air of eerie normality reigns. The town’s inhabitants lead busy money-centered and denatured lives. Then, with the pacing of a thriller, the horror begins. The narrator, Dr. Rieux, comes across a dead rat. Then another and another. Soon an epidemic seizes Oran, the disease transmitting itself from citizen to citizen, spreading panic in every street.

To write the book, Camus immersed himself in the history of plagues. He read about the Black Death that killed an estimated 50 million people in Europe in the 14th century, the Italian plague of 1630 that killed 280,000 across Lombardy and Veneto, the great plague of London of 1665 as well as plagues that ravaged cities on China’s eastern seaboard during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Camus was not writing about one plague in particular, nor was this narrowly, as has sometimes been suggested, a metaphoric tale about the Nazi occupation of France. He was drawn to his theme because he believed that the actual historical incidents we call plagues are merely concentrations of a universal precondition, dramatic instances of a perpetual rule: that all human beings are vulnerable to being randomly exterminated at any time, by a virus, an accident or the actions of our fellow man.

The people of Oran can’t accept this. Even when a quarter of the city is dying, they keep imagining reasons it won’t happen to them. They are modern people with phones, airplanes and newspapers. They are surely not going to die like the wretches of 17th-century London or 18th-century Canton.

“It’s impossible it should be the plague, everyone knows it has vanished from the West,” a character says. “Yes, everyone knew that,” Camus adds, “except the dead.”

For Camus, when it comes to dying, there is no progress in history, there is no escape from our frailty. Being alive always was and will always remain an emergency; it is truly an inescapable “underlying condition.” Plague or no plague, there is always, as it were, the plague, if what we mean by that is a susceptibility to sudden death, an event that can render our lives instantaneously meaningless.

This is what Camus meant when he talked about the “absurdity” of life. Recognizing this absurdity should lead us not to despair but to a tragicomic redemption, a softening of the heart, a turning away from judgment and moralizing to joy and gratitude.

“The Plague” isn’t trying to panic us, because panic suggests a response to a dangerous but short-term condition from which we can eventually find safety. But there can never be safety — and that is why, for Camus, we need to love our fellow damned humans and work without hope or despair for the amelioration of suffering. Life is a hospice, never a hospital.

At the height of the contagion, when 500 people a week are dying, a Catholic priest called Paneloux gives a sermon that explains the plague as God’s punishment for depravity. But Dr. Rieux has watched a child die and knows better: Suffering is randomly distributed, it makes no sense, it is simply absurd, and that is the kindest thing one can say of it.

The doctor works tirelessly to lessen the suffering of those around him. But he is no hero. “This whole thing is not about heroism,” Dr. Rieux says. “It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency.” Another character asks what decency is. “Doing my job,” the doctor replies.

Eventually, after more than a year, the plague ebbs away. The townspeople celebrate. Suffering is over. Normality can return. But Dr. Rieux “knew that this chronicle could not be a story of definitive victory,” Camus writes. “It could only be the record of what had to be done and what, no doubt, would have to be done again, against this terror.” The plague, he continues, “never dies”; it “waits patiently in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers” for the day when it will once again “rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city.”

Camus speaks to us in our own times not because he was a magical seer who could intimate what the best epidemiologists could not, but because he correctly sized up human nature. He knew, as we do not, that “everyone has it inside himself, this plague, because no one in the world, no one, is immune.”

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