

Reflections from octogenarians, and collaboration in uncertain times

March 23rd, 2020 Ian Foster — People Assured
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I was chatting with my 88-year old Uncle (my guardian), and his 87-year old friend. I was asking them if they had ever experienced anything like this (coronavirus) before in their lifetimes.

They said no, not quite like this, but spoke about their experiences during the Second World War and immediately following. They were 7 years old when the war started in 1939 and, like many children in the UK towns and cities, they were evacuated. They didn't see their families for a couple of years other than an occasional visit. They had to get used to isolation from close family and friends, without the benefit of (smart) phones and social media. As children, they adapted: attending different schools, living with different families. They said it was harder for their parents.

They also spoke about some unexpected opportunities from adverse events. After the war, in their early 20s, they both did their national service with the British Army. My uncle went to Egypt and his best friend went to Iraq (between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) – in the historical region of Mesopotamia. I recently found some photos of my uncle in front of the pyramids, and his army discharge papers from 1953 with a testimonial from the commanding officer: "He is honest, loyal and works well without supervision."

They described how they never would have gotten to visit Western Asia otherwise, in a time when there was much less opportunity to travel. They talked about the value of supportive communities (something that has stayed with them) and developing lasting friendships.

They talked about how life and society has evolved since the 1940s: more travel, more goods, technology, and more safety in the work we do. They also were stunned that, despite our evolution and major technological and medical advances, a virus could have still such a dramatic impact, affecting the whole world in such a short space of time.

One of the things that came home to me, as we discussed the impacts, was how we have evolved to live in a much more global, interconnected world, both physically and on-line — quite different to the 1940s.

It also made me realize that our lives are not as independent as we might have believed —they are much more interdependent.

Our supply chain, and much of what happens in our lives depends on those upstream and downstream. Similar to the animal and plant species in the food chain, if one element of our ecosystem isn't there, the chain is disrupted. If multiple elements are impacted, it's hard for us to live a normal life.

Every family, extended family and group of friends will have come to realize in recent weeks, just how dependent they are on one another and on others outside of their families, regardless of what job they do.

Everyone knows someone who has lost their job or business, is in ill health and cannot be readily visited, is distant from family members and cannot visit them.

It's all very humbling and has really brought to home to me how important collaboration and cooperation are, and the invaluable role our communities and critical services play in our lives. This new world has provided much time for family and for self-reflection. Life has become a lot simpler.

Listening to the radio while I "social distance" I've been truly heartened by the stories of the amazing medical and service personnel who are going above and beyond to help our communities — with risk to themselves — as well as the many people who are turning up daily to keep our food supply going, keep the lights on, ensure we are not too hot or too cold.

At times like these, as someone who is not providing front line essential services, there's always a reflection of "I could do being doing more." It comes with a sense of guilt. In part, I've come to reconcile this with the understanding that we can all help in some way. Everyone has a relative or neighbor they can call or help, or a co-worker they can check in on. Even a smile to a stranger helps.

The future will be different...it already is. We are having to think in new and creative ways.

We now have virtual coffees, use video calling a lot more, and (in many cases) are thrown into full-time remote working. My local Y just sent me a list of virtual fitness classes, which is very helpful. We are spending more time with those in our household, and much less (if any) with friends and relatives we don't live with. It's important to stay connected with others. For those of us lucky enough to have the technology, we can do that.

The pandemic has, understandably, changed behaviors. People (and markets) can become fearful when there is a high degree of uncertainty, when the future cannot be defined. Jobs will be lost (if not already), careers will need to change and there will be hardship where losses cannot be recovered. The desire to travel, when it's safe again, I assume will be less — though I hope not indefinitely.

Like everyone else, I don't have crystal ball to tell me what life will be like after things eventually settle down. My hope is that the level of collaboration and co-operation I am seeing and hearing about will continue, that we will have a renewed sense of appreciation of the communities in which we live, work and socialize, and — when the times comes — we will be ready to embrace new opportunities.

“It takes a village...” is perhaps a proverb no more apt than now.

My thoughts are with you and your loved ones.