

Benefits of Crisis

by Jack Cumming

Late in 2019, the world found itself facing the potential of a pandemic. By early March 2020 it was evident that the pandemic was spiraling out of control. Scientists recommended isolating people to reduce the risk of contagion. It seemed clear to them, early on, that the contagion potential of the new pandemic virus was beyond what a normal flu might unleash. Moreover, unlike the flu, there was no vaccine to protect the population from the new virus.

The Crisis.

The virus was quickly identified as a coronavirus. Soon the health authorities had given it a specific name, COVID-19. The term “COVID” denoted “coronavirus disease” and the 19 referred to the year 2019 in which it had first manifested itself. Scientists realized that they had to respond quickly to this developing contagion lest the entire global population be adversely impacted. In the United States, this led to the lockdown of many cities.

Because the elderly are particularly susceptible to the disease, the lockdown has affected that age demographic more than any other. This led to widespread loss of life and to a growing sense of isolation among the most vulnerable population. In summary, the impact of the virus has been grim.

The economic impact of the lockdown has been dramatic. Still, there is much positive that is resulting from the response to the crisis. In fact, as a rule, crises create a climate in which cultural evolution is accelerated with positive results. It’s hard to understand why that might be. Most likely, however, is the fact that the changed circumstances – the lockdown in the case of COVID-19 – open people’s minds to accepting change.

Openness to Change.

Most of the time, most people are resistant to change. The resistance to change increases with advancing age. Where young people see positive prospects in progress, the old people may feel that they are becoming less relevant and, therefore, unneeded. It’s not surprising, therefore, that most entrepreneurs tend to be young. It’s also not surprising that old people often yearn for the good old days.

The COVID-19 crisis is unlikely to be any different from earlier crises. For example, the crisis of World War II led indirectly to the proliferation of the single-family home through ventures such as Levittown, as it led more directly to dramatic new advances in scientific medicine and the unleashing of a source of energy like none the world had ever seen.

Growing Tolerance.

The physical dislocation of World War II may also have led to a new acceptance and respect for alternative cultures, ethnicities, and practices among people who otherwise might have lived out their full lives within a narrow geographic compass. That new intercultural tolerance may have been one of the factors allowing the civil rights movement to catch hold during the 1960s.

Now we are facing another crisis not unlike the earlier crisis of World War II. We are already seeing an acceleration of change brought about by this crisis. For instance, many people have now learned how to use virtual conferencing platforms. That new literacy, called by some “Zoom literacy,” will enable much more efficient learning and gathering opportunities. It’s unlikely that this will be discontinued once the fear generated by the virus has faded.

Impact on Housing.

Other changes are more difficult to foresee. For instance, housing, which we've already noted was dramatically changed as a result of World War II, is likely to change again. In the years between World War II and the COVID-19 crisis we've seen a great increase in the number of two-earner families. People no longer have the time and leisure to prepare elaborate dinners, to do housekeeping, or to provide at home childcare. The need for childcare has long been evident. The response has been slow in coming.

It's likely now, though, that new housing models will evolve which incorporate childcare in a collective living environment. This is quite a departure from the social isolation of the single-family home. In a multifamily, collective living situation, children can readily find their playmates within the neighborhood of the collective living community. That is positive. Imagine play dates that don't require a parent to drive.

Integrated Living.

If we continue to consider how this collective living (Integrated Living) environment might develop, we can well envision communities in which food services are readily available on the premises. Already many corporate working environments include employee cafeterias on their premises. Those workers who are able to grab their lunch without having to leave their worksite would also be well served to have similar food service opportunities available to them at home. One can picture restoring the traditional family dinner with everyone eating gathering at the family table to share takeout from the eateries included in their living community.

That could be a good beginning. It still leaves open, however, the challenge of healthcare. If a healthcare program can be built into the collective living neighborhood then the two-earner family can rest assured knowing that sick childcare can be readily

available on premises. Moreover, the physicians and other health workers serving the local community can get to know the residents in a way that is not possible today with the quick-in-and-out visit model that has characterized healthcare in the latter decades of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st. Relationship Medicine can result in a healthier population at lower cost than what we have experienced heretofore.

Automobile Dependence.

Thus, one of the changes that might be accelerated by the COVID 19 crisis is the possibility of integrated living. The single-family home concept of suburbs was made possible by the automobile. Returning veterans from World War II, settled easily into the idyll of suburban life. Homes tended to be located in land plots removed from shopping and from work.

Now we have come to see that the automobile has been a mixed blessing. The roads, driveways, parking lots, and more consume our land and dominate our lives. Collective living, integrating services to empower those who choose that form of life reduces dependence on the automobile, helps the environment, and eliminates many of the hassles of today's living models. It can also promote a healthier lifestyle.

Crystal Ball.

Will these changes be the consequence of the current crisis? No one can foresee how the future will eventuate. Much of this will require the vision and resources of entrepreneurial thinking backed by smart capital investment. Still, past major crises like COVID-19 have accelerated change for the better. We can expect that the world ten years from now will be stronger than it might otherwise have been because we have been opened to the possibility of change by the necessities of our response to this crisis.

The author. Jack Cumming lives in Carlsbad, CA. He is an actuary by examination and vocation and was educated as an historian at Princeton and New York Universities. He has also qualified by examination as a Certified Aging Services Professional.

He is a member of San Diego Independent Scholars and participates in discussions with the National Coalition of Independent Scholars. Mr. Cumming publishes regularly, primarily on topics affecting the senior living industry and the lives of older Americans.

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