

[Linda Holt's Letter from the President of the Princeton Research Forum was originally published in the *PRF Newsletter*, Winter-Spring 2020:  
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Dear Colleagues,

Hello and greetings, during this period of Covid19 pandemic. I hope you are doing well, staying cheerful, and continuing to do good work. On a positive note, I don't think I've ever seen and heard so many operas in such a short time!

I'd like to share with you some informal findings, not about the science of viral contagion, but about the literary source of the word *pandemic* which has struck fear (and justly so) in so many hearts.

Etymologically, the word is not as sinister as the condition it recalls. *Pandemic* derives from the Greek, *pan* meaning all and *demos* referring to people. All the people. People everywhere. In sickness, in health, and somewhere in between.

While the word *pandemic* picked up disease-related connotations in the Middle Ages, home of some of the worst plagues in recorded history, the roots of the term could just as easily apply to other conditions and circumstances. What if we had a pandemic of peace? A pandemic of justice? Imagine, difficult though it may be, a pandemic of listening to each other with understanding.

The past few months have been unprecedented in the history of our country, perhaps in the world. We have become accustomed to seeing the daily statistics on TV, computer, and cellphone screens. It was a black day indeed last month when the number of Covid-19 related deaths in the United States surpassed 100,000, and then, in a matter of hours, climbed up another thousand and still rising.

If we never thought about *pan* and *demos* before, the period between mid-March 2020 and now has changed that forever. Each of us has a personal story to tell relating to the emergence and spread of a novel virus. It may be that some among us, or a relative, friend, or colleague, has contracted Covid-19. More commonly, we may be experiencing the isolation resulting from stay-at-home orders, essential though those orders may be. Some of us have seen dreams dashed, jobs lost, careers waylaid. My dream of singing in Beethoven's Ninth with a full symphony orchestra was dashed mere days after our last rehearsal in March. My hope was simply a personal wish, while others are finding they cannot pay the rent, have necessary surgery, or even take a much-needed book out of the library. Even wearing a mask or social distancing can be a challenge for people with certain medical or psychological conditions.

But what has sustained us during this difficult time has been the two roots of the word used to describe our shared affliction: pandemic. We are *all* in this together, as scholars, artists, and *people*. In times of isolation and uncertainty, we truly come to appreciate the

organizations we belong to. These may include religious institutions, social or service clubs, special interest groups, but for independent scholars, they most assuredly include organizations that support and encourage scholarship and intellectual exchange with peers and colleagues.

Many of us are learning to use Zoom and other meeting software to see our colleagues face-to-face and engage in lively conversation, while others are seizing the moment to indulge in that rarest of luxuries, Time: time to read, to take notes, to reflect on what we have read and our own original thoughts nurtured in the soil of quiet and meditation. Our Poetry Group is taking the path of individual reflection rather than a group activity this spring and summer, while the Science/Science History and Humanities Groups are continuing to meet in the online environment.

We recall, too, that independent scholars are not generally afraid of “isolation,” which comes from the Latin word *insula* meaning *island*. In our research, creative work, and personal pursuits, we may well be transported in our imagination to islands such as Manhattan, Île de la Cité, or a sandy beach in the South Seas. Isolation is not always a bad idea.

In addition to PRF-related activities, many of us are taking classes online, some for the first time. As someone who has taught college courses online for 20 years, I can aver that students get out of it what they put into it, and that distance learning can be a life-changing experience. Online education is a great way to stay current in our fields and explore new horizons.

There is no substitute, of course, for good public and personal health, happy relationships, and fulfilling work (as remunerative as we need or desire). But the pandemic will pass, and, it is to be hoped, we will still be here. Thanks to PRF and other resources, we may emerge from our time on the “island” of isolation stronger, grateful, and ready to roar.

Best wishes to all,

Linda Holt, D.Litt.  
President, Princeton Research Forum 5/29/2020

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**The author.** As L.L. Holt, Linda Holt is the author of two novels (*Invictus* and *The Black Spaniard*) about young Beethoven published in advance of the composer’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020. She is President of the Princeton Research Forum and writes about music for [Concertonet.com](http://Concertonet.com), [Bachtrack.com](http://Bachtrack.com) and other publications.

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