A pandemic of fragility

That feeling you are feeling is fragility.

We are all feeling it.

Of course, at first glance I mean the fragility of our own precarious emotional, economic or mental states; but if we dig deeper we can also feel the fragility of the various systems, understandings and routines that make our contemporary lives possible.

We can now all sense, however subconsciously, that these systems, and thus civilisation itself, are as fragile as a thin sheet of ice over the deep and cold waters underneath. We skate around on that ice, going about our normal everyday routines, and for the most part we never think about the intrinsic fragility of our comfortable lives. This unawareness is, in fact, deeply tied to our happiness and emotional equilibrium. We *deeply need* to not be worried about the everyday systems that support us. We need to feel they are so safe and secure that they are effectively invisible.

And the pandemic has stripped that comfortable ignorance away from us. We can hear the ice shifting and cracking. We remember, as if for the first time, how deep and cold and dark the water underneath us is. And we shiver.

The realisation that our systems, our lives, are fragile, is deeply disturbing.

For example, a recent piece in *The Guardian* touched on the widespread need for an 'end point' to this pandemic – the point at which we can all say 'We made it!' and return with relief to our normal lives:

Feeling like there was a neat ending in sight was a psychological crutch – one that helped propel us through bizarre and tedious weeks of social distancing, constant hand-washing and using skin-stripping sanitiser.

As a society we have been telling ourselves '*This Too Shall Pass*' as an emotional and mental health strategy. While this is certainly a 'psychological crutch' to help us endure the first lockdown, is also reflective of a deeper psychological need.

As a society, as a culture, we residents of the industrialised and urbanised world are invested deeply in the perceived stability and permanence of that world. We base our mental health on this sense of stability; this sense that the reality of the world is essentially fixed, and that we will always 'snap back' to the bedrock permanence of our lives. We believe we can predict the future, and we plan our personal, social and economic decisions around that default certainty.

We get married, we buy a house, we study or work in the pursuit of our personal ambitions and goals – but only against the backdrop of an essentially fixed and permanent social reality.

To survive this pandemic, it is therefore perfectly natural that we would tell ourselves that this is merely an interruption.

Things will return to 'normal'.

Our regularly scheduled program will resume shortly.

Time to wake up – and *suck it up*

The problem is that, no matter how much we want our world, and our lives, to be stable and permanent – they are simply not.

They never were – and they never will be.

This sounds like an easy thing for me to write, of course – but this dramatic statement is based on some personal and intellectual experience.

Like more people in this world than most of us realise, my partner and I have survived a number of years of financial and career instability, with myself working for over a decade now as a sessional academic at RMIT. The deep pleasures, and gnawing insecurities, which come from such a career 'choice' are the topic for another post – but anyone who doubts the effect that persistent insecurity can have on your mental health is a person who has never experienced such insecurity.

At the same time, I spent the five years of my PhD reading about the ways in which interconnected complex systems can collapse unexpectedly. About the inescapable truth that no system, no way of life, no civilisation, lasts forever.

At the end of all that reading and writing, I came out with one clear understanding: everything *complex* is simply, and inescapably, *fragile*.

Why there is no going back

One of the most uncomfortable elements of the pandemic, and the nature of our contemporary and interconnected world, is the realisation that the world, even were the pandemic to 'magically go away' (as one stable genius seems to be hoping), has *already changed*.

Even while we understand that in fact, yes, the pandemic *will* pass, there is no way in which the 'normal' we return to may be the 'normal' we remember. In such a complex and interconnected world as ours, you cannot 'freeze' part of that system and expect the other interconnected elements to remain frozen in place. In complex adaptive systems, a change or shift in part of the system can have unintended consequences elsewhere in that system. Systems don't 'stand still' waiting for the pandemic to ease and normal reality to be restarted.

In the time that we have been socially distant, or in lockdown, other parts of our systems have been adjusting to these changes. They have been shifting, readjusting.

The example of Melbourne's CBD

Take Melbourne's CBD. I have worked for many years at RMIT, and I have a deep love for the crowded and bustling part of the city where that institution is based. The jostling of

different cultures; the huge number of multicultural restaurants; the streets filled with young people full of ambition and life; the stimulation of differing ideas and worldviews…

Yet will all that be there, in the same form, once the lockdowns eventually ease? I know that things will, most likely, never be the same again, and there is a level of grief implicit in that knowledge.

Will the international students return, or will travelling to Australia for three years to study no longer be 'the normal' thing to do? What happens if the changes in tertiary education we see happening now become normalised? What will Melbourne be like without the foreign students? Who will fill the CBD accommodation we have built?

Also, where does this leave universities in Australia? In 2017, education was ['Australia's largest service export and third overall behind iron ore (worth $62.8 billion in 2016-17) and coal ($54.3 billion). It is larger than gas ($22.3 billion) and gold ($19 billion).'](#)

What will be the cascading effects of a collapse in foreign education revenues?

And it's not just the universities, but the entire white-collar professional workforce which has, until now, been based in the CBD. More and more city knowledge workers, myself included, are able to work from home. In fact, many of us prefer that, and developments in technology have made it clear to organisations that working from home is increasingly practical. More and more workers say that want to work from home more regularly and reduce their times in the city. More changes may flow from this…

For example, the nature of (post-industrial knowledge-based) work may continue to change. How much can companies (many already in difficulties due to the economic slowdown) save in terms of rental costs if they downsize their offices? Will companies shift to smaller spaces, and increasingly let their staff work from home? Will that affect the commercial property market in the CBD?

What about the number of restaurants, and retail outlets throughout the CBD? Will we need as many, with fewer workers and foreign students there? How many hospitality and retails businesses will even be left there, after this next six weeks of lockdown is over?

With less students and workers, and less cafes, bars and restaurants, the need for service employment in the CBD will fall. This will further reduce the number of people needing to access the CBD on a daily basis, and thus affect the energy and vitality of the CBD…

This also affects public transport requirements; will we still need to shift huge numbers of people into and out of the CBD on a daily basis? What does that mean for our CBD-centric PT system?

What will the CBD look like in three months, or six? Or twelve?

These are big questions, and I certainly can't claim that these changes will come to pass; lasting shifts in complex adaptive systems are intrinsically hard to predict. But it *is* clear that things will change in a number of ways when the pandemic finally is over… and our systems will continue to shift and change long after that.

This is what complex systems do, after they have been buffeted by a major disruption – they shift, adapt and settle into new equilibria. This then becomes the 'new normal' – until it shifts and changes again.

Individuals and the 'attitude of the knife'

So what do we do to manage this situation?

First of all, in the face of this overwhelming systemic, and personal, fragility, it is crucial to manage our expectations in the light of new realities. The pandemic is here, and we must accept it. Our world has changed, and it is very unlikely that it will 'change back' to the way it was pre-Covid.

That pre-pandemic world is gone – and whatever grief, denial or anger might come with that realisation must be acknowledged and dealt with. We all have to live in the world that we find ourselves in, and throwing tantrums against masks, or trying to find an explanation for our fragility through childish conspiracy theories will help no one.

Children can retreat to fantasy worlds (*5G! Bill Gates! Celebrity chefs are prophets!*) in the face of systemic shocks and disruptions: adults are supposed to be, well, *adults*.

A wonderful quote from Frank Herbert's *Dune* explains the shift in attitude that we need now:

Arrakis teaches the attitude of the knife – chopping off what's incomplete and saying: 'Now, it's complete because it's ended here.'

Anything in your life that you wish you could do, but now can't – *accept it*.

The sooner we can all accept that this fragility was *actually always there*, the easier it will be to adjust and settle into whatever 'new normal' awaits us at the end of this tunnel. In the words of an old shampoo ad: *it won't happen overnight, but it will happen*.

There *will* be a new reality there, and our systems *will* settle back into some form of equilibrium. It just won't (*can't!*) be the same as it was before.

Author Anthony Richardson Posted on 12/07/2020