

WHY REFORMING HUMAN INTERFACES WITH CREATION IS VITAL

Is there anything good that God can extract from the tragedy of COVID-19? Perhaps through the faithfulness of those who honor God's call?

We often quote Paul's words in Romans 8:28 in times of crisis – "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28) – yet answers to such queries don't come easily.

The human suffering from COVID-19 is immense. No country has been spared from the pandemic's painful impact.

We rightfully grieve for the suffering, death and economic catastrophe currently visited upon multitudes in our nation and around the world.

And yet, we have been beguiled by the photos and videos of wild creatures invading cities deserted by those sheltering in place:

- Mediterranean dolphins frolicking in a normally busy harbor on the island of Sardinia.
- Goats strolling down an empty main street in a Welsh village.
- Swans gliding on the crystalline waters of untrafficked Venetian canals.
- 150,000 flamingos congregating in a lagoon in the middle of Mumbai.

Skies over global megacities from Mumbai to Beijing to Los Angeles are suddenly almost pollution free. But these spots of temporary respite from the global climate crisis can teach us some precious lessons as nations across the world begin reopening their economies.

We are reminded that human beings are not essentially minds or souls that are only tangentially related to the physical world in which we live. We are embodied beings, intimately related to the entire web of life that God creates and sustains.

Creation is a web of relationships, featuring myriad interfaces of which we are often scarcely aware.

Take, for instance, bats. Most people rarely think of them. We may be vaguely aware that they eat lots of mosquitoes, and we include them in the iconography of Halloween and the dark arts.

But most of us are unaware that there are more than 1,200 identified species of bats worldwide, comprising some 20% of classified mammalian species. Most do not know that bats are on the same main branch of the mammalian family tree as carnivores, ungulates and cetaceans. And we are unaware of their global role as pollinators par excellence.

Now we know of their alleged role in passing **coronavirus strains** to humans, supposedly through their relative, the illegally trafficked pangolin, in the notorious Asian "wet markets" where live animals are kept in close confinement to be sold as the ultimate in "fresh ingredients."

It is well known that certain bats harbor multiple varieties of coronavirus, but the fault for the transmission lies not in the bats but in our artificial creation of dangerous interfaces.

Speaking of the wet markets: how easy it is to scapegoat the cultural "other" and ignore the "log in our own eye" (Matthew 7:3)!

Of the beef cattle consumed in the United States, a high percentage spend the last few weeks of their lives in feed lots – standing in their own excrement, being fattened on grain diets and being dosed on antibiotics to help them survive the close quarters and the unnatural diets.

A similar proportion of pigs produced in the United States are raised in “confinement,” where these highly social and inquisitive creatures spend the entirety of their brief lives in enclosures too small to even turn around in, also dosed with antibiotics, and their manure is stored in vast cesspools which pollute water tables and belch toxic fumes into the air.

It is not my intention to scapegoat the American farmer, forced to adapt to economies of scale in order to survive in the landscape of industrial agriculture.

But our instinctive casting of blame for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic gives us the opportunity to fix our gaze on our own practices which violate the healthy interface between human beings and the nonhuman denizens of God’s creation.

For instance, agriculture in which traditional crop rotation is practiced, animal husbandry is integrated with the production of grains, fruits and vegetables, and seasonal opportunities and constraints are observed, could be scaled up to meet global food demands if we realistically value the long-term costs of food production – the “downstream costs” as ecologists call them.

Philosopher/practitioners such as Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson of [The Land Institute](#) have shown us the way.

Large scale monoculture – whether it be corn, soybeans, palm oil or tree farms – provides cornucopias for pests.

This requires largescale applications of pesticides that often kill untargeted invertebrates, birds and amphibians indiscriminately, as well as herbicides and phosphates that saturate water tables and create oceanic dead zones.

Large scale intensive irrigation depletes aquifers and dries out entire watersheds.

The increasing extension of exurban settlement into forests, grasslands and other natural landscapes creates additional fossil fuel dependency, harmful interactions between humans and wildlife and increasing vulnerability to disasters such as the Paradise, California, fires of 2018.

Global warming contributes not only to catastrophic fires worldwide but also to the spread of warm climate diseases such as Lyme disease and pests such as the so-called “murder hornets” indigenous to Southeast Asia, currently wreaking havoc among beehives in the Pacific Northwest.

Invasive species – both animal and vegetable – often arrive as hitchhikers on global commerce. And, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world literally on the wings of international travel and trade.

I am not advocating the erection of walls – physical, virtual or legal – to cut the United States off from the world. We Baptist Christians are deeply interwoven with believers in other places and cultures, to our mutual benefit.

Just-in-time supply chains and other mechanisms of international trade, though not without problems, have helped to lift millions out of poverty and to highlight our personal as well as economic interconnectedness.

Positively, one world in commerce can mean one world in combatting disease, creating educational opportunity and allocating access to resources – tangible and intangible.

The inevitable changes to retail and office space allocations and commuting patterns post-pandemic will give us an opportunity to reimagine the cityscapes where 80% of Americans, and 55% of global population now reside -- a proportion that is fast increasing.

Our cities are ecosystems as well, where myriad species of birds and other animals dwell, and where 40,000 square miles of monoculture – our lawns – are ripe for repurposing as vegetable gardens and pollinator gardens.

The pandemic has reminded us that we are truly one world, and we will feed the hungry, heal the sick, educate our children, cherish our elders and heal our planet together or not at all.

Jesus was at one with the Hebrew prophets in proclaiming the universality of God's Reign. God is not willing that "any of these little ones be lost" (Matthew 18:14) – or go hungry, untaught, unfree or unhealed.

May God give us the grace to do a restart on the other side.

Dr. David L. Wheeler, May, 2020