

Turning 19 – a Coming of Age in Aotearoa/New Zealand

The pandemic is offering wider insights into identity, crisis and human nature

National identity has played an inevitable role in the world response to Covid-19. Some, like Brazil and the USA, met it with confusion, avoidance or outright denial that any problem existed. The UK blustered and underplayed it for a while and then, like Italy, struggled to establish a swift, coherent response. Hong Kong and Singapore imposed firm boundaries from the outset whilst others, such as Sweden, coolly adopted a more structured approach and stronger community directives when other strategies failed.

Ideas about identity distil through the interplay between our individuality – how we see ourselves, our needs and the world – and our contexts – our social, local and national settings. National stereotypes arise from generalised perceived behaviours and attitudes of citizens. Personal behaviours are shaped by our wider contexts, including familial, social and national values, and, in turn, influence these.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand we like to see ourselves as practical, straightforward, innovative individuals who respect authenticity and fairness and can work together to complete the job. The world seems to see Kiwis in much the same light. In approaching the pandemic, the New Zealand government aligned policy with this national self-image in ways which brought out the best in both. As the magnitude of the situation became clear, it seemed the government paused briefly, took a deep breath and decided, in the words of the Prime Minister “to go fast and to go hard”.

The nation was fortunate to have a popular, articulate, media-friendly woman at the helm. Jacinda Ardern had already garnered respect at home and abroad for dealing with a violent, racist-driven crisis by recognising and being guided by the identity and emotional experience of those involved. In the pandemic, she has behaved like a team coach, a national leader and a big sister. Her words reflected our sporting culture, the “can do” Kiwi attitude, and sense of fair play: “stay home, be kind and save lives”.

Ardern's invitation became an authentic and consistent call to action. Promoting respect, kindness and inclusion, it affirmed the nation's capability and capacity to deal with an extraordinary and threatening event. The simple 4-level alert structure did not seek to remove or deny uncertainty. Instead, it provided a simple container within which to manage the uncertainty and changing times without minimising the characteristics of Covid-19. Diversity and transparency were maintained within government such that the opposition leader was able to announce that party interests were now subsumed within a shared purpose. The nation is perceived to have had one of the most coherent and effective responses to the pandemic.

The risk, death, and distress are far from over and the existential crisis rolls on across continents. The virus' impacts on almost every aspect of life have almost certainly only just begun. Covid-19 is an acute issue that has brought weaknesses in our global systems into stark relief. In its shadow a destabilised climate is a chronic condition of an even greater magnitude to our identities, world view and life habits.

Managing grief, uncertainty and loss

The pandemic offers wider lessons to be learned about human nature, identity and potential in the face of grief, loss, death and existential crisis, building on much that we already know. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' 1969 classic, **On Death and Dying**, is perhaps the best known psychological writing on people coping with the existential threat of the ending of their life – or that of a loved one. 30 years later, in **On Grief and Grieving**, Kubler-Ross and David Kessler developed the theory further. They suggest that shades of denial, anger, bargaining, despair and acceptance are likely features of any unwelcome existential shift.

Another psychologist, Rosemary Randall, observed that whilst not everyone follows all the Kubler-Ross stages, the process can be read as an initial Recognition of a crisis, followed by a Resistance to it, before Opening to the reality of the situation. These phases can be observed in the process of all nations facing the pandemic, even though their eventual behaviour and responses to the crisis varied greatly.

Drawing on the work of another writer on grief, William Worden, Randall suggests that we can approach a crisis as a set of tasks, or we can suffer it as an imposition. Whether individuals automatically embrace uncertainty and change in a more structured, task-focussed way or see it as unwelcome, frightening and chaotic has much to do with our sense of identity and familiar, unquestioned ways of making meaning and sense of the world, and our place in it. Most of us probably experience aspects of both approaches.

When we see change as an imposition, we can experience our emotions as alien, hard-wired, unavoidable and threatening. We make meaning accordingly, becoming isolated victims or embattled fighters, hostage to our own nature. We justify our efforts as if no other outcome is possible. Such thinking has excused injustices in the collective, whilst individuals fall into thinking "it's who I am" or "just how the world is".

Recent insights suggest emotions can be usefully understood as an expression of a flow of information, the felt-sense of being part of the world. Importantly, they let us know about our particular needs at any given moment. And, like the physical micro-skills we learned to balance and ride a bicycle, emotions are instinctual, natural and embodied. They become second-nature and easily taken for granted. But crisis is the call to pay attention, as if the handle bars had come loose and shifted through 90 degrees mid-ride.

We can also take for granted the patterns of meaning we make from the felt-sense of our emotions. Needs are prior to the meaning and identity built off our emotions. We are less challenged when we stick to our familiar frames or learned ways of being. But this risks the traumatic feedback of reality: whether cycling or making meaning of change, loss and uncertainty, it is wise to include new conditions as we find them.

When we approach emotions as immediate information we can address them primarily in present context. To do so we must reassess habits of meaning-making and open to wider possibilities than our old frames.

The Denial phase named by Kubler-Ross could be understood as a response to the felt-sense of our need to feel solid and not become overwhelmed. But it more often justifies our rejection of anything outside our worldview, or our denial of our own needs. Anger can be seen as information about how well boundaries are being held, recognised or respected – but it tends to be turned against others, ourselves, events, fate or even God. Bargaining calls us to relationship and inclusivity – but it can perpetuate an inner or outer struggle to maintain an apparently essential pillar of our identity. Despair can be the profound recognition that everything changes – or fuel a total loss of trust in self, others, or life itself.

All these variants of meaning-making and response can be observed in the range of behaviours and responses around the world to the Coronavirus pandemic. In 2019, David Kessler suggested an extra dimension to the Kubler-Ross map of Grieving. Making New Meaning is how learnings from an existential crisis are integrated in our lives, enhancing our understanding of purpose and values.

Global Crisis, Thoughtful Government, National Interests, Shared Insights, Individual Meaning

Psychologist Viktor Frankl is credited with saying "*between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*" The Ardern Government in Aotearoa/New Zealand used this space to reflect and choose promptly, rather than make a

too-swift reaction. By good luck and good timing, they announced their policy just as the enormity of the threat was dawning on the wider population. Left unsupported, citizens would have had to cope alone, no doubt in familiar patterns of resistance and avoidance, before recreating the unhelpful and fearful tactics of any traumatised populace.

Aotearoa/New Zealand's approach to Covid-19 resonates with an evolution in our understanding of the other great existential threat – a destabilising climate. In **“Coming Back to Life”** Molly Young Brown and Joanna Macy elaborated “the Work that Reconnects” to assist us in our personal effects and trauma of climate breakdown. This transformative model – “the Great Turning” – involves “Honouring the Pain of the World”, “Seeing with New Eyes”, “Going Forth to Action” and evoking a quality of “Gratitude”.

Jacinda Ardern made respect, kindness, inclusion and affirmation central to Frankl's “space between” in approaching the pandemic. This Government response “Honoured” the felt-sense and emotion of finding ourselves in a world suddenly swept by disease and death. People's subjective experiences could connect and align with the shared, objective meaning-making we were hearing, and the nation went into an unprecedented 5 week isolation with relative ease and equanimity. When our inner ways of knowing the world do not connect with the story we hear, we feel invisible, isolated, threatened, unsafe and traumatized. The dominant hyper-individualistic culture dismisses this as inevitable “wear and tear” or externalises it as personal dysfunction. In so doing important information about ourselves and our systems is ignored. The whole system becomes – and feels – more unstable, more chaotic, inflexible or contracted.

Where even such harsh reality is “Honoured”, we can feel safer, included, adaptable and capable. The Ardern Government created a container able to sufficiently include the individual and collective processes of the nation. “With New Eyes” the people of Aotearoa/New Zealand could “Go Forth to Action” in a shared task, rather than stumbling blindly into imposition. The invitation and call connected us through our individual and often unnoticed felt-sense of the world. We appear to share a basic sentience that links us with all life. It may explain inexplicable responses of animals and birds to some existential crises.

The success of the response to Covid-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand can be understood through the comprehensive way that our ways of knowing the world – visceral, intellectual, cultural, and more – were included, wittingly or not. Consequently, practical action could be taken in ways which addressed our most human needs, yet largely free from partisan and political defending of identity and self-interest.

The very high approval given for Government policy in this time of existential threat shows that our needs were met. Our needs for a firm sense of ourselves, for boundaries and connection, for negotiation and inclusion, and to have the power of uncertainty recognised. Of course there were challenges and difficulties but overall the nation experienced “Gratitude” beyond the anger, denial, fear and bargaining seen elsewhere. Covid-19 invites us to make new meaning as individuals and as a community – to share insights, tolerate difference, hold boundaries and meet our needs in alignment with planetary feedback.

The pandemic process in Aotearoa/New Zealand offers lessons for approaching existential threats with kindness, clarity and inclusivity. The response of the New Zealand Government aligns with insights from interpersonal neurobiology and bio-physics that acknowledge the evolutionary value of a vital and reciprocal felt-sense, a basic sentience. This phenomenon has been described as the world becoming aware of itself. Helping ourselves to recognise this visceral experience and the role of emotion, identity and human agency in the “wicked problem” of climate breakdown is an urgent, multi-disciplinary task. Whilst this new meaning-making is in early days, we have shown ourselves to be naturally well-prepared.