

Let's Use Our 'Time-Out' Well

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Mother Earth, after her long-suffering patience, has hauled us back on our heels to get our attention. The coronavirus is her “time-out” disciplinary tool of choice. This is a time to reconsider our impetuosity, and when it is over, to resume activities more cautiously and respectfully, in a ‘new normal.’

In late February, the Heathrow airport third runway was ruled to be illegal by a UK court because it's contribution to the climate crisis had not been calculated. In early March, the airline company, Flybe, was nudged out of business by the coronavirus and by mid March, even British Airways was seeking financial relief.

As carbon dioxide concentrations continue to rise above 415 ppm, the ‘old normal’ of millions of restless passengers crisscrossing the globe, will give way to a ‘new normal.’ This coronavirus “time-out” will help us to adjust our expectations.

Oil prices are at four-year lows, given coronavirus slowdowns. Saudi Arabia and Russia are tussling about how wide to open their taps to recover income from more volume, thus driving oil prices even lower. While they need oil money now, there is also a perception that they are selling these marketable oil assets before they become stranded assets, no longer worth processing and selling.

Governments are pivoting on the edge of restoring confidence in compromised economies by i) investing more in oil and gas which served us well in the past **or** by ii) divesting from oil and gas to invest in renewables which can provide more jobs and clean energy today and tomorrow. Science and the markets point to the ‘new normal’ with renewable energy.

While Canada may be responding appropriately to COVID-19, we are vulnerable with only about 12 intensive care beds with ventilators per 100,000 people, whereas Germany, Taiwan and the US have more than 30 such beds per 100,000 people, according to Doug Saunders in the Globe and Mail, on March 14 (<https://tgam.ca/2IZZL1G>). These beds were

mostly redundant during the ‘old normal’ and therefore, were not deemed as essential as other items while emergency rooms were crowded.

The Canadian pharmaceutical company, Connaught Labs, was publicly owned and then sold. As Linda McQuaig explained in the Toronto Star on March 14 (<https://bit.ly/2J2ZdLu>), it could have made a difference in the current coronavirus crisis.

This pandemic is a reset opportunity to remind us to build capacity as we adapt to a ‘new normal.’ The Dene phrase for climate change is unusual happenings. We can expect more unusual happenings.

Our just-in-time food system is designed to process and distribute food, sometimes in various stages of processing, on trucks, planes, trains and ships. Wasted food is accepted as a cost of moving the global food flow along. When all is working well there are reduced costs and efficiencies, by avoiding redundant costs of apparently excess warehousing.

The biblical Joseph would advise us to be prepared for famine and food supply disruptions. It probably seemed odd to set aside one-fifth of the available grain during the predicted seven years of good crops to prepare for a following seven years of poor yields and famine. Nevertheless, the kingdom of Egypt prospered during the seven years of famine, while neighbouring countries faced starvation.

Redundancy is a cost when all is going well. However, survival requires serious investment.

Hugh Segal has long been an advocate for a universal basic income (UBI). In his new book, ‘Boot Straps Need Boots’ he explains why he worked with the Wynne government, even if it was “neither perfect nor Tory” to set up a pilot project to test UBI.

Segal was deeply disappointed, as many of us were, when Doug Ford cancelled the UBI project losing not only the money already invested but also losing the data which could guide future governments.

Imagine how helpful a UBI might be now to help people adapt. So many are struggling to stay healthy with social distancing, while having to still pay rent and buy groceries. In the ‘new normal’ we won’t be able to afford to toss away practical and cost-effective tools, such as UBI.

Let's not waste the "time-out" Mother Earth has administered. We can pause, reflect and adjust our behaviour for this 21st century of unusual happenings.

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