

The Possibility of Renewed Discourse on Peace: An Exposition of Realities amid COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

When medical scientists come to grips with scientific measures and tools to arrest the spread of disease, physical suffering and death brought about by COVID-19, peace researchers also see violence, modern warfare and unjust social structures as evil that needs to be controlled and eliminated. The ethical commitment of this paper is to expose the realities and narratives of peoples and communities during this time of global pandemic and use them in the possible renewed discourse on peace studies as a result of this global health emergency. These emerging narratives are carefully aligned with the six elements of peace education, namely, the Inner Peace, Intercultural Solidarity, Human Rights, Dismantling the culture of War, Climate Justice, and Social Justice & Compassion. Peace education aims at providing better and life-giving alternatives to the existing social order so that the human agency will be equipped with the fundamental moral choice towards the realization of what is good. The good that this paper envisions is the possibility of renewed discourse on peace that will eventually lead the present generation to restructure the present social order and make it more holistic, inclusive, and morally plausible, hence, peaceful social order.

Keywords: COVID-19 narratives, Peace, Peace Education, social structures, discourse on peace

Introduction

There is a possibility of changing the way we learn, speak and build peace in this present generation because of our diversified experiences and narratives about how human beings and the world experience this COVID-19 global pandemic. The new normal allows us to rethink how we have fully grasped Peace Education because of the changing perceptions about human relationships, established institutions and ideologies, and even about the presence of humans in the world. Peace education is a holistic process of teaching encounters that draw from people their desire for peace, non-violent alternatives, and skills for critical analysis. Our experiences of this recent crisis offer rich teaching encounters about peace.

Although the story of COVID-19 pandemic is not detached from the ancient subjugation of the superior over the inferior, we see how the present realities about world-power is being toppled by a microscopic virus that penetrated and threatened not only the lives of people but of systems, ideologies, structures, and even relationships of sovereign countries. All of a sudden, the measures of world-domination like military power, liberal economy, the dominion of culture and values, leadership in science and technology are futile in addressing the enemy. These measures suddenly changed its meaning and function in order to keep the world running.

This is where the old narrative of Peace Education wants to begin. The Western World controls the world, the United States controls the Western World, and thus the United States controls the world. By controlling the world, the U.S. definitely owns the measures of world-dominion. They have the most advanced military power; they are the seat of capitalism and free-market; they are the yardstick of a civilized culture; and they are at the frontline in the advancement of science and technology.

Over the past decade, the issue of who is up and running takes the public spotlight as “China is leapfrogging the U.S. in its technological capabilities.”¹ China now becomes the at-par adversary of the U.S. not only in terms of technology but also of military capabilities, market economy and influence in culture. This set-up is a necessary groundwork in our understanding of where the fingers are pointing at while countries are being ravaged by the virus.

The opinion of Cunningham² about this gives us a new narrative to this old springboard to Peace Education. He opined about how the Trump administration points the finger to China for the pandemic mayhem that brings more than a million cases in all states in the U.S. and killed almost a hundred thousand people. This is the “blame China” narrative. China becomes the scapegoat when the most powerful nation is not ready to accept that she is not capable of addressing the pandemic. The U.S. claims that the Chinese authorities knew but withheld information about the virus since early November or December of 2019, thus, in conspiracy with the World Health Organization, endangered lives of millions of peoples in many countries all over the world. Another theory is that a certain Virology laboratory in Wuhan leaked the virus originally purported as a weapon of biowarfare program. As a response, the China-led media puts viral the conspiracy theory of an American Youtube blogger stating that a certain U.S. military Intel was the patient zero in Wuhan. All these baseless bandwagons are easier to accept than a story of a poor peasant who tries to buy exotic animals for food from a black market and eventually contracted a new virus.

The abysmal failure of some of the most advanced countries, like China, and many G-7 countries, such as Italy, Great Britain, the U.S., etc., to mitigate and address the crisis unlocked many heavily guarded questions about the flaws of a

¹ Fannin, *China Threatens U.S. Global Domination In Tech: A Wake-Up Call*.

² Cunningham, *U.S Concocting Intel to Frame China for Covid-19 Crisis*.

capitalistic society, covert advancement of biowarfare, illegal imposition of powerful sanctions to sovereign countries, and even world-image (dominion) over human life priorities. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic also renewed our questions about the self, human rights, cultural violence, social inequality, environmental justice, and the culture of war and domination. Thus, this pandemic brings to light a renewed discourse on peace.

This paper attempts to offer an objective exposition of the realities present among the poor communities who are greatly affected by the failure of the giants! It will try to show the life-conditions of new emerging poor communities like the health workers, no-work-no-pay contractuales, unemployed workers due to lockdowns, out-of-school students, senior citizens, the handicapped and mentally challenged individuals, the hand-to-mouth farmers and fisherfolks, and the quarantined elite. The realities from these emerging poor communities will be subsumed in the old discourse about the elements of peace, such as inner peace, intercultural solidarity, human rights, dismantling the culture of war, climate justice, and social justice & compassion.

I. Inner Peace

Albert Camus wrote about “The Plague” more than 70 years ago.³ Camus skillfully describes the vulnerability of individuals and communities to the widespread devastation of plagues. Similar to our experience with COVID-19, the death toll now has reached over 500,000 worldwide. However, the recent pandemic is not only about death, but also about social breakdown, disruption of the usual normal, and widespread panic. Camus reminds us that no one will ever be psychologically prepared for global pandemics.

In an instant, our daily routines and everyday stresses are not only disrupted by lockdowns but have also become

³ Camus A. *The Plague*. Vintage International. First International Edition, 1981

meaningless. The anxiety and uncertainty that the individual experiences are beyond what one can imagine in a lifetime. The safety bumpers of our lives like income, savings, job, acquaintances, authority, pleasures, etc. are pointless and the individual is at the mercy of what the elected officials and experts will do.

As a result, individuals resort to things that remained in their domain to keep their sanity. One will see a university of students and professors dancing tiktok in social media, writers publish their materials, jokers create memes, highly opinionated individuals post fake news, mothers open their cookbooks, professionals offer online courses, the lazy ones bolt themselves in front of the television, the selfish ones romanticize the donations they give to the poor, and the quarantined elite are now leveled among locked and hungry poor.

Quarantines and lockdowns enforce a very important opportunity to every individual – a time to re-examine the self. This is neither about heroism nor pointing fingers. This is about the decency of the self. Imagine an E.R. doctor going home driving away his son from hugging him because of fear that the child might be infected; or a nurse air-hugging her daughter from a distance; or a crowd of condo residents applauding the efforts of the health workers in a nearby hospital; or a decent home returning the aid from the government thinking that others are more in need than them. This is how decency works. And this is our only weapon to counter the anxiety and uncertainties of the self.

Let us remember that inner peace is only meaningful when there is social peace. There can never be authentic inner peace when one is neglectful of the social turmoil that is going on around. Selfishness in hoarding alcohol and toilet paper and in pretending to be poor to get amelioration funds from the government will never result in inner peace. On the contrary, living the decency of the human spirit, protecting human life above all, and achieving global solidarity will surely result in enormous appreciation and admiration of inner peace.

II. Intercultural Solidarity

The recent encroachment of COVID-19 among the Indigenous Peoples of the Ecuadorian Amazon stirs global concern.⁴ On April 10, there was already a first recorded death among the Yanomami tribe. It is only a matter of time when, without careful intervention, the whole tribe and the neighboring tribes will be wiped out.

The Indigenous communities throughout the world face incomparative risk of health emergencies such as COVID-19 pandemic. This is partly due to lack of proper sanitation, a limited resource to clean water, crowded living quarters and insufficient health care facilities and personnel. In addition, the transnational corporations that exploit the Indigenous Peoples' domain bring with them deadly diseases that are detrimental to the vulnerable communities.

In his warning to his people against the recent pandemic, a tribal leader exclaimed: "The *cowori* (meaning outsiders) are doing terrible things. They are destroying the homes of the animals. Humans created this disease by killing the earth. Go make camps deeper in the forest. Drink plant medicines. Eat only wild meat and fish. That will keep us strong."⁵ The sustainable living conditions of the I.P.s have been existent long before modern civilizations. Thus, for the I.P.s, the only bearers of the disease are the outsiders. The leader's warning also concretizes how the I.P.s equate their lives with the health of the earth. When the earth is being killed (destroyed), the I.P.s are being killed as well. What will make them strong and healthy are produced by the forest. There is nothing else from outside that they need. In fact, they have to be cautious with what the outsiders bring to them. Lastly, the warning also provides instructions to go deeper into the forest. This is always the case.

⁴ Anderson, 'Go Make Camps Deeper in the Forest.' *How the Amazon's Indigenous People are Handling the Threat of Coronavirus*.

⁵ Anderson, 'Go Make Camps Deeper in the Forest.' *How the Amazon's Indigenous People are Handling the Threat of Coronavirus*.

The *cowori* drives I.P.s deeper into the forest so that the former can exploit the resources left behind by the latter.

This is not a remote narrative between the outsiders and the I.P.s. It has always been a trend that because of capitalism and hunger for earth's depleting resources, the I.P.s are dispossessed from the forest which they equate with their lives. However, this current global pandemic sheds a possibly renewed discourse about how the world neglects the cultural identity of the I.P.s and exploits the vulnerability of these communities.

Inversely, this narrative can also be a point of reflection for those who design misdevelopment for the land of the I.P.s in the name of progress, prosperity and economic advancement. The social order imposed by the advanced cultures to dispossess the I.P.s of their lands and thus cause cultural genocide among the I.P.s is now turning its course toward the aggressors.⁶ The mass graves in most advanced nations are lethal reminders of the failure of the current social order. After all, we should not be building separate worlds because peace challenges us to build only one world for all.

Human Rights

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised a lot of human rights issues. Although most of these issues are already tackled by experts and ethicists, this global crisis has renewed the way we argue about them. From among the many human rights issues, this section will only discuss five.

First is the mounting cases of domestic violence during the community lockdowns.⁷ Reports of partner and child abuse have increased compared to prior months before the implementation of quarantines. Family members are now forced to be together in one roof for a longer period of time than

⁶ Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, *Victims of Development Aggression: Indigenous Peoples in ASEAN*. Thailand: Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact.

⁷ Ford, '*Calamitous*': domestic violence set to soar by 20% during global lockdown.

ever before. School-aged children are now staying at home for an undivided time. Parents attend to their children and deal with them without ever passing the burden to teachers in school. Initially, this was taken as an advantage to family bonding and closeness. The quarantines give time for family members to be productive and useful. However, as temperaments and psychological makeups manipulate human behavior, there also mount conflicts and misunderstanding; thus, sometimes result in verbal, physical, psychological, and even sexual abuse. Surely, the discourse on violence and family dynamics will alter and will never be the same after this pandemic.

Second is the right to religion. After the lockdowns have been implemented in many places, congregations are no longer allowed to express their faith in usual mass gatherings. Many religious groups have resorted to live streaming their services to keep the safety and physical distancing requirements.⁸ Other religious leaders who insisted on holding their worship in churches were penalized and persecuted.⁹ Some others devised their spiritual services beyond what is normal and necessary, like drive-thru confession¹⁰ or online counseling. Even Easter, one of the most important celebrations of the Catholic faith, the solemnity of solemnities, was celebrated by the pope at the Vatican, attended by few members and livestreamed by the local broadcast media. Similarly, one of the most important celebrations for the believers of Islam is the *Eid ul Fitr*. This year, the celebration will be quite different than how it is being celebrated for decades. All these are unimaginable before the pandemic. Had it not by this recent crisis, all these stories will be taken as an infringement of the freedom of religion. However, this time, the right to religion is not just about the freedom to choose one's religion and the profession of faith in

⁸ Arndt, *Religious Institutions v. COVID-19: Why Religious Institutions Should Think Twice Before Live Streaming*.

⁹ The Associated Press, *Louisiana Church Packed for Services Again Despite Charges Against Pastor Amid Pandemic*.

¹⁰ Torres, *Priest Offers Drive-Thru Confession During Coronavirus Pandemic*.

one's religion, but how we can freely express the religious rituals without restrictions. Certainly, there will be some major adjustments to some religious structures and systems after the pandemic, thus, changing the way we understand the right to religion.

The third is the right to education. The global pandemic produced another poor sector in the community – the education sector. This new emerging poor sector is poor because the lives and identities of teachers, students and academic supervisors become instantly uncertain. The closure of most schools had never happened in the memory of the recent generation. The initial excitement and the lasting anxiety of students are incomparable to all academic demands in the classroom combined. However, quick to adjust to the changing needs, some schools immediately devised some mechanisms and procedures to proceed with online instruction.¹¹ This, too, must have provided a lot more anguish especially to those students and teachers who do not have the facility and capacity for online learning. In addition, we cannot also disregard the concern of private school teachers and contractual employees in terms of continuity of income. The lack of readiness to address global pandemic, particularly in the academic sector, will necessarily become the subject of discourses shortly after this crisis.

Fourth is the civil rights of the senior citizens. During COVID-19 quarantines, the elderly are identified as the most vulnerable victims of the virus. As a result, the senior citizens are sternly instructed not to go out of their homes, thus, restricting their freedom. This scheme, too, has never happened before. Inasmuch as the elderly want to be free and independent, the quarantine guidelines are limiting them on the contrary. The limitation is very understandable because the authorities do not want to jeopardize the health of older adults. However, this results in feeling of repression and discrimination

¹¹ Gonzales, *Look: Ateneo de Davao Lends iPad Units to Scholars for Online Classes*.

on the side of the senior citizens. Once again, these liberties will find their new tastes in peace discourses after this contagion.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, are the rights of persons with disabilities. This is the most vulnerable sector in this time of crisis because most of them do not understand what is going on. Naturally, their welfare and protection depend on the critical standards provided for by the policies and guidelines during a global health crisis. Maboloc strikingly writes “[t]he COVID-19 Pandemic is often seen in terms of its impact on the economy and the social life of the general population. But reports say nothing about the potential impact of the disruptions of services needed by persons with mental disabilities in mental healthcare centers.”¹² In terms of peace narratives, this account will possibly change direction of human rights discourses.

III. Dismantling the Culture of War

A gross deal of most countries’ budget allocation prioritizes the advancement of military power. In the Philippines alone, the 2020 budget for the Department of National Defense is way higher than the budget allocation for the Department of Health.¹³ This alone communicates that our government weighs peace & order, security and militarization more seriously than public health. No wonder that in times of health crisis like this COVID-19 pandemic, the government scrambles to provide the necessary health facilities and apparatus for sick people, notwithstanding the needed personal protective equipment (PPE) for the health workers in the frontlines.¹⁴

Moreover, we also hear physical assault against health workers who are doing their duties in treating COVID-19

¹² Maboloc, *Who is the most vulnerable during pandemic? The social model of disability and COVID-19 crisis.*, p. 159.

¹³ Department of Budget and Management, *President Duterte signs P4.1 Trillion 2020 National Budget.*

¹⁴ Gartland, *New York hospitals must 'prepare now' to work without protective gear: Health Department*

positive patients.¹⁵ The attacks are perpetrated by random people because of stigma. Health workers are no longer allowed to go home to their rented apartments, or even allowed to take public transportation. Since the people are not fully aware of the nature of this new Coronavirus, the health workers are stigmatized as bearers of infection. Therefore, while the health workers are already exhausted in working under long shifts, they also endanger themselves in contracting the virus because of a lack of PPE, and they further risk their safety and security when they are in public places.

In western countries, especially in the U.S., we hear stories of racial discrimination against Asians in general and Chinese people in particular.¹⁶ Asian health workers in American hospitals are both celebrated and abominated. They are hailed because of their sacrifices in attending to the health needs of the COVID-19 positive patients. At the same time, they are also victimized when they are outside the hospital.

These are new narratives that have evolved since the beginning of this pandemic. All of a sudden, we realize that health is not the government's priority, and the health workers are living their lives miserably. In other words, this pandemic brings to light another poor sector in our community – the health workers.

Digging further, this realization about the health situation in the world brings us back to the ground zero of this pandemic. As soon as the health crisis broke out in Wuhan, China, speculations about biowarfare researches have already emerged. The use of biohazard chemicals and poisonous materials during a war is not new to humanity. Biowarfare has been a dirty strategy of military powers dating back in antiquity until its massive harmful effects in both world wars I and II.¹⁷

The Wuhan biohazard-leak theory did not come as a surprise to many. The U.S. strategists are quick in claiming that

¹⁵ Mayol, *2 frontline health workers attacked*.

¹⁶ Hobson, *Asian American Doctor on Experiencing Racism During the Coronavirus Pandemic, Feeling 'Powerless' in Helping Patients*.

¹⁷ Hooker, *Biological Warfare*.

China, in cahoots with their allied countries, has carelessly failed in its biowarfare research in Wuhan, and collaborated with the World Health Organization in keeping the epidemic secret until it became uncontrollable. On the contrary, it also says that the “Trump administration has been constantly raising the issue of growing Chinese global competitiveness as a direct threat to American national security and economic dominance. [I]t must be possible that Washington has created and unleashed the virus in a bid to bring Beijing’s growing economy and military might down...”¹⁸

Whatever is the truth about this will have to be unconcealed after the crisis. However, there is one thing that will possibly dominate our renewed discourse on dismantling the culture of war – that the health sector together with other frontline sectors like the food sector, basic services, and even public leadership are all jeopardized when the government gives more emphasis on global military domination.

IV. Climate Justice

We are glad to have known some of the hard-line environmentalists over past decades. The latest Greta Thunberg,¹⁹ the TIME’s 2019 Person of the Year, surely has moved many leaders throughout the globe to do something about the environment as she fiercely faced Trump’s rhetoric head-on. We might have thought that indeed the environment needs people like her. Now we realize that this is not actually the case. The sudden disappearance of people on usually busy thoroughfares in metropolitans; the vanishing visitors from parks and zoos; the decreased dependence on crude oil because of loss of movements of travelers on land, water and air; and the fading production of pollutants by factories and machines, all contribute to the sudden yet readily observable healing of the environment.

¹⁸ Giraldi, *Coronavirus was produced in a laboratory: Former CIA Intel Officer*.

¹⁹ Alter, *TIME 2019 Person of the Year*.

The wildlife starts to reclaim the vast spaces previously occupied by rushing people. Some peacocks and gazelles were sited on Dubai's superhighways.²⁰ This is something truly unimaginable without the lockdown of people and their expensive cars. More and more hatchlings of endangered sea turtles freely find their ways to the sea without the ever destructive interference of tourists and beachgoers.²¹ We even notice the clearing of thick smog of pollution in big cities due to lessened human activities. This reduced volume of pollution produced by cities every day was scientifically verified by experts and compared to previous readings before the lockdowns.²² The most encouraging of all is the satellite image of the damaged ozone layer slowly healing itself as a result of reduced greenhouse gases.²³ All these are manifested within weeks of human inactivity. What is this telling us?

Nature heals itself. The environmental principle that says that everything is connected to everything else takes a very different meaning after human beings are removed from the equation. Without us, the wildlife reclaims their life being wild, and the atmosphere does its job in preventing the devastating effect of global warming.

Surely the lockdown of humans is only temporary. Human ingenuity, intelligence and might can, without doubt, overcome this pandemic. In a couple of weeks, the world will slowly reopen to the usual human activities. Necessarily, bringing back humans to the equation will also undo what nature has done without us. However, these narratives caused by COVID-19 may also serve as a striking eye-opener to future emerging environmentalists. Possibly, this will change the way we look at our existing environmental international protocols

²⁰ Vohra, *COVID-19: So much for peacocks at the traffic lights*.

²¹ Geggel, *Baby leatherback sea turtles thriving due to COVID-19 beach restrictions*.

²² Gardiner, *Pollution made COVID-19 worse. Now, lockdowns are clearing the air*.

²³ Ibid.

and policies. This may also change the way we look at ourselves in relation to our common home.

V. Social Justice and Compassion

One compelling issue on social justice and compassion is who receives the aid from the government. Theoretically, everyone should have an equal share of the food rations provided for the local government units who rightfully imposed lockdowns in cities and provinces. Given that everyone is contained at home, and obtaining an income to buy food is not possible, it is mandatory that the government will provide food for everyone. However, we are new to this scheme. First, the government cannot afford to run for months without opening businesses, thus, exposing the vulnerability and ill design of capitalism. Second, everyone is considered poor and unfree, a quarantined community. This must be beyond our usual notion of justice and fairness and social strata, but not everyone locked at home can go without food rations. There are some who can survive for weeks and months without literally going to work or open their businesses. On the contrary, a pedicab driver, for example, who survives a family of five will surely go hungry the following day without going out and earning for his family's survival.

Moreover, the power of the government to impose quarantine guidelines to individuals, communities and institutions seemingly presupposes their entitlement to harass, abuse and humiliate the violators.²⁴ Will this qualify as an act of compassion? While the majority faithfully suffers the boredom of staying at home, going outside without observing precautionary measures, and presumably spread the virus, is socially uncharitable.

Social justice and compassion take a new face in this new scheme. We realize numerous narratives of compassion from unexpected people. We see young volunteers go for groceries

²⁴ Krishnan, *The Callousness of India's COVID-19 Response*.

and pharmacy runs for the elderly neighbors and health risk individuals.²⁵ Also, a sixth-grader, whose imaginative innovations and deeply seated compassion, helps in 3D printing some facemasks for the frontliners from his kitchen. Another is a story of one doctor in Davao City who was flagged by a checkpoint officer who happened to be the husband of the doctor's patient who just gave birth to a child. Knowing that the husband cannot be with his wife because of his duty, the doctor cancelled her professional fee.²⁶ On a bigger scale, the Chinese government sends its remaining COVID-19 experts to other countries which are still ravaged by the virus.²⁷ Narratives like these are common during normal times but are especially highlighted during this time of uncertainty. This perhaps is a phenomenon of creating and redefining compassion other than the common dole out of the rich, giving their extra to the poor.

The most uncompassionate narrative that we wish to unhear during this time of chaos is the imposition of sanctions by the powerful nations to some poorer, underprivileged nations. Concrete example is Iran. It has almost a hundred thousand cases of COVID-19 with more than five thousand deaths. Yet the Trump administration sees it fit to not only maintain harsh sanctions on Tehran; it has actually added three more rounds of sanctions against Iran since the epidemic occurred.²⁸ We cannot fully comprehend how the most advanced and most civilized nation terrorizes other sovereign nations already ravaged by the pandemic.

COVID-19 has changed the landscape of how we understand compassion and social justice, thus, possibly changing the way we take discourses on peace. The new normal reveals the previously unrecognized acts of compassion and generosity by the unheard individuals. At the same time, this

²⁵ Kaplan, *Young NYC residents helping elderly neighbors by offering to buy groceries, medicine amid coronavirus outbreak.*

²⁶ Lumantas, *Random act of kindness of a lady physician to fellow frontliner turns her into an internet sensation.*

²⁷ CNN Philippines Staff, *China sends medical experts, additional supplies to help P.H. combat COVID-19.*

²⁸ Cunningham, *U.S Concocting Intel to Frame China for Covid-19 Crisis.*

global pandemic also reveals the callous and cruel ignorance of social justice by the previously looked-up-to institutions.

Conclusion

Life under community quarantine is far from over. The silent yet lasting effects on people and communities and social order will soon be discovered. What is evident so far is that the COVID-19 pandemic eradicated the long-accepted world divide such as east-west, north-south, rich-poor, developed-developing countries, etc. The virus never exclusively victimized the poor, the uneducated, the unemployed, the unhealthy and the like. It devours everyone in its path without distinction. This powerful virus stopped the operations of the world and exposed the least heard narratives of peoples and communities. These realities are brought to light by careful examination and appropriation of the six elements of peace. Further, these realities change the way peace researchers and educators teach and work for peace.

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