The Transformation Potential of the Pandemic
By Larry Green

"Knowing that I'm going to die, is this the way that I want to live?"

The thought expressed in the above quotation has been employed by therapists and spiritual guides as a method for awakening their client's values. The thought of one's imminent demise quickly foregrounds values that had been buried and obscured by the compromises one thought necessary to get along and "succeed". That willful forgetting was made possible by the notion that we had all the time in the world. Once we had learned how to "play the game" and accumulated some power, we could then return to those values. The question asked in the opening quote, on the other hand, reminds us of what we had shelved: one's moral compass. When our end is juxtaposed with our present, a strange light is thrown on the activities that fill our days. Their ultimate value is thrown into question.

With the arrival of the pandemic no one needed ask the question that opened this piece. The appearance of face masks, social distancing signs, not to mention the daily news, brought the possibility of death "up close and personal". When you notice people avoiding you on the sidewalk you realize that they don't see you as just another pedestrian. Rather you've become a symbol for their potential death. We get and give constant reminders of existential threat.

How are people responding to these constant reminders? For answers to that question I turn to Transformational Learning Theory developed by Jack Mezirow. He suggested that a disorienting dilemma, was the triggering event that invited a journey of transformation. (Not all people accept the invitation). A disorienting dilemma reveals that one's frame of reference and one's previous learnings neither protect us nor make the disturbing event intelligible. We feel naked, confused and fearful. And, for some, this is the beginning of a massive project to find or construct more adequate premises that would be capable of integrating such an event. Divorce is an example of such an event. "Will I survive this, or is the beginning of the end for me?" The foundation of one's life has given way and one finds oneself falling through the floor of previously unquestioned assumptions. Crib death is another example of a devastating disorienting dilemma. "How could God take away an innocent infant?"

Death is the ultimate disorienting dilemma. Denial or postponement is used to mitigate the terror and paralysis resulting from full acknowledgement of our condition. That denial requires a disconnection from some fundamental existential truth. And that in turn leads to a kind of self-alienation… a kind of out-of-touchness. The result? Instead of feeling or sensing our values, — employing them to decide what course of action would be worthwhile— we opt for convention, obligation, doctrine and dogma, rules and laws to serve as guidelines for our behavior. That is, we use those as guidelines instead of our felt sense to guide our decision making. That is, until a pandemic arrives where everywhere we go implicitly and sometimes explicitly remind us of the threat of death.

Earlier I stated that we respond to existential threat with denial and/or postponement. But there are other responses — as the pandemic reveals. People become more neurotic. Habits and patterns that they left behind long ago, begin to reappear. People's fuses get shorter. Patience seems to be

in short supply. Aggressive encounters more common. Domestic violence increases. Deep, healing sleep is replaced by fitful dreams. Drinking and substance use, more prevalent.

However, there is another response, which I'm witnessing in some members of a men's group to which I belong. At the beginning of the pandemic these men reported, "I'm doing very little that I don't want to do." For example, "I find reading academic articles to be flat and unrewarding…even reading newspapers and magazines seems like more wasted time." Delayed gratification for some future reward seems like nonsense. In fact, the future seems to have disappeared while the present seems to have expanded. In other words, we've been thrown into the "here and now". A strange and unfamiliar, here and now. A circumstance in which the old habits and assumptions have gone beyond their "best before date".

Now, four months later I see the results of this change of orientation. Men who formerly couldn't state an opinion without equivocating, now state it firmly. Another man who'd been going through the motions of being a religious leader decided to change careers for something in which he actually believed. Another man, an environmental activist, gave up his academic career in favor of constructing a lifestyle that embodied his values: raising his own food; chickens for eggs, fishing rods and guns for game, vegetables and fruit trees. Which reminds me that most of the people I know, who seem to be thriving are spending a lot of their time gardening.

To conclude: I recently listened to a podcast about the plague in Athens 430 BC – 426 BCE.
At one point, a professor stated that virtues were upended during the Athenian plague. He quoted Thucydides, who chronicled the plague, to the effect that both laws of the gods and the laws of men were no longer being observed. He then worked out the startling implications of that observation. What had previously counted as virtues were those dispositions that served the pre-plague circumstances. In traditional time those virtues were stoicism, dignity, civility, service, courage, etc. Those were the virtues that sustained the collective. However, during the plague all the parameters of the culture shifted—traditional values disappeared to be replaced by individualism and hedonism — 'seize the day' was the right thing to do. This suggests to me that what we take to be absolute virtues are actually conditioned by the state of the culture. In other words, values are situated or determined by the prevailing cultural context. Change the cultural context and different values emerged. In the case of the Athenian plague, the mob of citizens were angry and directed that anger at Pericles, an Athenian general whom they blamed for the disaster that had befallen them. He addressed the crowd by first acknowledging that their turn to individualism was completely natural. When the laws of gods and men have broken down, then that strategy seemed reasonable. Then he pointed out that their individual well-being was dependent on the civic health of the collective. If anarchy became the prevailing condition, then nobody would be safe.

Prior to the pandemic, there was a widespread sense that our way of life in the West was not sustainable. But we couldn't imagine any other way. We continued to compromise while still using the language of absolute values to justify our behavior. Then we discovered that we were capable of radical change: we could do with far less meetings, far less travel, we could work from home, we didn't have to distract ourselves with sports and bars. Many people started gardening. And many expressed the hope that we would not return to normal. Perhaps individual transformation raises the possibility of collective transformation.