Covid-19. World is our Country

Versione italiana

It’s extremely invasive, powerful, indiscriminate, fickle, overlooks no one, and is universal. The whole world, for perhaps the first time since man has existed on the earth, must confront one sole problem: Covid-19, a “beast” both physically minute and at the same time enormous in its impact. But as the entire world copes with this emergency: the fear, the loss of daily habits, a seeming world war…it is waiting to see if the intruder will be right at the door or will it go away defeated? Below is testimony, a universal chorus of voices, reflecting upon the present and the possibilities of the future, all proclaiming loudly: “All the world is a village.”

Milan, Italy
Francesca, a married chef with two children, a 22 year-old son and a 16 year-old daughter.
Since the 9th of March, the Covid-19 epidemic has kept us confined to our home. There is great fear for the future. I have been left without any foreseeable work: I am a foot and lymphatic reflexologist and naturally I have had to cancel all my appointments. And working from home is impossible, both for my husband and me...he is an avid biker and he has mounted a stationary bike on our balcony, pedaling to somehow get away from it all. And after the initial giggles, my children and I have joined in pedaling as well, if just to escape the boredom and have some private time to think. We have rediscovered the joy of being together around the dining table, something we haven’t done for years! That’s not to say that we don’t disagree or fight. We are, each in our own way, forced to rethink things and manage our private and together time. It’s a strange situation, almost surreal: we look out the windows and only a few people and cars pass by. Where is all the hubbub and traffic? And then, we are not used to hearing the birds sing! Surely with nothing more than my nose, I could notice that the air in Milan is much cleaner now, but I’ve actually checked the pollution levels and they’re considerably lower. Therefore, I would appreciate it if this data were to be taken into consideration and added to the list of the many things that need be considered in the “afterwards.” I keep imagining everyone at his window with a torch in hand, screaming, “We can do it!” It’s touching, this sense of closeness with people you don’t know.

Paris, France
Lara, 45, editor, accustomed to working at home, lives with her companion and two cats.
The negativity, indifference, and superficiality that dominated France until now, having been plunged into the epidemic only a few days ago, has finally lost out to silence. Not that of the media, but that of the street and the people confined to their houses. No one believes any longer in his own immunity and we all await a miracle, looking out at the world through our windows. Only in the cities (the poor, violent, and overpopulated neighborhoods at the outskirts of Paris)
does life go on as it did. The people come and go, the police do nothing about the situation, and the few that do protect themselves are the food vendors, best equipped for their personal protective cleanliness. Meanwhile, I look out at springtime exploding in the park below our building and I can’t help but smile. The real virus is man and Nature has her laws that always reestablish balance against those who would greedily be blind to the fact that this world is our sanctuary. I believe that Covid-19 can be a punishment as well as a warning. A wise man said, “The weakest part of any action is the rising up.” One cannot live through this experience holding onto the same old indifference. We need to share a new understanding; we need to act singly and together in abandoning all that to which we were accustomed. All we need is courage.
Gerbamont, France

Marie, a self-described teacher and singer, living a utopian vision of the romantic and self-sufficient lifestyle in the east of France.

Now I’m “in prison” in Gerbamont. I am reading a great book with a lot of stories about the rural Vosgi people during World War II (much more terrifying than the situation we’re living in now): the horror transformed by the people into stories of fantasy. I live in a house in the mountains, surrounded by the forest and five other houses. In one of these, a teenager has built a small cabin in the garden so he can get away from his parents if things don’t get better soon and now he’s even planning out the furniture. The neighbors yell from one garden to another to exchange information, keeping up connections that don’t seem to be working. I have to go to the dentist in the city. Lots of military trucks are on the road and military planes in the sky because the sick are being transferred from normal hospitals to military hospitals. The silent city, perfumed by trees, kitchens, and flowers – a springtime from the past before there was gas. The first few days of the confinement I found frustrating – I had a sense of guilt for not being able to help anyone nor guide the weak: those children that lack internet access and don’t even have a house to shelter in. Over and over again, the injustice saddened me. What we are witnessing teaches us to slow down, act locally, and reduce our impact on the environment. Are we able to do so? Eh, don’t answer...in my infinite smallness, I ask myself: what would I give up first: chocolate or coffee?

In Melun, just outside Paris, men in white shirts and face masks pass around a Snapchat video that promotes
the sale of drugs, oblivious of the shutdown.

Vienna, Austria

Marzia and Massimiliano live together, both architects. She works for a large interior design firm; he has his own private studio.

Here in Vienna the situation seems to be pretty much under control. It’s been a week since they closed down everything,” explains Marzia. “I had already decided not to use the subway and go to work on foot – and tell everyone at work and my friends to do the same. I consider the Austrians to be a country of extremely optimistic people, so even in the face of all my anecdotes regarding Italy, my colleagues and friends were loathe to adopt the precautions. Still, notwithstanding the overall atmosphere of false security, for some weeks, in the pharmacies and supermarkets, it was difficult, if not impossible, to find certain things like masks, pasta or toilet paper. Since Kurz shut down all activities – on March 15 he added the parks – everyone here in Vienna has immediately and seriously adopted the government’s attitude. I only went out for a short walk (one can only go out alone or with one person with whom you are living) on Thursday the 19th because it was an absolutely beautiful day and I couldn’t bear staying inside. It did me a lot of good, but when I got home I felt a sense of worry as if my going out carried a certain amount of risk (notwithstanding the number of sick is still meager compared to that of Italy).

Massimiliano, on the other hand, doesn’t have any problem with being shut in:
I have never felt the weight of what other people call “isolation” and “solitude.” I associate these terms more with “peace” and “equilibrium.” I could stay locked up in a house for a month without feeling any ill effects. I could easily be a hermit. Of course, I don’t live alone. I live with Marzia, but the importance of the relationship we have works beyond just companionship and living together and has more to do with “yin and yang;” opposites complete each other.

Marzia remembers a “special” detail:
Months ago I asked a friend to pick up a book for me (“Man In Search of Meaning” by Viktor E. Frankl). It’s perfect for this situation and I’ve had it with me these last few days, stuck in the house, to lend me some courage and patience. Here is a passage I would like to share: “To make it clear, a human being is something with boundaries, and his freedom is limited. He is not free from his circumstances, but he is free to take a position regarding his circumstances. Like they used to say: professors from two diverse disciplines, neurology and psychiatry, are both entirely cognizant of how much man is a product of his biological, psychological and sociological circumstances. But beyond being a professor, I’m a survivor of four concentration camps, and as such, I am testimony to the surprising capacity of man to defeat and confront even the most horrible circumstances.
imaginary.”

Madrid, Spain
Angel, retired.

Unfortunately, the government’s state of alert in Spain has divided us by thousands of miles, one in Madrid, the other in Lanzarote, each one alone in his house. I don’t work anymore, so I can only take care of myself and of whoever is nearby, staying in contact with my husband, my friends, and family through social networking. And then there’s the need, at eight every evening from one’s balcony, to applaud and send encouragement to all the doctors, nurses, police, and all the other people out there taking care of us all. And then there are new friends on other balconies in the neighborhood. In Spain we don’t lack a sense of humor, luckily, and we manage to dribble forth with too much information. I go shopping for myself and for some of my neighbors. The house has become both a gym and a gourmet kitchen. I’ve been home for two weeks, without anxiety, hoping this will end well and soon. This pandemic has thrown light on unforeseen feelings and relationships. I hope that it serves to make a positive change in many people’s way of thinking and acting.
In Madrid, Angel celebrates his birthday
Lanzarote (The Canary Islands), Spain
Alberto Arranz Dominguez, 48, computer scientist.

My husband Angel is stuck in Madrid. As of today, March 23, there are 9 people testing positive for coronavirus in Lanzarote. I’ve been in isolation for a bit more than a week on a little island in an even smaller city where movement is very limited. There are few cars, and some passersby walking alone, taking the dog out for some fun or going shopping. The neighbors I can see are far away: a couple with two little children (very calm), two highly cultured people that, fortunately, I cannot see because they are unwatchable. And from my garden I can also see a middle-aged couple on their balcony: two unmoving figures that project calm. I have gone to the local market twice and once to the supermarket 15 kilometers away to buy fruit, meat, and fresh fish. That’s when I felt like a tourist again, discovering the countryside around Lanzarote. I drove slowly, observing everything, smiling stupidly like a baby seeing the sea for the first time. It’s incredible how my day passes with all the video chats from family and friends, making sure to be cheerful.
and thoughtful in order to make the chore as agreeable as possible. And then I circumnavigate my
in-house obstacle course: a bench, various chairs and a pair of 5-liter water bottles: with little you
can do a lot. Inside of me, though, there’s anxiety and anger, alternatingly. I’m worried about my
family, my friends on a budget potentially losing their jobs. Other times, I drift into a state of
resignation and try to enjoy the tranquility and the time to do nothing. Incredibly, I find distraction
in puzzles. Then, however, I hear the loudspeaker from the military truck that entreats us to stay
home in many languages: German, French, and Spanish and I find myself imagining a wartime
that once was and am now so lucky not to be living in. They tell me all this teaches one to enjoy
life, the good times and the people we love, belonging, as we do, to the culture of the
Mediterranean. Then, however, I feel a strong pain in my chest, missing my husband.
The military truck’s loudspeaker that entreats us to stay at home in Lanzarote (The Canary Islands).
London, United Kingdom
Rachel, 51, journalist and poetess.
March 25, we’re in lockdown finally. The advice came late after weeks of prevarication. We know
our NHS has been decimated by successive Conservative governments, and thanks to our present
Prime Minister, we have lost our closest allies, Europe. But our people are resilient, brave and
generous and our health service staff are heroes and heroines. That’s what we have to focus on
right now. I think: that much? There are weeks when I don’t leave the house for days, writing to
deadlines, internal, external. Knowing that you’ll come by, sooner or later, bringing food and love.
Now they say that couples must unite under one roof or stay separate entirely. So we gaze
through our third eyes at each other across the river’s silvery muscle. Our whole world suddenly
shaped like the heron who stalks the shallows. A fragile, transient question mark. If it wasn’t this,
it would be something else. Until we learn that we are all connected, each particle, each country,
each body. That what happens to my sister on the other side of the world, to the bumble bee in a
distant hedgerow, is as much my problem as events under my own roof, our planet will continue to
remind me. For better or worse. For richer or poor. As long as we all shall live.
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The deserted Thames
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Cambridge, United Kingdom
Alessandro, 53, has lived in Cambridge for 12 years, and due to Brexit, he has become a British citizen.

Watch it! I am British, not English, nor Scottish, nor Welsh nor Northern Irish, which is the usual way that those who were born in the United Kingdom define themselves even though we all have “British Passport” written on the front page on our passports. During the Second World War, there was the “Keep Calm and Carry On” thing. This motto characterizes all of us, from the very newest subjects like me to her Majesty the Queen. Or at least we would like to think that because yesterday, after a week in which I did not go for food shopping, I was at the supermarket and I started seriously to doubt if the spirit of the motto is still rooted in people. The shelves of toilet paper and pasta in at least two major supermarkets were completely empty. I was a little surprised by the lack of pasta: why? One of the winning arguments of the party that has forced us to separate from the European Union was that, at last, no one would ever be able to stop British having their traditional English breakfast and now, during a national emergency, the shelves of porridge are still full while those of pasta are completely empty. English people seem to worry more about pasta than porridge, I am afraid. On a more serious note, although it is difficult to reflect on things while living in this emergency, for sure after years of discrediting some jobs and professions – I’m thinking of doctors – by anti-science parties (just think of all the fuss created by anti-vaccination or flat-earth believers), now we have only science to help us to understand where we are and how we will get out of this mess.

Mannheim, Germany
Elena, 24, a university student.

My German and international friends have underestimated the risks of this pandemic, as did Italy at first. Curiously, when I spoke with my students, my boss, and my fellow employees and their friends, their naïve reactions made me think of those I remember of my parents and my friends at home in Milan. Even though I knew that this was very serious, it was difficult for me to tell them to stop talking about it so coldly, so casually, and begin to face reality. Even here there was a backlash against consumerism. Some friends began to live together with their partners, even if they knew each other for only a few weeks. The virus makes us not waste time. I’m an optimist by nature and I’m not easily upset, but for the first time in my life I have no power over my future. I look back and am proud and blessed by all the things I’ve done in my life. I think that it’s the first time I’ve realized exactly where I have traveled to get where I am. The virus might be the turning point: most people would like to think that society will emerge from this stronger and more
cohesive, and it could be true at some universal level. I think, however, that its impact on me will
be different. I will be more disenchanted and will concentrate more on my family and close
friends. The best I can take away from all this is an understanding of how I’d like to live and who
I’d like to have in my life after all this is over.

Thessaloniki, Greece

Elena, 46, married and mother to four children: 8, 10, 12 and 15 years of age. An architect, who,
along with her sister manages the rental of nine apartments, teaches history of architecture at a
private university, and design at a technical institute.

In Greece everything is pretty far away from my city, Thessaloniki. On the 24th of February, a
woman returning from fashion week in Milan was diagnosed positive on that Monday and her son
on Wednesday. The boy attended pottery classes at the school where my youngest son is a
student. I can’t tell you how much panic ensued! The 2nd of March, Fat Tuesday, the government
decided to cancel all public demonstrations, even those in Patras and Zakinthos, the most popular
ones. Schools continued to hold classes for another week, and on the 11th they closed their doors.
At that point there were no deaths and around twenty testing positive in the whole city. On
Saturday the 14th they closed all bars and restaurants, and on the 18th all stores, except the
pharmacies and supermarkets. We’ve been here at home since the 11th of March, thanks to advice
from my Italian friends. Now it’s the 22nd of March. There are 20 deaths and 700 diagnosed
positive, and since Monday they’ve instituted a form of self-certification because some people are
escaping to their summer houses or to their parents living in the countryside, or to distract
themselves by taking a stroll by the sea…very sneaky…it serves to highlight a simple truth: that
this has nothing to do with one’s political position. We are very lucky, really, that it is the
government of Kiriakos Mitsotakis and not Alex Tsipras – who had as his health minister Pavlos
Polakis, a doctor, but an untrustworthy bully. Mitsotakis decided right away to listen to the
experts, and to choose Sotirios Tsiodras, who every day enters our lives and manages the situation
with competence. I feel like I’m in good hands. Obviously, my day quickly gets turned around: I
don’t have work for obvious reasons and am only trying to help my students via the Internet. My
children don’t have a schedule and I have to assist them on the computer to do their homework,
and each wants their own computer. E-commerce has now entered our lives for everything, for the
board games we’ve rediscovered (we even play canasta)! Along the way we’ve had our moments of
fear: My youngest daughter had a fever of 39° that wouldn’t lower; a scary weekend. My 83 year-
old father, in order to get his daily radiation treatments, has to enter the same hospital to which
coronavirus patients are referred. He does, however, enter through a side door and the treatments
will be over in a week, but I still worry. At home we have become ultra-meticulous about cleaning: everything that comes in passes through an antiseptic solution. First, since there are six of us, we have a domestic “collaboration”: It is I who must cook for six people who are always hungry, every single minute of the day. Cleaning and running the washing machine is my typical day! The rest of the time I live in uncertainty and it makes me crazy. I constantly ask myself how long do we have to stay at home? Will it end before the summer once and for all or will it return in October? Will I become sick? Or will my neighbors? Will someone I know succumb to it? Will I have work after this is all over? What will the aftermath be like? Will I be able to travel again as I used to? Can I take a walk with the same thoughtlessness as before? In Greece we had been seeing some recovery after ten years of economic crisis. And now? The only answer I can give myself now is: patience. Furthermore, now we have only begun to reflect upon our present healthcare system. When this is all over will we find a way to make ourselves stronger? We must.

The pandemic opens up all sorts of opportunities to rediscover board games.
Moscow, Russia
Marco Aurelio, 23, film direction and cinematography student.

Basically, the crisis within which we now live has not changed things. I’m pretty lucky not to be one of those in the front lines of this battle or those who risk getting thrown into the economic abyss. Therefore, I felt I must continue to make use of the time and space that these other people, with their efforts, are allowing me. In Moscow people are confused. They don’t know what awaits them. The government measures are severe, but the timing appears improvised, and this makes everyone act as if without a compass. Personally, I decided to leave that bizarre world, as it would keep me from doing those things that were in my power to do. But I didn’t succeed: I saw what was happening and early in the morning I went to the internal affairs ministry because I had an expired visa. They wouldn’t give me a new one so I went directly to the airport in order to return to Italy. Anxiety, like a guest, is, at times, useless. Courage is more interesting: it’s like a candle that lights everything up. Obviously, it can be extinguished with a whiff if you’re not paying attention, but that’s not so bad because you can always relight it. At the crux of all our problems, this crisis is helping us to think, to discover ourselves and to discover how intimately interconnected we all are, and this, notwithstanding everything else, is exciting!

Cape Town, South Africa
Betty, 60, an artist, lives alone.

Cape Town, Friday, March 27, 2020: it is the first day of our lockdown, as declared by the president on Monday night. Things are quiet outside, I rent a room in a neighborhood below Table Mountain, with gardens. There is much birdsong this morning but also earlier the sound of a drone. I am lucky to be in this place, the country is so divided that my reality is that of a small percentage of the population. At this time regulations state that everyone should stay in their place of residence and we may leave the property only to get medicine or food or to provide essential services. No alcohol will be sold. Some people in densely populated areas do not have running water. However, I received an sms yesterday saying that my blood type is needed and so, as a donor, I can leave the house today to go to the clinic. Apart from that, we hope to have enough work, reading material, supplies, humor, and goodwill to survive the next 3 weeks but I suspect the lockdown will merely be repeated at the end of that time. The medical realities are awe-inspiring and shocking, even here where they are still only projected forecasts, the first 2 deaths from Covid-19 were announced today and the numbers of confirmed infections reached over 1000. The past few days have been fraught, some people panic buying (my landlady bought many tins of sardines and packs of toilet paper 2 weeks ago, some for people who work for her,
sewing) others concerned about economic realities, runners worried that they cannot go for a run, dog owners facing confinement with no walks. Yesterday, Thursday, it felt strange: seeing people in poor areas queuing close together to buy food at the ‘Cash and Carry’ in Voortrekker Road and at the ‘Herbal Clinic’. But also in this neighborhood like a Sunday afternoon, with mountain paths busier than usual, people getting their last fix, with a sighting of a long-tailed sugarbird on a protea bush, here nature is reasserting itself and this morning is mostly, overwhelmingly peaceful. Personally, I think that to have a meaningful structure is important in a time of uncertainty, continue as before, make something, meditate, assist others where possible. I usually ok spending time alone and bizarrely find myself reaching out to friends, in my country and others, much more than usual, it feels as if there is more sharing, checking in to see that people are doing ok. I feel that kindness and connecting is the way through this. Also remembering to laugh. I do not think this is good or evil, those labels are too emotional and these times should be a good time for humanity and science rather than a reliance on fake medicine or religions, as helpful as these can be. It is obviously a time of healing for the environment and a reminder of the interconnectedness of life on earth.
Khartoum, Sudan
Giulia, age 28.
29th of March: Here in Sudan, as of today, six cases of Covid-19 have been announced, and restrictive measures have been initiated very quickly, following the European example. Notwithstanding that, the density of the population and the poverty of the country does not allow rules to be followed as they should. The woman who sells tea on my street, and who lives under the burden of poverty, can’t follow the curfew laws. Thus, she can choose to try to either bribe the police or be arrested. In any case, if she stays home, she knows she can’t provide food for herself and her children.
Supriya, 66, lives with her husband, both retired professors. Our state has been on shutdown since last Sunday. On the 22\textsuperscript{nd} of March and yesterday, the 24\textsuperscript{th} of March, the prime minister has announced a general shutdown of the whole country for the next three weeks: we have enough food in the house and the necessary supplies and medicine to continue to be comfortable. But I worry for the day laborers, the migrants confined to the railway stations and the people in the slums living in overcrowded and distressing conditions and those that make the street their home. Notwithstanding the apparent self-segregation of the middle and upper classes, Kolkata is a city of poor people. The poor are the most hard hit by the coronavirus.
as it spreads, because it is they who cannot afford the luxury of observing “social distance.” I feel grateful for all the people who are doing all they can to observe the quarantine, wearing masks, taking precautions and helping others – especially doctors and nurses, sanitary workers, fruit vendors, pharmacists, and so on. I have faith. I’m not depressed or anxious and I think that there is great strength in ordinary human beings. What’s particularly gratifying after the hate and violence of December and January incited by our fascist government headed by the Bharatiya Janata (BJP) which attempted to use this actual crisis for political ends. In the personal sphere I have had no less than five academic engagements cancelled, both domestic and international, which were planned for March-April. This has made me understand how stressful this can be for me. One cancellation came worded as an invitation to enjoy peace and rest! Yesterday our gardener came to work even though he shouldn’t have. I bawled him out and sent him home. Actually, he wanted to ask me for a loan and I was able to give him something for his immediate needs. He’s a negligent and forgetful young man, but he offered to go shopping for us. I was really touched by him and asked him to buy some medicine for my husband, which turned out to be unavailable, and he came all the way back to tell me so. Many people hold on to the theory that the planet is healing itself (as the developed north instructs the south to remain underdeveloped and poor in order to stop climate change). But the truth is that epidemics are terrible and, living in a country like India, we understand that the healing process carries a price: the flu pandemic of 1918-19 took a million and a half lives – four percent of the population – in India. It was imported to India by millions of soldiers – forgotten – who had fought in the Indian-British army in the First World War, a European war. Therefore, among the beneficiaries – like me – who can feel good taking fewer plane trips, more time to read and think, and so on, we should not ignore the terrible effects on the economy and learn to value – and reward- the farm workers and those that are found in the “essential services” category that are keeping us alive right now. I’m not so sure that we’ll remember them when this threat passes.
The street in front of Supriya’s house in Calcutta, India
Florida, The United States
Lee, 85 years old.

Living alone during quarantine and the knowledge that at my age I am now an Eskimo who at some point needs to leave planet earth has brought a new rhythm to my life. I move about my space with almost balletic grace washing clothes, cooking, cleaning, walks on the beach and a bit of accounting all free of schedule. Now in the morning after waking besides making the bed, I take my temperature. At night my teeth get a rigorous cleaning but for the sixteen hours between I do what I want when I want to. The omnipotence of Covid-19 makes a sneeze or cough an event. Italy
and Usa are both very corrupt and have the highest incidence of the virus. We are both led by egomaniacal leaders who stupidly were more interested in their own popularity than preparing a defense. The world needs young female leaders. Finland has 5 female ministers all under 35. The prime minister is remarkably articulate and will probably be the next Finnish president. We have the crazy old men who pee in their pants while leading rallies. Maybe this crisis will encourage the masses to understand the new reality. Meanwhile, at the same time, we have these crazy old men who pee in their pants while they’re addressing their assembled followers. Maybe this crisis will encourage the masses to take a look at the reality we’re living in. In 2008, the federal government bailed out the banks and industry. Eight years later, Trump said the federal government had no business placing many restrictions on business. They were independent companies who were hampered by federal restrictions dealing with environmental concerns that were being presented by a bunch of silly, fear-mongering scientists. So that started in 2017. Now three years later these federal hating independent companies all are holding out tin cups asking the Federal Government that is financed by the individual citizens who have only 1% of the wealth. CEOs of these companies make annual salaries of 11 million dollars. Before any of these companies get bailed out by the ordinary people, their salaries should be capped at something under 300k annually. They are already multimillionaires and don’t need to accumulate more.
I have worked and lived in New York for many years now. Since the nineties, my husband and I spend the winter months in Southeast Asia. So this year in January I was in Bangkok, where, at our home during the Lunar New Year, we spent the occasion with various vacationing Chinese. We had begun to hear about Wuhan even then, but didn’t give much thought to the virus, even though Thailand is the preferred destination for vacationing Chinese in the winter. By February, one began to find disinfectant gel for your hands everywhere and before you entered a restaurant they would take your temperature, before letting you in only after you washed your hands. We had to have a change of scenery and so we traveled in order to stay in an office outside the city, which
was now full of Chinese, with and without masks, but anyway, packed in like sardines, who were forbidden to return home, their week’s vacation turned into a forced stay of over a month. At the end of February I traveled to Ko Samui Island, a hour’s flight from Bangkok, for a long meditation retreat. There were twenty of us; the island was full of tourists, the atmosphere entirely relaxed. I had entered a bubble, oblivious of what was outside. On the 6th of March when I returned to the capital, everyone was wearing masks, the fear had already spread even if it wasn’t openly expressed. Being a country in the grip of a military dictatorship, any news and statistics regarding contagion were not available. We began to think about returning to New York sooner than we expected to. Meanwhile, the airlines were cancelling flights right and left. On the 17th of March we returned to New York. What a shock! At JFK there were no inspections, and when we hailed a taxicab instead of taking the subway (obviously!), the taxi driver wasn’t wearing a mask and when we asked him why, he chuckled condescendingly and said, “Imagine if I wore one…” We found a changed city: uncertainty everywhere, fear and confusion but also a lightness and unconsciousness: no clear guide or indication of what to do until, at last, total lockdown. Suddenly the city was empty and silent. Having just come back from Asia and given that our ages (in our 70’s) put us in a category of high risk, we voluntarily placed ourselves under quarantine…our son and grandson came over, they in the garden and we at our threshold, and we played a science fiction game involving an imaginary transparent wall that divided us. Then they asked, “Dad, when will this be over?” and my husband responded patiently that the longer this lockdown lasts, the sooner you’ll have the possibility of playing with your grandparents again. In short, every once in a while, a black cloud of apprehension, anxiety, and uncertainty that I couldn’t evade despite massive doses of meditation, yoga, Qi-gong alternated with alcohol, gel and disinfectant. I equipped a corner of the bedroom as a working space. That way I didn’t have to leave even to go to my studio, where I was allowed to go, as I tried to avoid any moments of anxiety. It’s difficult not to think about the privileged situation I’m in while doctors, nurses and various other workers literally risk their lives all the time. But it’ll only get worse and one cannot see the end of it all. My husband is, instead, a rock. Nothing shakes him. This shutdown is simply one more reason to stay home and work in front of the computer, as I would have before, but now it’s justified. For the love of living together, my husband sometimes meditates or practices Qi-gong with me, or walks up and down stairs with me in order to keep exercising. It’s his way of showing his love for me and I accept it gratefully. One positive thought and a hope: after this big crisis, life will begin again with enthusiasm and bring inevitable big changes including, I hope, the political disappearance of Trump.
New York City, The United States
Federico, 60, director of an investment bank.

I live in a small house in Manhattan. As of today, the 23rd of March, the city is empty of tourists and of most commuters. Those who were able to leave have left. Those who remain have stocked up on necessities, are barricaded in their homes, and wait, working, reading and obsessively watching television. Schools are closed but, in theory, kids are at least attending classes online. The subway is running even if it is almost empty. Offices, as well as bars, restaurants and “non-essential” stores are closed by the order of Governor Cuomo. The stores are out of disinfectants and other items are scarce (for example, toilet paper, paracetemol, alcohol), but that’s about it. Here one puts on gloves, sometimes a mask, and walks outside in silence, giving large berth to
anyone you may meet on the street. It makes you think about Milan during the plague described by Manzoni. People are shut in their homes, often in small apartments of only a few square meters, in Manhattan skyscrapers. The silence is mind-blowing. It’s spring all of a sudden, but it’s mostly wasted, given that everyone is staying at home. There are no specific restrictions (yet) on going out, on shopping for groceries, nor any additional police measures. One feels connected to the rest of the world. One tries to speak with friends on FaceTime, to organize virtual dinner dates and happy hours on the computer. We await the cresting of the virus expected in the next seven or ten days. It makes me think of Berlin in 1945 awaiting the arrival of the Russians and the other Allied conquerors.

The photo in which her grandchildren show Luisa the bread they made with their father
Hong Kong, China
Yuki, 23, university student

Before the lockdown I left Milan and returned home. Here everyone wears a mask outside on the street. Even though we’re stuck in our houses, at least I’m at home and with my dog. Everyone
Covid-19. World is our Country

studies or works online, though some have dropped out. Certainly, we have come to understand the importance of cleanliness, but we also know that the statistical information given isn’t to be trusted. We all make believe that we’re living a normal life as best we can, but we’re in an anxious state all the time.

Shanghai, China
Anne, 38, yoga instructor.

Shanghai, where I live, is considered an international city, based on its creativity and innovation. But I see it more as a simple and traditional city. Because of this pandemic, I’m convinced that we’ll see a flourishing of pursuits like holistic health. There will be a major connection with the whole world, whether we’re talking about nature or human beings, everything that breathes air. Being anxious and fearful is very uncomfortable. However, getting out of the comfort zone is also rewarding and transforming, The path of evolution. At this very moment, we need to remember we are not alone, billions of people are with us in this un-comfort zone. Calm down, stay informed and do what we can do to help the situation which I think the best resource for courage. The clock is
ticking, life is short, make every day counts. It is what it is, it’s not good but not evil. The only thing I consider not helping at all is Indifference. It’s a lesson, a process we have to undergo as a result of what we have done to Nature. Do the job to have as many lives as possible to be saved. To heal is not to say that the damage never happened, but that the damage no longer controls our lives.

Seoul, South Korea
Minyoung, 24, university student.

In Korea, the peak came fast. From a day with 300 cases, then 500, then 800... now 100 additional cases are announced every day. At first it was impossible to find a facemask. But thanks to private donations and those from foundations, the government quickly furnished the populace. It’s the law that each week everyone is entitled to two masks apiece. Moreover, they say new cases are arriving from overseas, so the controls at the airports are made more stringent and efficient. It takes three or four minutes to take the coronavirus test and the results are published after eight hours. The government monitors the country with closed circuit cameras: almost every 300 meters there’s a minimart with a camera. Moreover, they can get detailed information from your credit card and cell phone GPS. Everyone has an app and residents of areas with coronavirus-positive cases receive notifications on their phones. Therefore, one can see the movement of any other individual: now, where they are, which bus they’re on, everything. Moreover, there’s another app for the quarantine. If you are put on self-quarantine, you have to install that app and consent to public surveillance. So if your particular GPS strays far from the house, it doesn’t escape notice either by the government or the police. The restaurants, bars and stores are open for business. And everything is available in abundance. I often go to the café nearby to study, but not so far away that I have to take public transportation. I wear a mask at all times and everywhere, except to eat and sleep. The only ones that don’t wear masks are my European friends. I feel protected and I don’t live in fear at all, even if I do admit that the situation is clearly worrying for its impact on racism and the economic recession (we are connected economically to China). My Korean friends have returned from Europe, Australia, or America, either because they’ve dropped out of school or because they’ve been forced to leave university dormitories. Here the people treat them as if they are infected.

Palawan, The Philippines
Walter, 52 years old.

March 15: To tell the truth, I don’t even know myself well, because I decided to move here. I totally know that if I could have chosen where to go, I would never have chosen the Philippines.
But, as it is, life takes you where it wants to, not where you want to. I simply have been associated with a friend’s project for about three years. I accepted the position because it appealed to me; the idea seemed interesting, but also, I must admit, I was out of other options. Thanks to the skill of my fellow workers (I am only a keyboard drone), the project took off and things were going pretty much as we had envisioned. That is, until January 2020. After the novel virus arrived, there was a chain of events from the tragic to the comic. Between conflicting news, fake news, alarmists, and uncertain assurances, it was an emotional rollercoaster. When the gravity of the situation was more or less clear, it was interesting to see the different reactions among us. The biggest pessimist (JC), who is apolitical, already was imagining an extreme situation (with lots of weapons to defend oneself from the popular masses looking for food), and he suggested we close up entirely and escape to some deserted island. Meanwhile, the exact opposite position was taken by NG, who seemed rather nonplussed, and considered the news to be excessively alarmist and prophesied the whole thing would be over shortly. As far as my opinion was concerned, I found myself torn between two positions. I have no fear and continue to have no fear (I consider my life to be sufficiently over and I don’t have any particular interest in the future, for which I can only prepare myself for death without too much drama). On the other hand, I worry for my family and friends, stuck in an Italy so heavily hit by this scourge, and I can’t do anything to help them. Meanwhile, here the situation is truly surreal. The first thing Duterte – the president of the Philippines – did was to close off Manila. Then, when he saw the contagion spreading pretty much everywhere in the country, he closed off the state of Luzon (with about 50 million inhabitants). Luzon also contains Palawan, the island where we are. Immediately, there was a general mass exit of all tourists, with a huge chaos involving cancelled, then reconfirmed flights with departures from different airports that were then again cancelled. About four-fifths of the reservations that we had made at our hotel for clients have been cancelled. At the restaurant that formerly was packed every night of the week, there were only a few tables, sadly occupied by tourists who had tried to flee but had moved from one city to another, vainly searching for a flight home. Maybe one of the things that impacted me the most in that period was to be stared at and marked as a plague-spreader simply because I’m Italian. It’s really terrible to be discriminated against, but an experience I recommend to everyone, just to understand what it’s like to be on the receiving end. Finally in March we got the extreme quarantine order: all domestic flights were cancelled, no one could enter or exit from the island without really urgent reasons or for transporting goods of immediate necessity; no one can leave their home without a pass (initially one pass was given to each household) and only leave the house for food or medicine. After 8pm it’s total curfew: no one
leaves the house for any reason. It’s like we’re at war. Now one stands at the window and the lonely tropical sea, with its palm trees and wooden boats, stares back at you like it always has, as it did before, as if nothing like this is happening...It’s strange to be at war in a tropical paradise. And no less bizarre to have all these restrictive measures (especially on an island that is only 400 kilometers long with zero people testing positive) and to see people walking around without masks who don’t have any idea what social distancing is all about, except to ask you – because you are Italian – “but do you have the virus?

March 15: We’ve been in quarantine only a few days, but already we’re asking ourselves if we can stand this for a long period of time. They announce ridiculous laws like, “It’s forbidden to get mad.” We’re organizing a card-playing tournament and movie evenings (online streaming, of course) because we are so bored here watching TV series, the networks are unreliable and the connection is so slow. It takes about 3 hours to watch an hour and a half film, with all the frustration it entails, and it makes you want to slap someone, but then you remember the number one rule: “Don’t get mad.” We get together daily to organize the rationing of food, the shortage of fuel, the use of lights. The restaurant and the hotel are closed, so we don’t have receipts of any kind, and we don’t know how long this situation will last...and our funds will surely run out sooner or later. We have money in the bank, but the closest bank is in Puerto Princesa, which is about as unreachable as South Africa. We must learn to live and cohabitate in a different way than we have up to now; it’s unthinkable to remain forever in this forced quarantine. The world economy will collapse. So we just can’t turn around and live as we did before. We need to understand how to live together with this virus (and with those that will come). We must find a balance point between a low level danger of contagion and the necessity of returning to work in order to sustain the world economy. Honestly, I believe that in a medium to short span of time, this epidemic will prove to be more beneficial than harmful. Already, in a couple of months, the world is slowly breathing again. Here in our little world (and we live in the middle of nature), one can see clear signs of nature taking back its space and rhythms. And I also believe, or at least would like to believe, that this forced shutdown will make people, hopefully a lot of people, rethink their own lives and reconsider the things that are important and those that are not.
Melbourne, Australia
Carlotta, 24, university student.
We leave the house only for reasons of true necessity, as does the rest of the world. This, compounded by the reality of what is happening makes it more difficult to accept. I have adapted with some difficulty in adjusting my personal level of gratification in regard to success. Certainly, I have quickly understood how much my previous freedom was just taken for granted. But looking back at it, and looking for a way each of us can make a contribution responsibly, our individual choices can make a substantial change. A change more positive than we ever thought.

Sidney, Australia
Goran, architetto, 57 years old.
Sydney is deserted, the street life has died and people bypass each other in arcs as the social distancing rules have become a norm. It is such pity as Australians have slowly becoming much more personal, fluid and physically close. I am afraid that South European and South American influence will be lost and the country will grow to be cold and distant... again. It will be like time travel to the days when I first came to this country thirty years ago. This year has been particularly bad for planed Earth and very specifically for Australia. I feel like Earth is a dog that has been eaten by the fleas and there are too many fleas and the dog is shaking from his head to his tale. I think that it was Thursday 23 of January that was probably one of the most depressing days in my life. I was with my son Anton at our farm south of Sydney. We arrived a night earlier, got up to a sunny but windy day. We had breakfast at home and decided to go to the beach. The wind was like nothing that I have dealt ever before... it was the most giant hair drier – incredibly hot and incredibly strong. The wind lifted the sand and made it into a weapon. We ran into the water but it was equally inhospitable – absolutely freezing... painfully cold. We fled what was suppose to be a nice summer beach day and went home to make lunch. I knew there were fires around us but they were few kilometres away and I thought that it will be fine. I started making lunch but I kept my eye on the sky looking for the smoke and app on my phone called Fires Near Me. All of a sudden like a finger on a map pointing towards our house I saw a fire moving in our direction. I just said to Anton: let’s go – now. It took us five minutes and two of us and our dog were in the car... we drove to the highway and turn left to go up the coast to Sydney. We drove through 250km of burned forests, burned and melted road signs, saw dozens of burned homes, we drove through dense smoke and in one part through the fire which was not more than 3m on our side. The car AC was working but we were coughing. I have never seen a devastation like this. Around Albion Park the smoke subsided but then we ran into this yellow cloud. It took me a few
minutes to realise that this was a dust cloud which travelled from central parts of Australia to the coast. Then it started raining. It became dark again and dust and rain made mud and mud stuck onto our wind shield. The wipers were working so hard but I could only barely see out. It was probably 50 km of the dust cloud and mud. We were finally at the outskirts of Sydney and it was becoming dark. The car radio tuned into one of Sydney stations and we listened to the news. And on the news for the first time they mentioned some virus somewhere in China... which over next few days became coronavirus, than Covid-19, then pandemic, than the end of the world as we know it.It was the most depressing day ever. I was looking at Anton who was pensively sitting next to me looking into the distance and I thought – what are we leaving our kids?

Auckland, New Zealand
Sergio, 62 years old.

I’ve lived in Auckland over 25 years and I’m doing very well. I have three wonderful sons, all living on their own and full of ambition. Since Thursday, March 26, the entire country has been on total lockdown. This means that, apart from essential services (the supermarkets, medical centers and pharmacies, gas stations), everything else is closed. The confirmed Covid-19 cases at this point number around 400, of which only one person is in intensive care, and there are no deaths. My first reaction to the news of these extraordinary measures was not positive. Lots of epidemics have shown up in the past that were much worse than this one in terms of mortalities. It’s a fact that the population of the world has reached the point of saturation and sooner or later something really catastrophic had to happen. We can look at this novel virus like a test to train us for the worst, always yelling “Good luck!” even as the opposite is happening. Two small examples: this morning (March 29) I left to go to the supermarket to do a little shopping and the line out the door was at least an hour long. My patience has never been exemplary, and so much so that I freaked out, returning home with empty bags. Once home, I sat down in front of the computer to do some bookkeeping. To my great surprise, the government had deposited 7000 dollars in my account to help with the next 12 weeks! This, only two days from the beginning of the lockdown! My nervousness vanished. And I feel lucky to be living in New Zealand.

Conclusion
In so many words, all the world is a village. And if you would like concrete facts to back that up, please take a look at this quote from Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli historian:
We must share information on an international level...something that an Italian doctor discovers in the morning in Milan might save lives in Tehran that evening. If the government of the United Kingdom is unable to make a decision on various issues, it can ask the Koreans for advice, as they
have struggled with the same questions a month before. If this succeeds, it would serve as a spirit of collaboration and global trust. Countries must be open to sharing their information and to asking humbly for advice. They should be able to trust the data and suggestions they receive. It would also serve the global effort to distribute supplies for medical use. Instead of each country producing whatever it can, a coordinated global effort would be able to increase production immensely... An international collaboration is also vital on the economic front. Given the nature of the global economy and its logistical obstacles, if each state takes care of its own interests without even minimally caring about the others, the result will be chaos and an eventual worsening of the crisis. We need a global plan of action and quickly.

Yuval Harari seems to be calling for a future utopia, and maybe a virus, this one or the next, will open the eyes of those who actually have the power to change things. In the meanwhile, a symbolic gesture of hope could accomplish something right away, right after this emergency is over: manufacture and adopt a universal flag. There is the one designed by Oskar Pernfeldt, a Swedish designer, for his graduation thesis some years ago: interconnected rings that form a flower, symbol of life on earth, against a field of aqua blue, representative of the universe. Everyone must pull together, passionately.

Translation by Adrianna Dinihanian

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