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## A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Recovering a Sense of Agency in Coronavirus Times

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*“Never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it’s an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.” ~Rahm Emanuel<sup>1</sup>*

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## **A Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Recovering a Sense of Agency in Coronavirus Times**

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Steven F. Freeman<sup>2</sup>

April 9, 2020

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One disheartening aspect of the current crisis is *lost sense of agency* both for individuals and organizations – a loss seemingly accepted as a fact of current circumstances, barely worth noticing or commenting on. We’re told there’s little to do but wait it out, and there seems no reasonable counter to that. We’re at the mercy of events that are difficult to understand. News is reported and speeches delivered at a grade school level; often quite disingenuously. And yet we read, look and listen because, well, it’s important, and because normal social interaction or just getting out into the world is no longer an option.

Accordingly, we *feel* that we have little control of our lives and livelihoods. Some people are working 14 hour days/7 days a week, usually less from choice than obligation, in some cases literally working themselves to death. Yet more are unemployed, prisoners of rashly-implemented lockdowns, whose gainful labor is now filling out inane state and federal forms rushed out to make 100,000,000 people(?) wards of the state.

Likewise, for organizations. Some are stressed and strained towards the breaking point; others, essentially closed for business, often legally prohibited from opening, the rest struggling to carry on despite massive disruptions and breakdowns in supply chains, customer flows, and almost all ways of working, likewise counting on newly minted bailout money. With or without it, an unprecedented number of companies and even entire industries may be dying.

To an unprecedented degree, businesses and citizens alike have placed their fate in the hands of government agencies, institutions and experts that we have little reason to trust<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Seib, Gerald F. *Wall Street Journal*. “In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama” Nov. 21, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Contact the author at [sf@alum.mit.edu](mailto:sf@alum.mit.edu). For more information about the author, see <https://sffreeman.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Examples could fill volumes. For now I’ll mention four:

- (1) China hid news for six critical weeks and punished the whistleblower
- (2) in the aftermath of secret January security briefings about expected impact of the virus, four U.S. Senators sold off entire stock portfolios but then assured the public that everything was fine, e.g., [Senator Kelly Loeffler](#): “Concerned about [#coronavirus](#)? Remember this: The consumer is strong, the economy is strong, & jobs are growing, ...:”
- (3) the “scientific” model on which UK and US policy was originally based, was systematically flawed off by orders of magnitude because of untested assumptions, among other problems. Critics Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Yaneer Bar-Yam observe: “Social science is in a “replication crisis”, where less than half the results replicate (under exact same

and in fact do not trust.<sup>4</sup> Survival for the 100,000,000(?) and the drydocked organizations for whom they once worked depends on state support that barely functions in the best of times, the hope these now-hobbled institutions will successfully step up with \$10 trillion, a fantastical sum that will be conjured and added to an already \$23 trillion national debt. ...

And yet, we have faith .... Because, well, what choice do we have?

\* \* \* \* \*

Actually, much more than most realize! Just as everything about this crisis suggests we should place even *less faith* in institutional support than we normally would<sup>5</sup>, crisis presents a unique opportunity to exercise *more control* over the path that your life and livelihood can take. or at very least provides more options.

Crisis is when agency can and ought to be most fully manifested. The word *crisis* derives from the Greek *krísis* (verb *krinein* “to separate, decide, judge”) and subsequently Medical Latin, the “decisive point” at which a patient either dies or recovers.

conditions), less than a tenth can be taken seriously, and less than a hundredth translate into the real world. The UK's coronavirus policy may sound scientific. It isn't.”

- (4) Amazon Staten Island fulfillment center management refused to inform workers that an co-worker contracted the virus, “not wanting to prompt a panic.” When Chris Smalls went ahead and informed them, he was summarily dismissed. The NY Times: “Not content merely to fire Mr. Smalls, executives planned to exploit him as part of a public-relations strategy meant to deflect attention away from safety issues.” Internal notes from a meeting of executive leaders at Amazon obtained by Vice News reveal the company’s general counsel David Zaplosky calling Mr. Smalls “not smart or articulate” and thus a useful tool in its ongoing plan to besmirch unionization efforts.”  
[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/4age5j/amazon-workers-in-new-york-are-striking-for-the-second-week-in-a-row-as-coronavirus-cases-pile-up](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4age5j/amazon-workers-in-new-york-are-striking-for-the-second-week-in-a-row-as-coronavirus-cases-pile-up)

<sup>4</sup> Even prior to COVID-19, American confidence in institutions have sunk to abysmal levels: particularly so for those who claim to inform us, and Worst of all for those who make the laws. From a September 2019, Gallup Poll:  
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

Institution / Confidence Level	Great deal	Quite a lot	Some	Very little	None (vol)*	No opinion	Great deal/ Quite a lot	Very little + None*
The presidency	24	14	17	38	6	1	38	44
Medical System	15	21	38	24	2	-	36	26
Banks	13	17	43	25	1	1	30	26
Big business	10	13	41	32	2	-	23	34
Newspapers	12	11	37	34	5	1	23	39
Television news	8	10	33	45	3	1	18	48
Congress	4	7	26	48	4	1	11	52

\* “None”s were **volunteered** by respondents, i.e., not provided by interviewers as a response option

<sup>5</sup> I could write a book on this one: Look at elite behavior, how in natural disasters, they regularly take aid money, humanitarian supplies for themselves (i.e., Haiti, Nepal, Africa). use crises such as 2008-09 to consolidate power and money, but let’s leave it for now. And here: the GOP senators above, Dem party holding primaries in the midst of the contagion, no doubt killing in the process rank & file Dems asked to vote and man the polls.

So, yes, there is danger in crisis, and yes, caution is warranted. Back to the medical origins of the word, crisis is when attention is critical. But it's also when readiness for action, intervention, is critical. In life as well, crisis is the decisive point, the turning point when change can and will happen!

Most of what's happening now *is* beyond your of control, but it's beyond *others'* control as well. This is bad news if you were 100% happy with the status quo. But most of us who aren't yet dead have some aspirations left in life, things we'd like to change; every leader has some goal they aspire to lead to.

Under normal conditions, change is difficult. We have all the obligations of life and the paths we follow to meet them. When those paths are no longer passable, it's a rare opportunity to break bad habits or create new good ones. Imagine crisis as a storm of freshly fallen snow. The tracks and ruts created all winter long, made for easier passage, but they also forced you into particular routes. With the fresh snow, you have a beautifully fresh, clean slate!

This is true on a personal or organizational level. Contrary to naïve expectation, the greatest challenge in leading organizational change is not instituting the change itself, it's in "unfreezing" the system so as to create even a possibility of change. The Covid-19 response is the most thorough unfreezing since World War II!

But you too must unfreeze to put the crisis to use. This is an article for the 99%.<sup>6</sup> The world's power elite understands all too well everything I've said here. Power players have agendas. This is when they *go back to work*, planning, implementing plans and following up on plans of how to grab or consolidate money and power. Every political thinker worth his salt, at least from Machiavelli on, knows to use, or as necessary, *create* a crisis. every government agency has program strategists whose job is to use the crisis.<sup>7</sup> Rahm Emanuel, even before he took office as Barack Obama's 1<sup>st</sup> White House Chief of Staff, was plotting how to make use of the 2008-09 Financial Crisis." The rich as well. That \$10 trillion "bailout" approved *unanimously* by the U.S. Congress? We've barely heard reported that *eighty percent, \$8 trillion* is going not to the 1%, but to the .0001%! The \$1,200 checks so widely publicized? Simply the cheese in the mousetrap, as observed in a noteworthy act of unusual political honesty, by Congressman Thomas Massie.<sup>8 9</sup> If you sit back helpless and frozen you wind up, well, helpless and frozen ... in a mousetrap!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Do we all remember this term from the Occupy movement in August 2011? Paul Krugman was on stronger ground empirically in suggesting "We" as the 99.9% citing a 2005 Congressional Budget Office report that between 1979 and 2005 the inflation-adjusted income for the middle of the income distribution rose 21% (including the lower 9/10 of the top 1%), while for the top 0.1% it rose by 400%. Krugman, Paul (November 24, 2011). "We Are the 99.9%". The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/opinion/we-are-the-99-9.html>

<sup>7</sup> use or manipulate. Right now, 530 openings are listed 530 Government Program Strategist jobs *available* on <https://www.indeed.com/q-Government-Program-Strategist-jobs.html>),

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thenewamerican.com/print-magazine/item/35356-coronavirus-deep-state-assault-on-economic-freedom>

<sup>9</sup> I don't even think that this \$8 trillion is the biggest thing at stake. There are geopolitical cold wars, enormous budgets and profits for medical products, especially vaccines ... but I'm pretty sure we don't want to go there with this. I'm not even sure about this whole paragraph.

With everything changing, everything's up for grabs. That makes possible a certain equality of opportunity, but there's no opportunity at all without awareness that there might be an opportunity and some reasonable confidence of one's own agency,

Life fully lived is a stream of turning points — challenges, changes, crises — in the world at large, in our families, relationships, workplaces, institutions, and also within. Rather than a time for giving up or simply trusting in authority, times of crisis is the most potent offering the world presents life for growth, opportunity and development.

[Up Next: Take Back Control: A Full Spectrum Approach to Managing Crisis<sup>11</sup>](#). Next article scheduled for Thursday 12/16:

[If you'd like to help your organization better deal with the crisis write or call for a free consultation:](#)

[If you'd like to better understand Crisis preparedness & organizational Resiliency, register for a free case workshop at:](#)

[Want notification about new posts, register at:](#)

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<https://www.thenewamerican.com/print-magazine/item/35356-coronavirus-deep-state-assault-on-economic-freedom>

<sup>10</sup> The lost sense of agency? Some are counting on it. Very likely intentionally created! And perhaps commentary on it suppressed.

<sup>11</sup>Extant CP is very narrow. No surprise it's widely ignored. A Full Spectrum Approach however allows leaders to put Crisis Preparedness (CP) where it belongs, going beyond the technical protocols of Crisis Management, Emergency Preparedness and Continuity Planning, in three ways:

Systemic Perspective Some organizations prepare well for technological crises and natural disasters, but few do for [macro events](#) that, as we see, could be just as devastating. We try to think about CP [systematically](#) – by identifying the larger systems in which an organization is contained and the associated vulnerabilities.

Wholistic approach to CP, considering not only standard *Anticipate and Avert (AaA)* strategies, i.e., but also *Resiliency* strategies, i.e., [generalized capacities to cope with unforeseen, even unforeseeable, adversity](#). though protocols are easier to teach and develop, the unforeseen does the most serious damage. Resiliency -- strong core values, independence, organic structure, slack resources, -- resists simple algorithms. Rather, becoming resilient usually demands vigorous circumspection of contemporary theory, education and practice.

Attention to Opportunity: Crisis usually entails not only danger and vulnerability, but also **opportunity**. Indeed, opportunities arise *only* as a result of change. If nothing changes, nothing will change (you can quote me on that); at the other extreme, the best opportunities arise from the most extreme changes, i.e., crisis. The benefits of this perspective are transformative: CP ceases to be an expensive insurance policy and tiresome fire drills, but rather at central to *new business development*. Leaders no longer relegate CP to lower technical levels, but rather use it to understand change, threat and opportunity. Feeds directly into creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial initiatives throughout an organization.

### Other upcoming articles

- why CP is Job #1
- The Woeful State Of CM, RM, CP
- If humanity is to survive ...
- Organizational Resiliency: What it means, how to foster it.
- A Systems Approach to Crisis Preparedness & Organizational Resilience: To understand, cope and even thrive amidst crisis
- A Systems Approach to Crisis Preparedness & Organizational Resiliency: Shining Light on How to Understand, Cope and Even Thrive Amidst Crisis

## Some parting thoughts on Crisis

*Because of the unpredictability of the next crisis, public health infrastructure is the single most important way of preparing the nation. Paul S. Keim, speaking about the need to apply what was learned from the 2001 Anthrax and 9/11 crises in A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.<sup>12</sup>*

*"Faced with crisis, the man of character falls back on himself. He imposes his own stamp of action, takes responsibility for it, makes it his own." ~Charles de Gaulle*

*"Any kind of crisis can be good. It wakes you up." ~ Ryan Reynolds*

*"Crises ... force us to think." ~Jawaharlal Nehru*

*"Never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before." ~Rahm Emanuel*

*"There's always an opportunity with crisis. Just as it forces an individual to look inside himself, it forces a company to reexamine its policies and practices." ~Judy Smith*

*"Seeds of faith are always within us; sometimes it takes a crisis to nourish and encourage their growth." ~Susan L. Taylor, *Lessons in Living* (1995)*

*"Sometimes you need a little crisis to get your adrenaline flowing and help you realize your potential." ~Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle**

*"Maybe it did take a crisis to get to know yourself; maybe you needed to get whacked hard by life before you understood what you wanted out of it." ~Jodi Picoult, *Handle with Care**

*"The crisis is a period in which a ... body or system cannot live on as before and is obliged, on pain of death, to undergo transformations that will give it a new lease on life. Therefore, this period of crisis is a historical moment of danger and suspense during which the crucial decisions and transformations are made, which will determine the future..." ~André Gunder Frank*

*"[Martin Luther] King's response to our crisis can be put in one word: revolution. A revolution in our priorities, a reevaluation of our values, a reinvigoration of our public life and a fundamental*

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<sup>12</sup> Keim, Paul S. *Science*. "A Crisis Is a Terrible Thing to Waste." (2007): 396-397.

*transformation of our way of thinking and living ...” ~Cornel West*

*“Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.” ~Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom**

*“Crisis is a Messenger.” ~Bryant McGill*

*“Theology starts with a crisis, the very crisis of reality itself. The crisis is the fact that you live, that you have a life to live. ... The crisis is the very mystery of our existence and the yearning for there to be some kind of meaning to it.” ~Andrew Root*

*“A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” ~Multiple sources, including article title by Paul S. Keim in *Science* (2007)*