

Exposing Ourselves

There's a time-honored way to test whether a container is airtight: Coat it in soap and submerge it in water. The pressure will cause the air to escape, and you can see where the leaks and weak points are by following the bubbles.

COVID has put our entire society — in fact, the entire globe — deep underwater, subjecting all our institutions to remarkable pressure. The resulting social bubbles have been plentiful, and have revealed long-standing problems. These simmering issues would have come to the surface sooner or later, but by putting everything to the test at the same time, we have revealed which of our pre-pandemic institutions and practices were most precarious.

Where are the most noticeable leaks? Here is this author's highly subjective take on the issues that have blown the biggest bubbles. There isn't room to go in-depth here, just to summarize America's top fractures.

Education

Turns out, the most valued function of our school system is its role as babysitter. Educators were faced with that brutal revelation, as the need to get children out of the house — for the mental health, but also economic productivity of care-givers — seemed to outweigh concerns about immunological safety or actual education. Homeschooling had a huge boost, and many new homeschoolers realized that it's harder than it looks. A school teacher friend of mine told me, "I learned this year that America doesn't love its children. It just wants them out of the house." There are many great teachers in the system, and many great kids, who deserve more. And that starts with defining the mission of education. If it's really childcare, then let's acknowledge and deal with that and figure out a new way to approach educating as well. This is an entire industry that just got a reboot. Let's make the most of it.

Policing

I was raised in the '70s, when children (well, suburban ones, anyway) were trained, "If you're ever in trouble, find a police officer." They were portrayed as friendly do-gooders; the smiling guys on "CHIPS" would stop to rescue a kitten trapped in a tree. The kids I know today run from cops, thinking they'll be shot or choked. That old-time rosey picture was never really true — and the modern one certainly doesn't tell the full story either — but the current perception that the police are essentially at war is a perfect example of a conflict that became more openly evident amid the added emotional stress of a pandemic. Frustrations that have been there likely forever found new enthusiasm for expression in a landscape that seemed, for a while, to be the end of the world. The bottom line is that we need to find a way to protect our public and enforce laws, without it feeling like our police have declared war on their own citizens. Right now, there's a wide-ranging mandate for reform, which can be acted upon on a region-by-region basis. It's a lot of work, but now is the time when such efforts can be taken seriously, if we apply our collective will to not recreating the status quo.

Race relations

Is anyone really surprised that this tension was simmering beneath the surface, waiting to force itself out like in a modern Pompeii? Our country has generally acknowledged how broken it is on this matter

for centuries, and in the do-or-die atmosphere of the last year, it's become clear that there is a long way to go from where we are, and that issues of race are among our most hot-button issues. This is not something like education or healthcare where we can just tear down a system and try to put in a new one. These festering, multi-generational issues will need a prolonged, multi-generational repair plan.

Healthcare

We've all known these systems are horribly broken, but this crisis tested them most directly. Interestingly, it turns out that proper high-level motivation can produce effective results. High-level motivation, a sense of communal crisis, and funding enabled different parts of the system to develop and distribute vaccines countrywide. But there are front-line workers who will need years to get over the stress they've incurred this past year. Our healthcare system stood the test, proving that issues like equity and access, if not actually solved, are within our power to address if we really want to.

Social media

Too much time on your hands? Start obsessing over your favorite conspiracy or those idiots who just don't see your point of view. Under a crisis, everyone who knows how to fix the world seemed to become even more vocal and move further than ever from the center. Social media is horribly broken, but getting attention for it. There's also a generation working its way up that will be able to bring appropriate knowledge and experience to the problems social media has created. They won't be able to fix human nature. But they will be able to counter it with some serious coding.

Equity

Record growth in the stock market. Record unemployment at the same time. Conventional wisdom about what makes a healthy economy was upended this past year. The day-to-day economic confidence of your average person seems to have nothing to do with the meta-level indicators of prosperity. When times were good, the gap between rich and poor was growing. Now, in tough times, that gap is growing even more. How do we balance those books? This disconnect may be the most real challenge ahead of American society. We've seen very clearly that the fortunes of the folks on the ground level and the folks in the high towers are not as connected as we've been led to believe. They may not be connected at all. The idea from trickle-down days that what's good for one segment is good for the other seems to have crashed and burned in a really obvious way. Now what? Is there a way to tie together success for the few and success for the many? The bubbles escaping this leak are merging with and carrying almost all the others.

I'm not saying society doesn't have other urgent problems. From food allergies to modern mental health to environmental policy, there are many more rising crises in our world. But these are the ones that have bubbled to the top when the world went truly nuts, **the ones that might have simmered below the surface without the added catalyst that brought them to the top as our significant problem children.**

So, what do we do about it? We've proven that we can change the world in a remarkably short time when we're collectively motivated. We can take from the chaos of the last year a meta-level to-do list identifying the things that most need to be fixed.

Knowing your enemy is half the battle — or acknowledging a problem openly is the first step to fixing it (choose whether you follow Sun Tzu or AA). We have shown, throughout history, that when we are

collectively motivated, whether to go to the moon, to win a war or to take on a monster virus, our society can take on tremendous odds and persevere. Now is a chance to rebuild with an eye on what we want these societal constructs to be. They've been fractured. Their bureaucratic and societal momentum has been interrupted. Their flaws have been wildly exposed. Let's not let the approaching "return to normal" be a return to some of our dysfunction as well. It might be comforting to just go back to the way everything was, warts and all. But that would be a tragic waste of the unprecedented opportunities this experience has presented us, to tear down some detritus and make a "better new normal." Let's not plug the leaks. Let's make some new, less leaky stuff!

Stay tuned for our podcast series delving into each of these topics with local and national experts.