



Lasting scars of the pandemic

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Will we emerge from this pandemic both safe and sound?

In January 1998, a terrible storm battered the country's southeastern regions, sweeping across eastern Ontario all the way to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. For 2 days, layers of ice coated tree branches and power lines, causing them to collapse under the weight. Ottawa, Montreal, and the surrounding areas were especially affected. For weeks, millions of people were without electricity. In the dead of winter!

Those who lived it will remember. Everyone did what they could to escape, tried to find ways of staying warm, sought shelter elsewhere, and worried about food, being able to bathe, and taking care of other basic needs. Everyone ran around trying to find generators that had already been sold. Montreal verged on catastrophe, as its water treatment plant was left to the mercy of a single remaining power line. At the time, I lived in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, a neighbourhood known for its big, beautiful trees. The city looked like a nightmare come to life. At night, some neighbourhoods were plunged into total darkness, while others that had escaped the outages blazed brightly. This lasted for 3 weeks. And then, one night the electricity came back; as if by magic, as if it had been nothing but a bad dream. Finally! Hallelujah! Those who have lived through similar catastrophes, like the forest fires in Fort McMurray or spring floods, know what I am talking about. You never forget these times of crisis.

We will never forget COVID-19.

But compared to natural disasters, pandemics differ not only in magnitude of damage, but in the persistent uncertainties they engender. Natural disasters eventually pass—one day the water ceases to rise, fires die down and are extinguished, and electricity returns. But pandemics feel like they will never end. A second wave is announced, and then another after it; treatments prove ineffective; no one knows for certain whether a vaccine will ever be found. It is as though the threat is always lurking, omnipresent, omnipotent, and never ending.

It is not surprising that this pandemic has caused us so much fear.

Our fear has led us to take draconian measures. Everything was done to prevent the spread of the virus. Entire regions were placed under lockdown. Countries ground to a halt. Gatherings were banned. Elderly people

were forbidden from leaving their homes. Caregivers were told not to help their parents or loved ones. We kept children indoors, stayed away from friends, isolated partners not living under the same roof, prohibited grandparents from taking care of their grandchildren. Entire families were separated and divided. People were prohibited from seeing one another, speaking to one another, touching one another.

And what were the results?

In Quebec, the situation was horrible. At the time of writing, nearly 60 000 people were infected and approximately 6 000 had died. One of the worst performances on a global scale. Even though the lockdown and physical distancing measures were generally observed. The virus especially affected the elderly and those living in long-term care homes. Bedridden people left to fend for themselves, abandoned, dehydrated, starving, found lying in their own excrement. Personal support workers left unprotected, shunted from place to place by unscrupulous placement agencies; sent from hot zones to cold zones without regard for safety. Overwhelmed personal support workers, afraid, unprotected, abandoned ship. Politicians in the hot seat held daily press conferences, no longer knowing where to look, calling in the army as though we were at war, or calling in specialists to replace personal support workers. And the media and social media always omnipresent, inundating the airwaves with bad news.

And, above all, fear.

Fear of places. Of subways, buses, grocery stores. Fear of parks, benches, of anything that others might have touched.

Fear of others. The people we pass on the street. Those we do not know. Those not wearing masks. Those who are asymptomatic—we don't know, they might be contagious without even knowing it.

The fear of strangers, but also of relatives, cousins, brothers and sisters, children, partners that we have not seen in a long time. The fear of others. The fear of opening our arms. Of touching. Of shaking hands. Of kissing. Of loving. None of this is normal.

In comparison, the 1998 ice storm was nothing. This pandemic will have far greater repercussions than those caused by infection. While we might emerge safely from this pandemic, we might not find ourselves sound in the aftermath.

Shall we dream better (<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1714906/artistes-diversite-rever-mieux-daniel-belanger>)?



Cet article se trouve aussi en français à la page 547.