



The Potential in this Crisis

With the COVID-19 quarantine settling into some semblance of routine, I have been able to get outside for walks. It appears that I am not alone. We are no longer a society of leisure walkers. Our parks have bike paths, running paths and ball fields. They rarely have gardens designed for a stroll, in the nineteenth-century style. With all the new walkers in a town not built for them – many streets lack sidewalks – an etiquette emerges, primarily related to maintain social distance. I have also noticed something I never thought I would see. During my walks, fellow pedestrians are waving and offering greetings. Not reluctantly, but they – we – seem to be looking up for the opportunity. They glance, catching eyes in a way that normally would be awkward and yet now feels right. Strangely, to ignore the silent, socially-distanced outreach would be the uncivil thing to do. Awkward now is to look down, avoid the outreach, and to stray from being human and trusting. Somehow in all this eerily evolving routine, Covid-19 highlights the evolutionary edge of personal sacrifice and the instinct to trust that underpins it. Trust is survival. In a small way my walks are a window into that human truth.

Evidence for human evolution is often studied through the prism of natural selection and how it survived the extinction of one species to survive in the next, presumably more fit species. For example, larger brains demonstrate greater intelligence which are an advantage. Therefore, modern humans have larger brains than earlier, less evolved hominids, such as Neanderthals and Homo-Erectus. The same should be true for instincts, with the better ones surviving extinction. It is fair to say that trust is an advantageous instinct. The humans whose instincts were to trust and engage peacefully are the ones who survived and whose genes live on, rather than those whose instincts were to distrust and engage in violence. We are the descendants of the self-sacrificing and trusting, proverbially if not for real.

When prehistoric human bands came into contact with each other, they were faced with a similar conundrum as we do in the new and novel Covid-19 pedestrian class. We see each other coming toward one another, and we cannot look down and pretend the other does not exist. Like our prehistoric forebearers, we can engage positively with a wave and a greeting or we can be perceived as somehow uncivil. Just as most people today respond positively, so did our ancestors on the savannahs and from the caves. We do not descend from the untrusting ones who avoided other humans, or worse, acted out violently. We descend from those who took that risk to be trusting. We descend from those humans who put their necks out in trust and were rewarded with the fruits of human collaboration. Way more often than not, that was and is the case. The untrusting have neither the advantage of collaboration nor of numbers. With every confrontation, the untrusting group remains similar in size or shrinks from violence. The trusting humans are only at risk when confronted with the untrusting. That risk was and is overcome by the advantages of collaboration and trust.

When I walk around my town, I realize that I too actually want to say hello and offer greetings. I realize that looking down and pretending that I am alone is unnatural. Because I am not alone. Being alone is in itself unnatural. It is most natural to the human condition to

collaborate and to traverse down paths of trust. When our usual outlets for trust and collaboration are limited, some of us find nibbles and reminders in the small wave on a stroll. COVID-19 reminds us that trust and potential collaboration are ubiquitous in ways we never could have known. We should remember the potential we see in crisis during better times when it could be unleashed to pursue great human things rather than preserve basic civility. If only we have the courage to reach out and to trust then as we do now.