

There will be no return to a pre-COVID world; it has changed forever

By Peter Comensoli

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Victorians have been in exile from the homeland of our humanity for six months now. Throughout this exile, hope has been hard to come by as fear, fatigue and frustration have taken hold. Now, a way out of captivity has been set before us. Every Victorian has an interest in the government's road map towards a "COVID-normal" destination. But what do we actually want that destination to look like, and how might it shape the road ahead?

There will be no return to a pre-COVID world; it has changed forever. Rather than lament this loss, might we be facing a great opportunity? What is the world we want to build? Is our objective a society that is fair, truthful and merciful; prosperous and generous; democratic and transparent? Or one that is anxious and argumentative; uncivil and individualistic; competitive and selfish? Will every life matter? What are our priorities as we take the next steps?

People of faith have deep resources to share here. While the voice of religious communities has gone largely unheeded in recent years, at this time of great fear it turns out religious people are motivated by something positive and inspirational. In the middle of lockdown, and cut off from all kinds of human sources of inspiration, people of faith draw on something that does not depend entirely on other people. It might be unfashionable to say, but God has been helpful to lots of Victorians in 2020.

All God's people – whether believers or not – are my friends and fellow pilgrims on the journey ahead. From my Christian faith, this is a road that offers a horizon of hope and wellness. Some friends on this road have been lonely and isolated this year. Some of them have had a hard time stuck in high-rise public housing. Some have faced death and sickness apart from loved ones, and cried at a funeral without the tender presence of their nearest and dearest. Talking with our friends on the phone and via Zoom has been helpful. But all of them tell me that it's God who has made all the difference.

Right now, we can't physically gather in our churches, synagogues, mosques or temples. I want our doors to be open; they should be open for the life-giving nourishment and healing offered there. We will do so safely and carefully, but we need to be open so as to gather as friends with the God who loves us.

The great challenge emerging is not how to keep people at home, but how to encourage them to interact fruitfully in the new context. Restoring social contact and connection, especially for the elderly and vulnerable, while practising physical distancing, is a key part of any path ahead. Finding the balance between protecting lives and livelihoods is also a measure of the treatment of every human life. Reaching for a "COVID-normal" must mean reaching for the common good, where no one is left behind and a place is found for everyone.

Both prayer and play are deeply humanising realities. Work and the care of others are good for humans. Families, who have had to work, live and be schooled at the kitchen table for months, have had to rediscover the best and the worst of themselves. The family – in all its nuances and challenges, griefs and joys – remains the fundamental pillar and source of order in human society. We neglect the family at our peril.

Family, religion, work, education, care and leisure: these should be our first and foundational priorities, the human measures upon which our pathway forward ought to be framed. The humanity behind the data cannot be neglected as we emerge from captivity. Each step along our path from exile must be taken in personal and civilising ways.

If these good things aren't part of the horizon before us, then we are creating much trouble for ourselves. I, for one, will work so that our journey out of exile is oriented towards this humanising horizon. And like many of my friends facing the hard realities of this year, I'll be placing my hope in the tender closeness of God who is accompanying us on the road ahead.

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