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The Federation's Pages

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Should we still talk about crisis?

The word "crisis" is omnipresent in today's discourse. There is the COVID-crisis, the climate crisis, the Ukraine war crisis, the hunger crisis, and many more. The feeling of an extraordinarily uncertain and threatening future permeates public sentiment. Some use the word "polycrisea" to describe this state of affairs.

The word "crisis", derived from ancient Greek, has had several meanings over the centuries, including decision, separation, test, and result. Current definitions hold that a crisis represents a "time of great disagreement, confusion or suffering; an extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation." (Cambridge Dictionary). Similarly, the Oxford Dictionary describes crisis as "a time of intense difficulty or danger."

Today, it is common to view crises as discrete events with defined beginnings and endings. Such views come with pitfalls.

First, crises frequently occur simultaneously, and often concurrently with events of significant global importance. This is not new. In 1961, wars raged in Angola, Eritrea, and Vietnam to name a few; the Berlin wall was under construction; the USSR was testing nuclear weapons; Yuri Gagarin became the first man in space; and Fidel Castro declared Cuba a socialist state. The cold war was at its hottest phase, with a third world war in easy reach of imagination. 1961 also marked the year John F Kennedy was sworn in President of the United States.

Second, many crises have only an apparent beginning point. If seriously researched, the root causes and events leading to a given 'crisis' usually long predate

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it. The same logic applies for the apparent end of a crisis. The political, societal, cultural, and other sequelae of a crisis are often broader than our understanding of it, and only years or decades hence become visible to historians.

Third, one crisis may coincide with another, amplifying the effects of both and creating new, complex, and deleterious dynamics. The nexus of climate change and COVID exemplifies such syndemic crises.

Why is it that our contemporary mindset and the systems it creates operate according to the 'beginning and ending' model? Where does this come from? The Bible's alpha and omega may offer some understanding. Christianity conceptualizes human life on this basis; other religions have varied conceptual approaches.

If a pandemic must have a beginning and an end, then the far-reaching root causes and the even more distant consequences will not be understood. The links between assumed independent phenomena will be lost. A pandemic's effects and broader long-term implications will either be missed altogether or, if seen, not understood. This, in turn, will render difficult society's efforts to prepare for future crises.

The beginning-ending conceptual basis naturally calls for business models that require direct returns (ends) on investment (beginnings). This runs contrary to broader systems thinking approaches that often do not fit into the beginning-ending paradigm. Moving beyond the alpha and omega conceptual basis will enable us to embrace better the flow of events and their simultaneousness. It will enable us to cease counting crises, and to begin understanding them (and framing our responses) as elements of a continuum.

Speed constitutes a relatively recent complicating factor in crises. The pace with which crises become global is faster than, for example, in mediaeval times. The Black Death took decades to eradicate over 50% of the European population. The consequences for society were far-reaching, and not all, such as the abolition of serfdom, were understood to have roots in this health tragedy. Moreover, it took years for the bacterium Yersinia pestis to travel along the trade routes from Asia to Europe. The very first DNA plasmids of Yersinia pestis were detected in the teeth of seven Bronze Age individuals in Siberia, Estonia, Russia, Poland, and Sweden as far back as 6000 years ago. These were all from hunter-gatherer cultures. Trade networks were proposed as the likely avenue of spread rather than migrations of populations; yet genetic changes that made the disease highly virulent did not occur until about 4000 years ago. Today, modern transportation and the extensive global trading system enable genetic changes to occur in months.

The speed of information in today's world exerts both positive and negative effects on crises. The WHO has called COVID the first pandemic to be accompanied by an infodemic. Information—both true and false—spreads over the internet at light speed, instantly fueling our reactions to real or perceived dangers. The wish for predictability, security, and stability is widespread and human. It is also desirable from a political standpoint, as stable societies are more productive and more peaceful.

Speed, in turn, is relatively perceived. The advent of new technologies such as the steam train or the telephone produced angst inducing for many people. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, many considered as outlandish the use of telephone and telegraph instead of letters. Such broad societal changes affect

different people in different manners, according to multiple factors including one's education, socioeconomic class, and even personality type. Today, some use social media in a wise and judicious manner; others develop unhealthy addictions to it; and yet others view it as an intrusion. There is no such thing as neutral technology. New ways of doing things always carry with them consequences for society as a whole.

Nevertheless, situations that qualify as crises per today's definition (a time of difficulty and danger) are a present-day constant and will increase in the years to come. 'Handling' crises one after the other is not an effective long-term strategy. Nor is the stated goal of getting 'back to normal'. Moving back to an earlier 'normal' time is simply not possible, and 'normal'—when we attempt to define it—turns out to be a constantly changing state. The belief that we can deal with and resolve crises one by one is an illusion.

So how should we deal with crisis? What is the alternative to a 'back to normal' strategy?

Can we think of a catharsis moment? As with crisis moments in history, many now seek a single point in time that will clear up the current situation—the 'catharsis' of the ancient Greek tragedies. Catharses clear the air, enabling society's renewal. The German Youth Movement of the first third of the twentieth century may offer one example of a group seeking a catharsis. The quest for such moments frequently rests on antithesis thinking—'good' (nature) versus 'bad' (technology)—and a physis-thesis dualism anchored in the hope of an all-encompassing resolution. This hope not infrequently seeks one individual, the *deus ex machina*, who brings deliverance. Yet in reality, neither catharsis moments nor a single individual can affect instant, pivotal change. Fundamental change requires the efforts of our whole society, where individuals take steps to adapt to new realities. Positive, conscientious, and patient adaptation will prove salutary in the long run.

Flexibility and adaptability must be central to effective crisis response—this holds true at the individual and societal levels. For the individual this is a permanent learning process. For the international community the challenge is far more complex.

The freedom to think different in ways, and the creativity of each and every one, also stand out as essential to any response. These days the WHO International negotiating board is working towards establishment of a pandemic treaty or equivalent instrument to enable effective international response to future pandemics. The WHO's 194 member states, plus myriad stakeholders, have been working at this task since the beginning of 2022. Any future treaty or global instrument must have inbuilt flexibility, as well as a mechanism that allows for adaptation of its regulations as times and circumstances evolve. Only flexibility and the ability to adapt can guarantee stability.

The ancient Greek meaning of 'crisis' should be our guiding principle—decisions must be taken, analyses must lead to action and results. We must abandon the current *modus operandi* of approaching crises as discrete events with discrete solutions, and instead embrace diversity of thought, flexibility, and adaptability as leading principles in responding to complex and interlinked (in both time and space) global challenges.

Should we still talk about 'crisis'? If we understand the term in its positive, proactive way, in the ancient Greek meaning, we can do so, while keeping in mind the flow of events that we are subject to, and act upon, simultaneously.

The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin wrote a hymn called *Pathos*. There we find the sentence: "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch," as we try to translate it: "Where danger lies, so also grows salvation."

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