

Love Without Limits

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“Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.”

So says Albert Camus in his novel *The Plague*. Who would have guessed back in January that unemployment would soar to levels not seen since the Great Depression, that concerts and festivals would be cancelled or that a trip to the grocery store would be considered dangerous? The world has changed in ways that would have been unimaginable not long ago. As Camus says, we were taken by surprise. If we'd been better students of history, we might have forecast at least some of it.

The city of Oran, a rather unromantic shipping port in Algeria, is the setting for Camus' tale. Its ordinariness is the town's only distinguishing characteristic. The landscape is unlovely, the architecture uninspired. It is, Camus says, a place of “dust, pebbles and heat,” the citizens are industrious but unimaginative. Few of them suspected their lives were about to change.

In the beginning, it was easy to blame the victim. “You knew Camps, didn't you?” asks one streetcar conductor to another.

“Camps?” A tall chap with a black mustache?”

“That’s him, a switchman.”

“Ah yes, I remember now.”

“Well, he’s dead.”

“Oh, when did he die?”

“After that business with the rats.”

“You don’t say so! What did he die of?”

“I couldn’t say exactly. Some kind of fever. Of course, he never was what you might call fit.”

“Still, he didn’t look that different from other people.”

“I wouldn’t say that. He had a weak chest and he used to play the trombone in the town band. It’s hard on the lungs, blowing a trombone.”

“Ah, if you’ve got weak lungs, it don’t do you any good, blowing on a big instrument like that.”

What possessed a man to engage in such a dangerous activity remains a mystery, as the narrator ironically comments. But by distinguishing their own sensible behavior from that of their less fortunate neighbors, many of those unafflicted managed to perpetuate an illusion of their own immunity. So we heard, early on, that covid-19 was a hoax, or a political ploy, or a Chinese virus that could never reach these distant shores. We were different. Special. Protected.

But when the death toll rose and continued to rise, it became impossible to sustain the denial. So other stratagems were employed. Father Paneloux, for instance, uses the Week of Prayer to suggest the plague is God’s scourge, a punishment for sin. “Calamity has come on you, my brethren,”

he intones from the pulpit, “and my brethren, you deserved it.” Religion has always been used to justify havoc, as with Franklin Graham, advisor to the President who blames the current scourge on abortion and gay marriage, Americans turning away from God. But as the ravages of the epidemic become increasingly indiscriminate, affecting rich and poor, young and old, even Father Paneloux begins to waver in his faith. Plague began to seem less like a divine plan than the negation of any plan, a senseless assault on every human value.

Camus was no stranger to the arbitrary nature of life and death. His father, an infantryman, perished after being shelled in the Battle of the Marne, leaving the infant Albert to be raised by his mother, eking out a living as a cleaning woman in Algiers. Despite the poverty of his upbringing, the young Camus distinguished himself as a scholar and athlete, but contracted tuberculosis in his seventeenth year that condemned him to a lifetime of spitting blood. It was for his lungs that he left Africa and traveled to the mountains of France for the uncontaminated air, but unluckily left just as the Nazis laid down their occupation, separating him from his wife and forcing him into unexpected exile. Only by subterfuge could he continue his medical treatments, since his doctor, a Jew, was forbidden to practice under the regulations of the Vichy regime in France. In this climate of encroaching darkness, Camus began work on his novel.

Le Peste, the plague, stands not for any single malady but for all the blind and brute forces that frustrate human hopes and rob people of their dignity. Fascism, war, poverty, stupidity and ethnic hatred--these were forms of plague with which Camus was quite familiar. All that dehumanizes and

objectifies our neighbor, the walls of indifference and disregard that anesthetize us to the misfortune of others--these are the breeding grounds of the disease in which the unwholesome germs grow and flourish.

The small mountain village where Camus lived in France was called Le Chambon. Although he didn't realize it at the time, Le Chambon was an enclave of Christian resistance to Nazi rule, where hundreds of Jews were sheltered and hidden under the guidance of the local Protestant pastor. For quite different reasons, Camus was also a resistor, editing the underground newspaper *Combat* even as he worked on his novel. But while Camus wielded his pen against the Nazis, he refused to wield a gun, for the same reason he refused to condone the execution of war criminals after Nuremburg--in his essay *Reflections on the Guillotine* condemning capital punishment as state-sponsored murder, pre-meditated and cold-blooded. "The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance," he wrote in *The Plague*, "the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill."

Killing would never seem right to Camus: death in all its disguises--whether the work of lowly microbes or men who justified their carnage in the name of a higher cause--would always remain the enemy, the eternal foe. When Dr. Rieux, the protagonist of Camus' novel who spends himself tirelessly to fight the plague, is asked why he persists in his struggle to cure and heal and comfort rather than succumbing to the fatalism or escapism of his peers, he searches for an adequate answer. Not to serve God, for the doctor finds it hard to believe in a higher power in a world where plagues

exist. Not because he believes he can finally rid the world of suffering or win a lasting triumph against disease. As a physician, he realizes that his work is never finished. All cures are temporary. “Only,” he says, “I’ve never managed to get used to seeing people die. That’s all I know.”

That may be enough, the saving grace that saves some scrap of humanity. So long as we can feel touched and diminished by the death of another--known or unknown--a shred of decency remains. This is what Camus called “love without limits,” leaving our hearts open to a commonality that knows no barriers of geography, race, class or creed.

And yet compassion fatigue is a reality. It may not be possible to care personally for every victim. Exhaustion sets in. Camus describes how, after months of being locked down in quarantine from the outside world, the citizens of the walled city of Oran were slowly worn down, especially as the holidays drew near. “Christmas that year had none of its old-time associations,” he notes. “In churches there were more supplications than carols. You saw a few children, too young to realize what threatened them, playing in the frosty, cheerless streets. But no one dared to bid them welcome in the God of former days, bringer of gifts ... There was no room in any heart but for a very old, gray hope, a dogged will to live.”

Yet doggedness--the survival instinct--prevails, the plague ultimately subsides and, after the war, Camus returned to the land of his youth, but he found the world had changed. He had changed, too, from a young man into someone and something else. In his essay *Return to Tipasa*, he recalled the dank, dampness of Algiers in December, not the luminous city

he remembered. He haunted cafes where the faces looked familiar, filled with people he'd once recognized but had forgotten, their expressions now more careworn and beaten down, just like his own. "To be sure, it is sheer madness, almost always punished, to return to the sites of one's youth and try to relive at forty what one loved or keenly enjoyed at twenty," he remarks.

Yet still he made the attempt. He returned to Tipasa, his hometown, which lay some kilometers away from the big city, an old place. A Carthaginian port before falling to the Roman legions, it's now a World Heritage Site, where the ruins of ancient baths with their colonnades and theaters and basilicas reach down to the turquoise sea. So despite the poverty of his childhood, Camus says, he had been "brought up surrounded by beauty which was my only wealth, I had begun in plenty. Then had come the barbed wire--I mean tyrannies, war, police forces, the era of revolt." Resistance had been his life, but it had drained his spirit.

Fighting cruelty and injustice was not enough, he discovered. Even morality was not enough. One needed awe and admiration, too. One needed beauty. He realized, "To come alive again, one needs a special grace, self-forgetfulness, or a homeland. Certain mornings, on turning a corner, a delightful dew falls on the heart and then evaporates. But its coolness remains, and this is what the heart requires always."

I discovered once more at Tipasa that one must keep intact in oneself a freshness, a cool wellspring of joy, love the day that escapes injustice, and return to combat having won that light. Here I

recaptured the former beauty, a young sky, and I measured my luck, realizing at last that in the worst years of our madness the memory of that sky had never left me. This was what in the end had kept me from despairing. I had always known that the ruins of Tipasa were younger than our new constructions or our bomb damage. There the world began over again every day in an ever new light. O light! This is the cry of all the characters of ancient drama brought face to face with their fate. This last resort was ours, too, and I knew it now. In the middle of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer.

May we too soon find our way back home and into the summer's light.