

The Memory of Social Crises

By Kazumasa Kusaka

Our societies and governments are in the midst of a storm in coping with the coronavirus pandemic. In 2003, the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 1, sister of the current SARS CoV-2, emerged as a benchmark threatening human life. Now, as the current situation worsens, the plague of the Middle Ages and the Spanish Flu of a century ago are also being invoked.

“The pestilence, as the Tribunal of Health had feared, did enter the Milanese with the German troops. It is also known that it was not limited to that territory, but that it spread over and desolated a great part of Italy...” This is part of a letter the principal of Volta High School in Milan, Professor Domenico Squillace, wrote to his students in February quoting from Alessandro Manzoni’s 1827 novel *The Betrothed* which includes a description of the plague that hit Milan in 1630.

The principal wrote that everything we are experiencing now has happened before in history and the risk is the poisoning of social life and human relationships by looking at our fellow citizens as threats. The speed with which a disease can move is faster now, but there are no walls that can stop it. He urges students to go for a walk and read a good book with the aim of preserving our most precious asset – our social fabric, our humanity.

Some good books worth reading tell us that the kind of pandemic we are experiencing now is certainly not the first to have hit mankind. Albert Camus set his novel *The Plague* (1947) against the background of an epidemic sweeping the French Algerian town of Oran. Centuries earlier, in *Hōjōki (An Account of My Hut or The Ten Foot Square Hut)* written in 1212, Kamo-no-Chōmei, a Japanese poet and essayist, looked back at those who had been affected by natural disasters in his era such as fires, epidemics, famines, and earthquakes. More recently, in *Economics of Good and Evil* (2011), Tomas Sedlacek discusses Gilgamesh and the Old Testament records of disasters. These and many other works show how literature can play a role in passing on memories of the past to the next generations. Even myths were originally passed down as an oral tradition by storytellers before documentation was introduced.

A century ago, about 30% of the world’s population became infected by Spanish Flu, which claimed up to 50 million lives worldwide. In Japan half a million lives were lost. All Japanese schools were closed, and the measures advised were identical to the current measures against the coronavirus, such as wearing

masks and avoiding gathering in groups. In the end, it was herd immunity that stopped the pandemic. But the group mentality that sought to forget the distressing experience prevailed and there was no cautionary documentation to enlighten future generations.

Crises are not limited to the threat to lives. In the area of economic and financial crises, not only the two oil crises of the 1970s but also the recent 2008 Lehman Shock now belong to history for younger journalists, politicians and professionals in the business community. They seem to have no personal memory! If such crises are labeled as a once in a century event, the public will not recognize the dangers of unfolding situations. The span of half a generation, i.e. about 30 years, is long enough for society and organizations to lose their institutional memory. The main reason the second oil shock in 1979 did not cause such economic and social panic was not the preparedness of policy measures, but the fact that people remembered it was their hoarding that had caused the disappearance of toilet paper from not only the store shelves but also factory warehouses in the first oil shock in 1973, and that without such panicky behavior there would have been abundant supply, and so there was no need for consumers to rush to hoard it again. Generations who experience crises have an obligation to pass on stories of the disasters.

It could take not months but perhaps up to three years to weather this coronavirus storm if it requires herd immunity to end the pandemic. The risks would then include destruction of supply chains, high unemployment, and a 20-30% reduction in GDP.

Because the coronavirus has taken top priority in domestic politics, “my country first” is now the mindset that has led to countries closing their borders, except for international cooperation to develop new medicines. We should learn from the wisdom shown at the time of the oil crisis when the international cooperation framework of the G7 was created to pursue a common agenda. The agenda now includes development of a coronavirus medicine for a cure, as well as a vaccine, new medical equipment, and human resource development, and finally to accelerate post-pandemic recovery, social infrastructure provision and other demand creation, regionally and globally.

Kazumasa Kusaka is chairman and CEO of the Japan Economic Foundation (JEF), as well as being a professor of public policy at the University of Tokyo. He previously served as special advisor to the prime minister on global warming after having been vice minister for international affairs at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.