

The pandemic as “a portal between different worlds”

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The starting point for this Collective memory work was solidarity and how this is actualized or put out of play during the covid-19 pandemic. Our group consisted of four women in the ages 50-79 years and originated/positioned in Europe, Asia, Australia. We began to dig into the main conflict we experienced around solidarity, between participating in demonstrations in solidarity with #blacklivesmatter, and distancing ourselves in solidarity with all risk groups for covid-19. There was a contradiction between our own comfort and sense of solidarity and the wider injustice of racism and the discrimination based on race and class. One group's right to breathe stands in opposition to another group's right to breathe.

As a trigger word for our memory pieces, we therefore used George Floyd's last words: “ I can't breathe.” With this in mind we described two memories, one a positive memory, and the other a more unpleasant one.

After discussion these memories, we felt an urge to go deeper into the concept of solidarity, and in our last memory pieces we described how we encounter solidarity in our everyday life.

We have become acutely aware that when Covid-19 was declared a pandemic on 12th March 2020, it not only unleashed a wave of sickness and death, but in the process exposed inequality, prejudice and discrimination experienced by minorities who in many countries were the indigenous peoples of the country they live in as well as refugees and immigrants. People who are poor, homeless, disabled and dispossessed were also experiencing discrimination, and a greater vulnerability to Covid-19.

We have also become more acutely aware of the contradictions between our own personal comfort and the wider fear and hardship around us. We felt more sharply the joys that were enhanced by our experience, especially the comforting presence of nature, and the value of our human connections with friends and family. But we also felt more sharply our own anxieties, the social distancing that alienates us from friends and family, and the terrible injustices made visible. We began to question the solidarity we wanted to feel. “We are all in this together” except when we are not.

The following image provides a summary of our texts and discussion, and our conceptualization of how these are connected.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

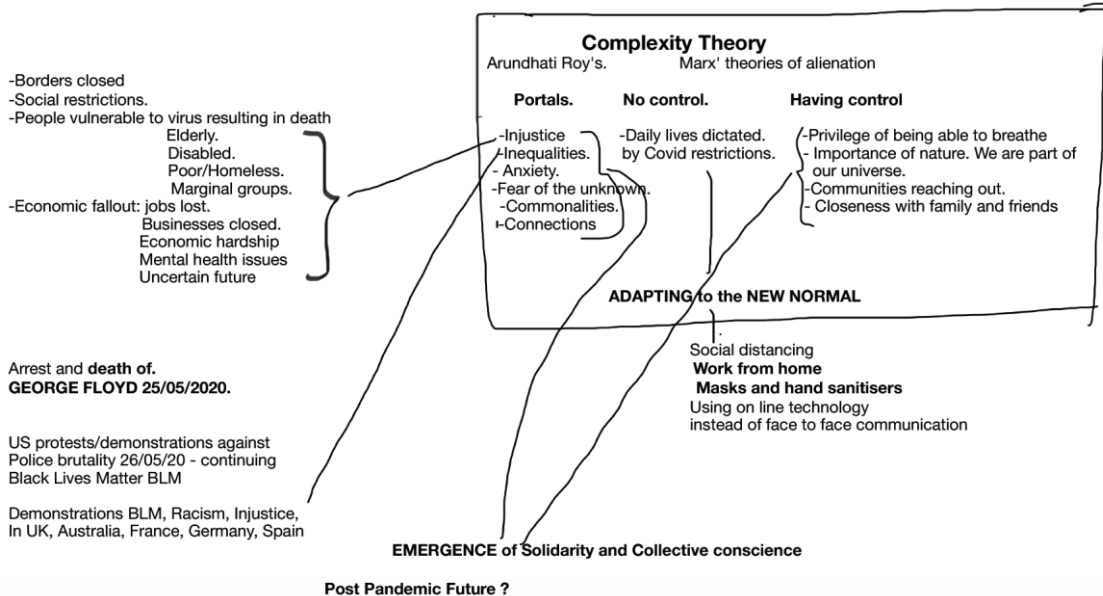
12/03/2020-

MEMORY WORK GROUP 4

(Jenny, Karin, Nita, Trees)

"I can't breathe"

Theories&Themes emerging from texts/discussions/reflections



Solidarity as the normal

Our last and first question is about solidarity. What is it really? Where is it. While trying to grasp it through memory pieces, we realized that its actually something fundamental, something we take for granted. Without it, without trust, empathy, love, there is no society. Solidarity as an essential condition for humanity.

“all stood in solidarity
each meaningless without the other
a moment
incomplete without the other “

Solidarity can be expressed in our daily contact with strangers as we walk through the park or just around the block. During these special circumstances of covid-19 we maybe smile more, engage in light conversation, and realize that we are together in our individual isolation. We offer kind words of comfort, small acts of kindness. We cannot hug our grandchildren and friends but we can call and text and show our concern for each other. We can't directly help those in intensive care at hospitals, but we as a collective can adjust to the situation, care about each other through our small acts of solidarity, just by keeping distance. Like how people carefully interact in the public space.

“On the subway people were sitting with distance, the informal rule seemed to be one company on every set of two pairs of chairs facing each other. The remaining people standing picked places 1-1,5 meters away from each other. She had seen no signs or heard other recommendations on this way of behavior and was amazed that everyone seemed to have figured out the same system.”

This is a quiet solidarity, largely unsung, but a very effective base for dealing with the pandemic crisis. We were separated but with a shared understanding of friendship. We also seem to be returning to a more peaceful lifestyle, while creating new ways of being part of the community. In some places local organizations have emerged recently to encourage people who live in the neighborhood to connect with each other.

Emma downloaded the Nextdoor app on her phone and soon received greetings and messages of welcome from people who live around her. A lady wrote 'Say Hi when you see me walk past with my two yellow Labradors. I'd love to get to know you'. Another posted 'Is anyone interested to go bushwalking on Sunday mornings?' And 'I can help do the shopping for you'. 'I can walk your dog'. 'My daughter is making cloth masks. She accepts orders'. 'Does anyone know a reliable gardener?'. 'I'm giving away a small fridge' and so on, and so on.

Neighbors invite each other to join walking groups and book clubs, offer their unwanted goods free of charge and share information about reliable trades people and handymen. Actions such as these indicate that there is a sense of solidarity within communities. There is a willingness to regard the lives and safety of fellow human beings as equal to our own. Religious and community organizations have pulled together and offer food and support to those in need. This is solidarity, this is normal.

The new normal: anxiety, adaption, emergence

Another theme is the *new normal*, marked by anxiety, where old patterns are challenged. The pandemic clearly points out the structural inequalities between different groups, classes, continents. At the peak of the pandemic, the city centres are almost desolate, those who remain out on the streets are those who have nowhere else to go. Those that usually are in the periphery are suddenly a majority in the city's outdoor spaces. Home quarantine requires a home. We, the authors of this text, all have homes. Now they are also our offices.

Stuck in our homes we rely much more on online communication, and tools like Zoom in combination with the pandemic sometimes creates an unexpected intimacy. You stare at these tiny moving portraits of people in their home environment, and phrases such as "how are you" or "hope you are well" aren't empty phrases any more. Everyone is happy to share all the details of their sore throat.

This intimacy, sharing personal environments and bodily sensations, also points out the differences. When meeting outside neutral offices, we encounter personal home environments, filled with strange colours, sounds and animals. We became aware of the differences in our group, geographically, historically, socially. Even if we believe this virus unites us, it also reveals the differences in our realities, differences that aren't that obvious when meeting at international conferences, represented by our titles.

Even as we share the experience of the Pandemic with the whole of society, this doesn't automatically lead to solidarity. Instead we hide indoors if we have a home, and focus on our individual health and happiness, facing the risk and anxiety of our own death in isolation.

The words 'fear', 'anxiety' and 'stress' did not appear in any of our written memories. Nevertheless the emotion that these words convey were woven throughout our writings. We described what we did and saw and heard and smelled and felt, but reading through our

memories. one can feel the sense of unease, of not being completely comfortable, of being on edge. It is a feeling of uneasiness, nervousness and anxiety in all of us. A perplexity about how this pandemic has suddenly changed our daily lives. Our worlds have changed and we're unsure as to how to handle this. We're doing our best and adapt to our new circumstances by making new routines so as to normalise what is quite abnormal for us. We keep hand sanitizers in our handbags, wear masks, maintain a distance of 1.5 meters from our friends, and refrain from visiting crowded places. We participate in meetings and concerts on line instead of attending in person, we cancel dinner parties, holidays etc. It is a bit like the first scene in a horror movie, where subtle details reveal that not everything is alright and that what will follow might turn into something unexpected and horrifying.

In a memory of a happy day planning for a dinner that eventually got canceled due to covid-19, the author seems to be in control and active, but something hindered her plans, showing that in reality she might not be in total control, and that a situation she takes for granted can change quickly.

“Back home, she has to lay down on the couch as she got unusually tired after the walk. As she laid there, she clearly felt the shape of her lungs. It didn't hurt, she could breathe, but she was aware of the contours of this organ and how the lungs moved with her breathing. She got a text from one of the friends coming over for dinner, her friend has a slight cold and due to the corona situation, she might not come as she didn't think it was to ok to go on public transportation with a cold. Too bad she thinks, she hasn't seen this friend in a while, and she is a bit surprised by her friend's sudden concern, she usually isn't afraid of a small cold.”

The kind of racism that is laid bare by covid-19, also feels like a horror movie. In one memory when shopping for toilet paper, the author becomes acutely aware of a perception, a stereotype of a Chinese hoarding toilet paper. The racism is subtle, and maybe only in the author's imagination, but still it is very much there, and it affects us all.

“As Emma rounded the corner where the tissues and packets of toilet paper were kept, she spotted one lonely packet of toilet paper on top of three rows of empty shelves. As she put the last packet of 6 in her trolley, Emma noticed that a few customers turned their heads and watched her. She was aware of a video that had gone viral on social media of an Asian man running in and out of a supermarket buying up toilet paper. She also heard in the news on television that people from Chinese descent have been abused and harasses during this time. Emma felt her heart thumping away and willed herself to breathe calmly as she stared straight ahead and walked with unseeing eyes to the checkout.”

Covid 19 fear reveals racism where we didn't expect it. Racism is quite banal sometimes, when it is about fear of the un-known, people that do not mirror you become a threat. The crisis reveals our deepest fears and long forgotten biases. And, as we pointed out in one of our discussions, this basic fear of what doesn't look familiar, reproduces structural discrimination that is embedded in the foundation of our societies.

The phrase, “the new normal” is a kind of mantra to convince ourselves that we are coping maybe, or should be. A kind of “this is the new reality and it’s not going away...so get over it”. There is an increasing focus in the public dialogue about concern for mental health, especially during second wave spikes and repeated lockdowns. There is more public anger, more struggles to reopen the economy.

Complexity theory

The new normal is describing the process of *emergence* a key concept in complexity theory. Indeed it is an apt description of our own memory work process. We describe our own pain, the loss of routine, the anxiety, the threat of the unknown. We then reflect on our experience, search for and find deeper meaning. Some of this reflection lead to a heightened awareness of the injustices in our societies.

“Calling, cajoling, coaxing all she knew in high-places
...Courts set up an investigation committee
Matters set in motion by
A Covid19 survivor”

Some of it lead to a new consciousness of our own good fortune, of the healing properties of nature, of the sanctity of life giving breath. We are left with many unresolved questions: how to redefine friendships, how to heal nature, how to support each other, how to earn a living, how to restore social justice.

There is a sharper awareness.

“To understand the breath
The very essence of life
‘Prana’ my breath”

Complexity theory dismisses the standards of old science, as reductionist, unable to respond to the reality of today’s problems. Rather than tracing a linear process of causality, complexity theory seeks to identify the myriad interacting conditions together with the myriad decision making of individuals and collective groups of people. Current events constantly emerge out of this interaction, a co-creation of people and external conditions. The process has no finite ending. It can lead to destructive outcomes, but also to personal growth and new societal patterns to support greater fairness. Through a process of disruption, anxiety, reflection, of finding new positives and adopting new practices.

Without control or having control

“One of the first things I thought when I heard of a lockdown was--
Oh gosh! This means all 4 of us will be in the house 24/7...This was going to be the end of us.”

Another theme that emerged was the contradiction in the texts between *situations of control*; of being a determined individual in one's own context acting in the world, and with *situations without control*; then we are stereotyped, de-individualized and have to submit to a larger system we cannot influence.

This dichotomy corresponds with Marx's theories of alienation, which put humans’ control over their own conditions as an ideal, and this control as an expression and means of self-realization:

control or in direct relation with oneself and others, to be a special and creative person, someone who is not interchangeable. To have direct contact with your own life conditions. The opposite of this relational individual, is an interchangeable pre-programmed and un-creative person, alienated from itself and its fellow human beings, alienated in relation to its living conditions: at best a piece in the machinery.

Without control: stereotyped, de-individualized, out of breath

An example of losing control over your own narrative, being stereotyped and therefore de-individualized is in the memory of buying toilet paper (above), where the main character experiences a notion of racial profiling, suddenly fearing people categorizing and judging her as “Asian”.

In another memory piece we found another example of being de-individualized, and categorized, not as race but as old, and therefore treated as potentially sick and in need of care (rather than being an actor with multiple capabilities),

“Then news of a planned demonstration in Sydney. It was lockdown. People, especially those over 70, like Jo, were told not to leave the house. It was too dangerous. The authorities tried to ban the proposed demonstration for health reasons.”

Ultimately, this is what covid-19 does, we lose control, we can’t breathe without assistance, we are no longer in charge, as expressed in the same piece:

“Jo remembered a documentary on Covid 19 and how it causes death. Apparently, in the final stages, it effects the lungs, which is why there was a desperate call for ventilators for hospital intensive care units. The person may still breathe, but the carbon dioxide is no longer expelled, oxygen no longer absorbed. Basically, the person suffocates.”

Without controlling our breathing we will ultimately die, figuratively as well as literally.

“Couldn’t breathe
Barely out of the emergency
Out of the ambulance...”

Having control: Being a human with agency, being able to breathe

Examples of having control and being a special individual could also be found in all texts that describe a positive occasion.

One memory about nature is a beautiful example of being an individual in a certain context, about being special, situated, with a history and belonging, very much alive and breathing:

“She picked a twig lying on the ground, and breathed in the familiar fragrance of the most iconic Australian tree. It’s a smell that directly transports her to this park, to Australia, to home.”

In another piece on meditation, where the main character becomes aware of her special breath, being her, being human, is also about being in control. To control breathing is to be empowered, aware and therefore in control while also embracing what is outside our control, which becomes a way of controlling one’s reactions towards the unknown:

“But gradually Jo became aware that this breath was rather special. In fact it was life. Without breath, she would be dead. Breath is simply taken for granted, that is until it stops. We all breathe constantly, usually without effort, without thought. To focus on breath, to really focus, is to fully appreciate the sanctity of life.”

Similar in this memory piece where the yoga is about taking action, regaining control:

“Yoga
It is time to re-start
[---]
So, I started yoga
Slowly but surely”

One memory-piece describing the demonstrations is also very much about taking action, regaining control, and the right to breathe:

“But ordinary citizens around the world had had enough of these deaths of unarmed black people. The demonstration was going ahead regardless of its legality. Black lives matter. They have the right to breathe. We the citizens must stand in solidarity with them.”

The choice is always to take control of one’s life, one’s breathing, or to passively accept structural discrimination. To emphasize one’s right to express oneself or to follow the authority’s recommendation to ensure other’s right to breathe. The crisis reveals conflicting rights.

The crisis also showed that we can take control. Either we fall victims of the pandemic within ourselves, and outside ourselves, or we use it as an opportunity to rise above the pandemic to reveal our higher selves, to take responsibility, collectively and socially.

“Wondering how ordinary patients cope [in the red zone of government hospitals]
She [Covid19 patient, lawyer sister] sent in a written complaint to the Courts
Evidence-based proof of mismanagement
Unhygienic, water starved toilets
Helplessness of patients
Walled in the red zone...”

Marx’ theory of alienation points to a utopia where society will be in harmony if we are just active, creative subjects while at the same time in direct relation to our peers and life conditions. This notion of control should not be mistaken for individual “freedom” in a liberal sense, but as being connected and responsible, rather than alienated and “free” from relations.

Breathing: Covid-19 as an art and as a portal between different worlds

Several of our memory pieces highlight breathing as an activity. Like in this text about meditation, where the simple act of breathing that we usually take for granted is in focus:

“Breath is simply taken for granted, that is until it stops. We all breathe constantly, usually without effort, without thought. To focus on breath, to really focus, is to fully appreciate the sanctity of life.”

Just like the breathing in meditation is used as a means to focus equally on everything, creating a higher awareness, the crisis Covid-19 has created becomes a tool where we see our society in another light. In this sense the crisis is a bit like art, as it frames and highlights what is important. At best it makes us acutely aware of something that we mostly ignore as it is so banal, or so obvious that we can't see it without help.

In an interview with the author Arundhati Roy, she suggested that we should look at covid-19 as “a portal between different worlds”. This summarizes some of our discussion about how the pandemic reveals inequalities (different worlds) but also commonalities and connection (portals). As in one of the memory pieces where the author's sister because of corona regulations had to go to the public hospital instead of a better private one, where she was confronted with the harsh reality of people other than those from her socioeconomic group:

“The dreaded red zone in a govt hospi’
Private hospitals refused to take her
Without the covid19 clearance certificate”

The use of new means of communication on distance is also mixing the private and the public self which sometimes creates awkward situations, where the social structures become unclear, twisted, or trespassed, creating an awareness of the subtle but strict borders between different social worlds.

The idea of covid-19 as a portal between worlds is a useful image, that also points to the potential of the crisis to bring us together, de-alienating us by making us losing control over our petty lives, finding more sustainable means of control than reproducing differentiating structures.

Breathing, while facing everything that is before us without filters on.

“Prana, my breath called me out
...To understand the breath
The very essence of life
‘prana’ my breath
...A few minutes at the start
Till the breath leaves
Honour it”