

A New World, A New Self *by Agustinus Wibowo*

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We entered a strange new world. The year 2020 had been off to a great start. The Tokyo Olympics and the Dubai World Expo had been vaunted to be spectacular. Airports in Singapore, London, and Doha had been bustling. Prospective travelers had been enthusiastic about vacation plans. When the news broke of a mysterious respiratory disease outbreak in a city in China, most people in other parts of the world paid no mind.

I knew, though, it wasn't just an outbreak. I had experienced a coronavirus outbreak before, when Beijing was hit by SARS in 2003. It was as the city's very air were shrouded by vicious, life-threatening viruses. The Chinese government immediately took extreme measures that seemed to be a typical solution for the nation that built the Great Wall. They fortified "walls", confining cities, offices, schools, and housing complexes. The lockdown proved effective in shelving SARS into history in just a matter of months.

However, the world situation of the COVID-19 era was decidedly different from the SARS period. The ease of travel and the massive human movement in a highly globalized world impeded the super-tight lockdown in Wuhan and other Chinese cities in stemming the outbreak from spreading abroad. Iran, Italy, England, Brazil, United States, India, Indonesia... new epicenters mushroomed in many places. What I used to think of as an "overkill" solution with Chinese characteristics immediately became a new universally-adopted norm. Lockdown, quarantine, and all forms of social restriction became a living reality for almost all humans everywhere.

The pandemic reversed the tide of globalization. The heyday of low-cost flights and freedom of travel was suddenly over. All passports in the world instantly became equal: people of all nationalities equally had nowhere to go. I became a travel writer who could no longer wander. With the danger of plague, non-essential travel became too much of a luxury, simultaneously selfish and unwise.

All in all, the world had become cold, no warmth of human interaction the way it used to be, which to me was an essential element of traveling. The physical distance forced by the pandemic exacerbated the emotional one, making people even more alert and suspicious, especially of the unknown. As soon as there was the slightest sound of coughing or throat clearing, pairs of fierce eyes would stare from faces behind the masks, footsteps rushing away and hands busy rinsing with sanitizing liquid.

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Weeks went by, and then months; the pandemic was lasting far longer than the most optimistic had imagined. People were locking themselves inside the house for a long time, and yet the wheel of life had to keep turning. Radical solutions had to be embraced, which under normal conditions wouldn't have been considered.

Offices, which used to place great importance on presence and punctuality, were forced to remain productive although staff worked from home. School continued throughout the year without face-to-face contact. Virtual meeting applications, alien to most people before the pandemic, now became an integral part of everyday life.

The pandemic turned the world into a global social experiment laboratory, bringing about a massive digital revolution in people's way of life. Everyone, in metropolises and remote hinterlands, inevitably adopted the digital communication technology. The pandemic has moved everything online: work, study, graduations, meetings, reunions, marriages, funerals, worship, sports, tourism, shopping, treatment... Even street food vendors in Jakarta now accept digital payments and serve online orders through marketplace platforms. Those who are not quick to adapt to this change will surely be left behind and crushed.

In the early days of the pandemic, I faced the same anxiety as many others who were on the verge of losing their livelihoods. Literary festivals, book fairs, literacy discussions, writing workshops, and all events that would bring out crowds had to be cancelled—and these were important sources of income for writers like me. Thanks to technological adaptation, though, all of those moved to the virtual realm. In an instant, my apartment turned into a recording studio, equipped with video cameras, microphones, tripod, green screen, ring light... From morning to night, it was a virtual meeting in one Zoom room followed by virtual workshop session in another, followed by live broadcasts on Instagram and YouTube, interspersed with status updates and photo uploads.

The pandemic wasn't all bad. Indeed, it confined us in increasingly narrow social bubbles, but we also became increasingly connected to each other in the virtual world. Exchanges of information, knowledge, and ideas became more frequent, widespread, and inexpensive. Writing classes that I had taught in the past could only be attended by a dozen students who lived in one city; now, hundreds of students were there, spread to the farthest corners of the archipelago, even in Europe and America. And virtual literary festivals allowed for direct dialogues with great internationally-known writers without us having to leave our homes.

The digital revolution in the pandemic era expanded learning space ever wider in cyberspace. We found all kinds of knowledge among billions of YouTube videos and millions of hours of podcast streaming. During my stay at home, I devoured a

hundred hours of lectures by an American psychology professor on toxic relationships, attended an Australian therapist's webinar on self-love meditation, and watched a flood of videos about snakes to cure my phobia. What changed my life the most was the science of investing.

The pandemic sparked innovations in the financial sector so that investing in stocks became incredibly easy. With just the touch of a finger on the screen, we could buy and sell stocks with the smallest amount of capital. For sure, there were myriads of new things to learn for a novice like me, but YouTube was an extraordinary teacher. From hundreds of educational videos by international experts and local practitioners, I learned about fundamental and technical analysis, how to read financial reports and price movement charts, how to predict money flows, and how to forecast market momentum. Economic terms, which used to be like the language of the gods, became very clear and relevant to me.

According to data from the Indonesia Stock Exchange, the number of stock investors rose during the 2020 pandemic by 56%. Perhaps a lot of people were bored at home and needed new preoccupations, or they could be looking for passive income to deal with growing uncertainty. These newbies, I myself included, were dubbed the "corona generation investors". Immediately I discovered that so many people around me had become market players. Millennials and Generation Z hanging out in cafes were busy discussing bitcoin. People in apartment elevators muttered about digital bank stock charts. Even my editor at the newspaper greeted me every day by asking about my portfolio, just as the English greet each other by asking about the weather.

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Change is inevitable. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that humans are creatures with extraordinary ability to adapt to disasters. And there had been so many pandemics throughout history that, in the end, brought good to human life. The terrible Black Death pandemic in the 14th century raised the living standard of common people and sparked the birth of the Renaissance in Europe. The Spanish Flu pandemic in the early 20th century sparked improvements in healthcare, sanitation, and medical technology innovation. Who knows to what point of the digital revolution the COVID-19 pandemic will lead us?

However, we humans were not intended to live in confinement. Prolonged restrictions on movement created new abnormalities, such as mental disorders and changes in patterns of human interaction. I longed to see smiles on people's faces. I missed handshakes and vibrant human touch. I felt there was something deeply wrong with me when I started talking to myself to break the silence of my apartment room that lacked human voice.

Of course, I could easily turn on instant messaging or virtual meeting applications to connect with close friends. But with so many virtual meetings and webinars, even chatting through an app felt more like work than entertainment. Maybe it is the so-called “Zoom Fatigue” syndrome. Just attending a lot of webinars was exhausting, especially if you were a speaker. I had to constantly encourage myself to maintain my speaking passion in front of a dead machine, and after a long session I always slumped into bed for the night to recharge.

How lucky are those of us who experienced childhood before the pandemic. How sorry I was for the children who grew up in the time of the pandemic, locked up at home every day and constantly facing screens. A friend, a father, shared his worry about his five-year-old son. The kid had not seen any outsiders in a year and went into a hysterical screaming fit whenever facing someone unknown.

Our world seemed quiet and introverted, but in cyberspace it was truly noisy and extroverted. People who stayed at home became very active in sharing all trifles of life on social media, whether dance, lunch menu, joke, cat activity, trivial comment, or puffy face after waking up. In just one minute of the pandemic year, more than 500 hours of videos were uploaded to YouTube and more than 695 thousand “stories” were posted on Instagram.

All of these became an endless source of entertainment, all the more crucial for us in relieving stress in this difficult time. We were exhausted, fearful, depressed, and lonely for being confined for months at home during the pandemic, not to mention the barrage of sad news from relatives and friends. Lying in bed and scrolling through social media on the smartphone or watching a series on Netflix gave us a soothing sensation of peace. Next thing we knew, though, three hours had passed; these gadgets and television hypnotize us to stay glued and stare. Yet, afterward, instead of feeling rested and refreshed, our fatigue just doubled. Guilt loomed and life felt empty.

I became a little less dependent on social media after learning about stocks. But it was like escaping from of a lion’s mouth to stumble into a crocodile’s mouth. Watching the price of a stock I owned suddenly skyrocketing generated an adrenaline rush, my heart racing and my hands breaking out in cold sweat. The blissful sensation of the dopamine felt like an intoxicating drug, leaving me wanting more.

Returns on investment did relieve a lot of my anxiety from financial stress. But it wasn’t a free lunch, either. During daily trading hours, I got fixated on the ever-changing charts of numbers and graphs, while trying to think fast, with fingers nimble to execute decisions. When the market reversed direction, the pain immediately spread throughout the body, the tension intensified. Stock morning, stock afternoon, stock evening. Even when I slept at night, my dreams contained stock codes.

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Traveling wasn't just about moving physically, which was hard to do during the pandemic. There was another kind of trip, a good one, that one could take instead: a journey within.

Every day, morning and evening, I took one hour to meditate. In silence, I observed every breath going in and out of my nostrils, noticed every heartbeat, paid attention to every bit of memory and emotion that came and went. Also, for two days over weekends, I did a digital detox by locking all my devices in my suitcase.

Such moments of silence were important for me to maintain my sanity in turmoil and exceedingly rapid change... The noise of the digital world subsided, my body and mind relaxed, I reconnected with my reality. As a Zen master said, "You can only see your reflection in the still water, not in the fast-flowing water." In silence, my mind became clearer, and I was able to understand this world that seemed increasingly strange and difficult to understand.

Besides change, the essence of life is also truly about balance. We humans are creatures in constant change while perpetually looking for a new balance. A balance between reality and dreams. Between the material and the spiritual. Between craving and gratitude. Between personal survival and concern for others. Maintaining balance throughout rapid changes is very vital for keeping us from being lost and losing meaning.

We all fought in this difficult condition in multi-dimensional, layered, and sometimes contradictory battles. On the one hand, we fought against invisible viruses; on the other, we wrestled to make ends meet. And we persisted in adapting to torrents of change while struggling to maintain our balance. It was a terribly long battle, and no one knew where or how it would end.