



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Quest and Questions in Coronavirus

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'COVID-19 is an open heart surgery. I've tried to find my answers in search for a sense of an inner identity, a peace that passeth all understanding.'

Your heart could break if you didn't know that death is a reality unlike any other. It's part of our destiny, our destination.

Last week my wife and I attended a memorial service in honour of a friend's late wife. It was a drizzling day and among the 200 mourners we were the only coloured couple.

Our friend is a distinguished citizen of this transplanted city.

A former vice-chancellor, he is also a writer of considerable distinction. He has fictionalised a few piercing portraits in the small and often petty world of university politics where the same mice are after the same small pieces of cheese, damaging in the process each other and the idea and ideals of a university.

My friend had generously launched a couple of my books in the presence of his wife. I had launched one of his. We met occasionally for coffee in their home they finally moved into. Downsizing is the name of the game for the elderly .

We returned home feeling unusually melancholy – perhaps the intimations of our mortality had affected us in its subterranean way. The transience of life is a permanent and pervasive reality.

And the wet, windy weather of the lake city didn't help. One felt cold in the summer's simmering heat.

Or was it the relentless assault of COVID-19, with its virus variants emerging in various parts of the world that casting a pall on all our lives?

In such a mood, I sat down and scribbled these lines...

COVID – a world of pain

COVID-19 has thrown our known world into a spin. None of us can get off the spinning wheel of this fateful catastrophe with any certainty of our health or wealth, today or tomorrow.

Life turns and churns like waves in the ocean moving forward and back sidles sideways, breaking on every shore and rolls on the rocks and sands – on the shoals of eternal time with a sense of endless energy.

Without beginning, without an end the sea in its shapeless form shapes

us.

Those born on islands may perceive

it more clearly than those in the inland of life. We get an idea of the waters rolling through the crevices of our lives, in the cracks of our hearts, on the ridged contours of our consciousness.

Like fishes caught in a vast net under a blue-burning sky, we survive.

But the sea is One. Like Life. Like...

My first book of fiction was titled *The Wounded Sea*. The title was a serendipitous choice – sometimes things come into your mind from the sea-depth propelled by some invisible force that makes the grass grow, the water to flow, the wind to blow, the sun to shine, and the rains to fall. And you breathe even in a tsunami.

My book was written after the coups of 1987.

My grandparents had never seen a sea, a sea-wave, a ship or an island.

Yet they were brought to the islands and died on an island thousands of miles away from the landlocked places of their birth.

They were a river people, their imagination was shaped by the myths that were imagined on the banks of the Ganges – they called the river GangaMa.

Many of their gods dwelt on Mount Everest and in the forests of the Himalayas where the sages lived and speculated amazingly about life and death, here and hereafter.

Resilience in these covidous times

In these covidous times, one thinks of one's identity because dying is never far away. The death toll daily of so many people makes you aware of your mortality – Who are you?

And no-one is really safe as the infected victims of the most appalling virus exceeds 100 million worldwide. Before long it will be two hundred.

The news bulletins on tv are loaded with the most poignant images of people writhing in hospitals on every continent and not a few islands. And no-one to hold their hands.

It's the helplessness of governments, scientists, universities, medical staff and ordinary patients and people that harrow your heart with both terror

and pity. Only the graveyards multiply. In these painful circumstances what does one do? The strength often lies in oneself. The resources of resilience like faith and human bondage are never far away.

The will to carry on even as the light is fading and the rain begins to beat us.

Then there are cyclones, drought, fire, famine, landslides, avalanches, in places one didn't know existed on the planet.

And those terrible accidents on the roads, mines and the drowning in the seas. Four children are killed as they go to buy ice cream.

Your heart could break if you didn't know that death is a reality unlike any other. It's part of our destiny, our destination. This virus is just a version of it.

I've just completed a book on this theme through five journeys I have made over the years.

My book is titled *Life Journeys: Love & Grief*. In it I explore through my very ordinary life the meaning of life and death, love and loss, roots and relationships, home and homelessness....

But above all, our experience human love and grief which make us what we are.

Identity

COVID-19 is an open heart surgery. I've tried to find my answers in search for a sense of an inner identity, a peace that passeth all understanding.

A cataclysmic event makes you think thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

What is our identity? What elements go into making us truly human in shared suffering and separated living?

In the ancient Mahabharata there's a marvellous couplet which tells you that human beings are like streams and rivers – they flow towards an indivisible ocean.

But they have many sources, they flow from many springs not one. Search for them in yourself and your neighbours.

We're not rooted like a tree – movement, migration, transmigration are natural to our two feet, to our wings of imagination, our dreamings.

If one looks at one's sources of self and being, one finds how so many fragments like LEGO pieces give us shape and add new dimensions in life.

You're born in one place, you live in another, and you may die elsewhere. There's always an elsewhere, somewhere. And what of the love given and received? Whence do these come?

What places, parents, grandparents, siblings, children, companions and loves shaped you? What books and teachers? Where were they written?

Think of the sacred texts? Think of those whose words of worship and acts of kindness that moulded you, gave you a life felt in your bones.

Human Identity is a mutinous wave in a multitudinous sea in which we float like a log buffeted and beaten by myriad other waves, big and small, and finally left on some shore as a driftwood or an empty seashell for hermit crabs.

COVID-19 has revealed to us our connections not only to other human beings but to the world of nature and nurture which have shaped what we call our body, life and living.

This is our true identity – the communication among peoples; not the myths of national, racial or religious aggrandisement and walls.

This may be the gift of coronavirus which has enveloped us without discrimination of any kind.

Dispossession and death may help us to discover our true destiny – we may be able to repossess it only through life's blessings and kindness – a prayer where words flow like the waters of a river towards a visible sea and in the invisible rivers of our veins and arteries, blood in the body unseen but felt along the heart, and always there.

If we cannot recover a lost moment in our lives, or know what the next moment will bring, what control do we have on our identity or integrity?

*Everything is a drop
On a blade of grass
Life will not stop
Even as we pass.*

Satendra Nandan's *Girmit: Epic Lives in Small Lines* was published recently. His forthcoming volume, *Life Journeys: Love & Grief*, is scheduled for publication on May 15.