

Keynote Address MELOW 2021

Creativity in Crisis

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Good morning!

I am delighted to be part of this conference on, “Illness, Healing and Literary Imagination,” which captures the moment in the middle of the global crisis caused by the Pandemic Covid-19. It provides an excellent opportunity to pause and deliberate on the devastating impact of the crisis on the humanity, and the tremendous suffering it has caused at physical, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual levels and find the ways to overcome the crisis.

This conference functions as a platform to collectively discuss the following questions “why pandemic (the root cause of the pandemic)?” “How did the world respond or is responding to it?” “How do we overcome the suffering caused by it?” “What does this crisis, and human responses to it reveal to us about human nature and the meaning of life?” “What helps healing?” Answers to these questions will better help us determine our role in this situation.

I applaud Professor Jaidka, the Chancellor, the Conference committee and the participants for undertaking this important project, which marks a major milestone in the journey toward the recovery and the healing process as it shows awareness and understanding of the situation, and a careful and caring way to determine our role in it! Congratulations!

1. Looking back is going forward. This is not the first Crisis our humanity and the world at large has faced.

In my short presentation, I would like to look back in the history to unravel the facts about how the writings and works of some of the great human beings, luminaries including scholars, artists, saints, and political and social thinkers have creatively responded to the pandemics in the history and were a strong guiding force toward the recovery and healing of the ailing, distressed and

tortured world in crises in their respective times. This deliberation, I believe will let us compare pandemics, their catastrophic impact, the universal patterns of survival, and how literary creativity played a unique role in the recovery, repair, and transformation of the suffering into a creative power, a new vision, a new world. I believe, history is our laboratory, which records and tells us what, when, and why of the experiences of humanity, that is why it is called itihāsa “Thus it happened”.

2. A close correlation between crisis and creativity: Some examples from the past.

Let me ask first, “How do we define crisis and creativity?”

Crisis is an abnormal, unexpected, destabilising condition leaving human beings helpless and which demands an immediate solution. Crisis is a Greek word *krino*, which means, “to decide.” Crisis can be a condition resulting from diverse causes, physical (earthquake for example), economic, Sociopolitical (Holocaust), environmental (water depletion, foods, etc.), virus (plague, Flu, etc.) or mental (anxiety-driven nervous breakdown). It is an emergency, where the established system of reasoning is incapable of providing a solution and if left unresolved, there is a risk of dangerous consequences. Crisis creates colossal physical, mental, social, and spiritual suffering.

Creativity is generally understood as the ability to view things in new perspectives, and generate new possibilities, new alternatives to express them, as poets do (see *Meghadūtam*, “The cloud messenger” composed by *Kālidāsa*, in which a cloud is treated as a messenger by the lover to convey his message to his beloved). In the context of a crisis, we look at creativity as a response to crisis. Creativity here refers to the ability to recognise the failure of the established norms and find novel solutions to the problems, uniquely appropriate to their resolution. Creativity is the quality of mind, may be a sixth sense, to tackle Covid-19 crisis as a challenge not simply an aberration and create a new vaccine. A world known artist *Van Gogh* created his masterpiece, “*Starry night*” while fighting with his worst depression and anxiety. Creativity is also defined as the tendency to generate or recognise ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others.

Looking at these features of Crisis and creativity we are tempted to say that crisis is a destabilising force while creativity repairs, heals and stabilises. However, despite the difference in the nature of crises and the kind of creativity that occurred during or after the crises, there is almost a universal pattern we see in the history, that is, crisis has been a powerful catalyst for creativity.

3. Examples

I would like to present a few examples to show the relationship between crisis and creativity. How crisis unravels the inner strength within human beings, which they did not know they had. Carolyn Gregoire and Scott Barry Kaufman's 2016 book "Wired to create: Unravelling mysteries of the Creative Mind" investigated the phenomenon of art born of adversity.

They found out that the artists 'best work follows their periods of deepest suffering -the crisis of health, trauma or loss.

The biographies of artists show the correlation between crisis and creativity. Milton wrote his most celebrated work, "Paradise Lost" after the death of his wife, daughter and the loss of his eyesight. Van Gogh was battling anxiety and depression when he painted "starry night." Virginia Wolf wrote "to the lighthouse" as a strategy to cope with the loss of her mother.

Camus wrote "The plague" and Shakespeare wrote "King Lear" during the crisis of the plague. Giovanni's Decameron, a 14th century acclaimed creation was a response to the plague as well. We may ask, why does this happen? Why are artists inspired to create in the midst of their worst crisis?

In the midst of hopelessness, and meaninglessness, the creative artists and writers have found meaning of life in their profound creativity and creation. Their creative impulse liberated them from suffering! Their suffering forced them to find meaning. Meaninglessness became the source of their search for meaning. The destructive crisis became a creative impetus. The examples I am going to involve different types of crises and the creative responses are varied. However, they share a pattern, i.e., Crisis creates loss of meaning and creativity gives a new, original meaning through the creative action.

Let us look at some more examples of the writing of the world known figures in the crisis and see how the crisis/suffering empowered them and others. These can inspire us to deal with our own current crises and create a new imagination in us.

4. Crisis of imprisonment, liberation in Creativity and contribution to the world.

The crisis-inspired creativity has immensely contributed to the world. The most famous prisoners who contributed to the social, political, philosophical world found tremendous inspiration in the painful life in the prison. Their crises became their creative energy.

a) Nelson Mandela was facing the crisis of imprisonment in South Africa for 27 years! He wrote the well-known 255 letters in the prison, the letters to empower people to fight the white unjust government. It was the fight for freedom. He wrote continuously for 27 (from 1963 to 1990) years from prison. His letters expressed the pain of deprivation but also the power for the fight for freedom as if his isolation and suffering made him focus without any distractions on what was most important for him. Here we see the power of isolation allows one to ask the questions one would not have asked in the midst of the life full of other demand on one's time!

Let us look at Mandela's "Locked in a cell so tiny his head touched one wall and his feet the other at night, he found ample room to praise his monk-like isolation in 1975, calling it "an ideal place to learn to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings." The deprivation, he added, "gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct, to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you." Mandela's book, *Conversations with myself* is his own experiences raw and fresh, told in real time; it seems as if one is having an intimate personal conversation with Mandela himself. Painful and powerful personal issues are treated and resolved with great sensitivity allowing the readers to explore new aspects and corners of the legend's life.

Mandela's seclusion in the prison, gave him time to evaluate the situation and come up with the solution of organising the movement against the government. His quote is a telling example of the power of crisis to sharpen the edge of human creativity, "A new world will be won

not by those who stand at a distance with their arms folded, but by those are in the arena, whose garments are torn by storms and whose bodies are maimed in the course of contest.”

b) Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime minister after India’s independence in 1947, wrote the book “The Discovery of India”, during his imprisonment at Ahmednagar fort for participating in the Quit India Movement (1942 – 1946).

c) Boethius (a 6th century political leader) wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy*, while he was still in prison awaiting his trial for conspiring against the Gothic rule under King Theodoric, is a story raising questions of grave importance. Themes like that of the Wheel of Fortune, Fate, Philosophy and Eternal truth as well as highest order of self-actualisation have been discussed within its frame. The book was a source of inspiration for many philosophers like Dante and Chaucer; many readers have also considered it as the most central book in the intellectual development of Christianity, which started with St Augustine, but eventually led here. He was executed in October 524 CE.

d) A simple and spontaneously written book, *My Experiments with Truth* records Mahatma Gandhi’s life and his contribution to the struggle for independence in India. Gandhi wrote this book in 1932, while serving time in Yerwada jail in Pune. What makes this book great is the fact Gandhi autobiographically narrated his life through the course of five major volumes, giving truthful insights. Gandhi believes that truth can be attained only through experimenting and through learning from the ups and downs and the struggles of life.

e) Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* is a book that inspired almost every literary movement during the 18th century. It can be said to be an allegory for themes like that of Christianity, Romanticism embedded in cult artists and alike. Even 400 plus years after its initial publication, *Don Quixote* holds both relevance as well as importance. Captured by the Turks in 1575, Cervantes wrote this book while in captivity. It is a tale of caution about the perils of idealism. The phrase “ahead of its time” is a cliché, but no better phrase comes to mind while describing this cautionary tale about the perils of

idealism. This book is undoubtedly one of the most influential works of literature in the Spanish literary canon.

f) The story chronicles the experiences of Divine, a recently deceased drag queen, recounting her journeys through Paris 'colourful homosexual underworld. Jean Genet's debut novel, *Our Lady of the Flowers* is considered his finest fictional work. Genet deserted the French Army in 1936, after which he was tried as a deserter and imprisoned in the military prison. Prison officials initially destroyed the first draft. Genet reproduced this novel in a dire attempt to bare the torturous isolations that he faced by building his own fictional controllable world. It is a novel that combines facts, memories, fantasies, irrational dreams as well as philosophical insights. The power of community and ethics that are bound up in aesthetically as well as theoretically in terms of homosexuality in *Our Lady of the Flowers*.

These creative responses note that the respondents transcended their immediate reality of prison and emphasise their realisation of finding meaning in their role in that reality. Rather than dwelling on the suffering, they rose above it and found meaning in the world beyond prison-their inner world.

5. Kabīr (a 15th Century mystic saint), Jnāneshwar (a 13th century poet-saint of Maharashtra): a fight for new visions through creative writing.

We have many figures in the Indian history who found solutions in the middle of the crisis, not personal but social. (There are plenty of examples of personal crises but I am quoting examples of social crises here). They used language as a powerful weapon to fight the crises. Their writings have been sources of inspiration for centuries including present.

Kabīr in 15th century CE, responded to the crisis of religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. In his *Dohe* (poetry in the specific meter of *Doha*), he argued for one God with many names and aggressively rebuked both Hindus and Muslims for their irrational behaviour. He called their religious practices as unnecessary. Kabīr is not a non-believer. He is criticising the outwardly show of the faith without sincerity and genuine understanding of it.

Kabīr was religious but wanted to point out the discrepancies in both Hindu and Muslim practices to convince them neither was better than the other in blindly following practices without understanding their deeper meaning. Kabīr’s creativity is well-known.

He said to the Hindus:

मुंड मुड़या हरि मिलें, सब कोई लेई मुड़ाया

बार बार के मुड़ते ,भेंड़ा न बैकुण्ठ जाया।

“If by shaving head one gets Hari-then everyone would do it.

By frequent head-shaving will a goat go to heaven?”

He said to the Muslims:

कंकर-पत्थर जोरि के मस्जिद लई बनाय,

ता चढ़ि मुल्ला बांग दे का बहरा भया खुदाय।

“Collecting small and big stones Masjid is built and Mullā shouts from their calling Allah. Has Allah gone deaf?” Jnāneshwar a 13th century mystic saint of Maharashtra, while fighting against battle of linguistic superiority of Sanskrit and marginalisation of Marathi and other regional languages ,wrote his magnum opus Jnāneshwarā, a commentary of the Bhagawadgītā and said, Sanskrit deve kel ī, Marth ī kāy corāpāsūn ālī? “If Sanskrit came from God, did Marāṭhī come from the thieves?” He fought back with creating a piece of influential work in Marathi in the Indian history of religion. These poet-saints created new visions of religions and languages respectively.

6. The 20th Century responses

In contrast to the above, the two celebrated and influential figures of the 20th century, T.S. Eliot, the well-known British poet, and Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher and writer responded to the personal and socio-political crises in their lives respectively, by assuming a unique strategy.

Viktor Frankl wrote, “In some ways, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning.” Viktor Frankl went through the catastrophe of the Holocaust and survived it.

Deprivation of food, connection with relations, love, torture, and constant threat of losing life made the concentration camp a living hell with total hopelessness in life of suffering and nothing else.

In 1945, within months of his liberation from a concentration camp in Nazi Germany, Viktor Frankl sat down to write a book. He was forty years old. Before the Second World War, he worked as a successful psychologist in Vienna. He wrote the manuscript in nine successive days. Although the book tells the story of the unfathomable horrors and suffering, he endured as a prisoner at Auschwitz, Dachau and other camps, the primary purpose of the text is to explore the source of his will to survive. The book, titled *Man's Search for Meaning*, went on to sell over 10 million copies in 24 languages.

Some see life as a never-ending quest for pleasure. Others believe life is about the accumulation of power and money. Frankl sees life as primarily a quest for meaning. In the meaninglessness of his life in concentration camp, he found the meaning of life within himself.

As humans, we often look to the margins, those extreme situations that test the fibre of human character. Viktor Frankl survived at the ultimate margin. He concludes that the ultimate test for all of us is to find meaning in our lives. It is within the power of everyone to find meaning, regardless of your health, wealth or circumstances—no matter how miserable or dire.

Frankl argues that external crises cannot take away the freedom, which human beings have to decide their attitude toward them and act accordingly. Some of the excerpts from his book are piercing but powerful examples of creative thinking in the midst of the crisis. The following discussion is based on Frankl's book (in quotes) and some of excerpts of Murray's (2018) writing on Frankl's book. Based on his experiences in the concentration camp, Frankl has discovered some important universal truths about human nature, which I find valuable in this pandemic situation.

a) We always retain the ability to choose our attitude.

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but

they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Frankl and his fellow prisoners had everything taken away from them, their families, friends, jobs, health, possessions, even their names and the hair on their bodies; but there was one thing that remained truly their own. It is what Stoic philosophers refer to as our inner discourse or guiding principle. Namely, we get to choose how to react to any given thought, emotion or set of circumstances.

Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis, it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner-decision and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally then, any man can, under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually.

No matter what life experiences we confront, we always have the inner-freedom to decide our attitude, and to remain true to our character and duty. This reminds me of the Bhawagawadgītā, which says that, the inner Self (Ātman) is never affected by the external events and powers (nainam chhindanti shastrāṇi, nachaidam dahati p pāvakah, “Weapons cannot kill it; fire cannot burn it”). Satyajit Ray’s movie, Aparājitā has the character of Durgā, which epitomizes this invincible power of the Self. Durgā is the character originally conceived and presented by Vibhūtibhūṣan Bandopādhyāy, who wrote the story, Aparājitā.

b) There will be Suffering – It is how we react to Suffering that Counts

Frankly claims that one finds meaning in life through three ways. Through work, especially when that work is both creative in nature and aligned with a purpose greater than ourselves. Through love, which often manifests itself in the service of others. Moreover, through suffering, which is

fundamental to the human experience. It is this third category that was put to the ultimate test through Frankl's experience in the concentration camp:

If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an eradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete." The test then for all of us is how we respond to the suffering in our lives. "The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life.

c) The Power of Purpose

Frankl observed that those prisoners who survived, who found a way to endure, always had a greater purpose that carried them onward through difficult conditions. For some it was a child who was sheltered away in some distant country and who was waiting for them upon liberation. For others it was a spouse or family member. For others an unfinished task or creative work required their unique contribution. Frankl compares those who had a purpose with those who did not. "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and become subject to mental and physical decay."

While working in a camp hospital, Frankl noticed, the death rate spiked the week between Christmas and New Year's in 1944. He attributed the dramatic increase to the number of prisoners who were naively holding out hope for liberation before Christmas. As the end of the year drew closer and it became clear that their situation was unchanged, they lost courage and hope. This in turn impacted their power of resistance and their ability to survive.

Frankl refers several times to the words of Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

d) The True Test of Our Character is revealed in How we Act

Frankl comes to the conclusion that there is no general answer to the meaning of life. People must answer the question for themselves. We find our own unique meaning based on our circumstances, our relationships and our experiences. Life is essentially testing us, and the answer is revealed in how we respond.

We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answers to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

Therefore, the meaning of life is not found on some mountaintop away from the mundane life; rather, it is revealed daily and hourly, in our choice to take the right action and to perform our duties and responsibilities. Finally, Frankl responds to a question we might ask, “what if the person is powerless?” Frankl points out compassion and kindness toward them is the answer.

e) Human Kindness can be Found in the Most Surprising Places

One would assume that the camp guards and camp commander were, as a whole, terrible people. However, Frankl occasionally experienced startling moments of human kindness from guards. Frankl recalls a time when a guard, at great risk to himself, secretly gave him a piece of bread. Frankl says, “It was far more than the small piece of bread which moved me to tears at the time. It was the human “something” that this man gave to me – the word and look which accompanied the gift. At the same time, the senior prison warden, who was a prisoner himself, beat other prisoners at the slightest opportunity.” “The mere knowledge that a man was either a camp guard or a prisoner tells us almost nothing. Human kindness can be found in all groups, even those which as a whole it would be easy to condemn.” Frankl claims there are really only two types of people; decent human beings and indecent human beings. Both can be found everywhere. They penetrate

every group and every society.) “Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths. (Is it surprising that in those depths we again found human qualities which in their very nature were a mixture of good and evil?”

Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, is a profoundly moving and extremely inspiring book. Finding and cultivating meaning in our daily lives is critical if we want to achieve what Socrates calls “a life well-lived.” Frankl’s insights teach us that, not only is there value in our search for meaning, but it is the duty of each one of us to find that meaning for ourselves and pursue it. Frankl argues for finding meaning outside suffering to deal with suffering. Suffering is an eradicable condition and one must find meaning of life beyond suffering, in our freedom to choose our attitude toward it, in the purpose of life beyond suffering, and in being kind to others, love others as way to deal with suffering.

7. T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land”: the ultimate liberation from suffering.

Eliot, one of the most famous poets of the 20th century, writes about the post first world war crisis of moral and ethical degeneration of European society. For Eliot, the “hyacinth moment” marks the ultimate liberation, the Buddhist Nirvana from suffering, which he sees as the endless cycles of life and Death. When the mind transcends both suffering and happiness, life and death, and does not get attached to either, it reaches the state of liberation. Eliot describes the moment of liberation in the following lines:

You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
They called me the hyacinth girl.
Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth Garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
“The Waste Land” by T.S. Eliot.

The Mind becomes like a mirror, which reflects the objects as they face it but is not attached to it. The mind experiences emptiness, the undivided uncategorised reality! It does not discriminate and it sees the world as a whole by emptying the mind. Thus, for Eliot, suffering can be eliminated by transcending the vision of the world as divided into dichotomies of suffering and happiness. One experiences the world as a whole, not divided up into dichotomies of pleasure and pain, good and bad, etc. The pain is in seeing the world fragmented. The transformation of the vision, seeing the world as one, liberates one from suffering. A tall demand indeed!

8. From the past to the present.

We have looked at diverse responses to diverse crises with different solutions found by different people according to their own dispositions and circumstances. We may ask, does our current crisis fit into any one of the ones we discussed? How is it different? What is our role? Each crisis is unique and yet it shares the most salient feature with other crises is that all crises cause suffering and need immediate and unique solution. History presents diverse solutions, many lessons to us— Like Gandhi, Mandela, etc., transform the imprisonment into creative force by writing, like Frankl, change the attitude with the knowledge that no outside power can take away our freedom to choose our attitude Inner power. Like Jnāneshwar of Kabīr respond forcefully through getting involved in the crisis and responding to it, writing and changing the outside world, transcend the suffering like Eliot by finding the “hyacinth moment” of liberation from the cycle of rebirth. In summary, find meaning in the middle of meaninglessness is creativity and pursue that meaning; that is the purpose.

Our crisis is unique because it is global; it has taken the whole world hostage and threw us all in one pandemic, and crippled all of us physically, psychologically, and spiritually! Fear of death, uncertainty of future and the realisation of the limits of our unprecedented success in medicine, technology and communication have forced us to ask, how do we fight the crisis? Where did we go wrong? What has the crisis taught us? What is it to be human? What is our role in this

crisis? Each of these questions need a creative solution as our system of beliefs is shattered with the death of millions (and counting). The Vaccines have proven the human capacity to create a new defense against the virus. It is an immediate creative solution. However, a new set of beliefs is needed if the humanity wants to survive. The Pandemic has taught us two major lessons:

First, we must acknowledge and fully understand interconnectedness of all forms of existence, human, animal, birds, non-human, living, inanimate, natural forces, water, air, sun. As humans, we had failed to realise this noble truth. Wiebers and Feigin (*Neuroepidemiology Journal* (2020) (54 pp283-286), the two well-known neuroscientists in the US, point out that we the humans have divided our world into Human and the other in which the other- the birds, animals, the earth, water, the natural environment is for our consumption. Ruthlessly, we have consumed everything and called it progress, success. The human-dominated ecosystem will destroy human beings. Three out of 4 infections come from animals and spread through the parasites on animals and birds, which move to humans due to their close proximity. Swine flu, influenza, and many more. They say, “Our species has come to the edge of the cliff on these issues, and the covid-19 pandemic is forcing us to make a choice between either changing our thinking and practices or facing increasing destruction and perhaps self-annihilation. Time has come to rethink our relationship with all life on the planet.” Our religions had told us oneness and interconnectedness of all existences, but we did not listen, Darwin had told us about this through biological evolution but we did not pay attention to it. Finally, Corona taught us, we are all connected.

The second important lesson is about the “speed” with which we define the progress makes us lose so much we could have gained by simply slowing down. We would have seen more, connected with more of our own relatives, friends and loved ones, heard more, touched more and lived more.

There is beautiful poetry written during the pandemic time on the need to slow down so we go beyond our desires to have more for ourselves and pay attention to others. One striking poem is entitled “Stop.”

From Pandemic poetry 2021 composed by Kristin Flyntz:

An Imagined Letter from COVID-19 to Humans:

Stop. Just stop.

It is no longer a request. It is a mandate.

We will help you.

We will bring the supersonic, high-speed merry-go-round to a halt

We will stop

the planes

the trains

the schools

the malls

the meetings

the frenetic, hurried rush of illusions and “obligations” that keep you from hearing

our

single and shared beating heart,

the way we breathe together, in unison.

Our obligation is to each other,

As it has always been, even if, even though, you have forgotten.

We will interrupt this broadcast, the endless cacophonous broadcast of divisions and

distractions,

to bring you this long-breaking news:

We are not well.

None of us; all of us are suffering.

.....Last year, the firestorms that scorched the lungs of the earth

did not give you pause.

Nor the typhoons in Africa, China, Japan.

Nor the fevered climates in Japan and India.

You have not been listening.

It is hard to listen when you are so busy all the time, hustling to uphold the comforts and conveniences that scaffold your lives.

But the foundation is giving way,

buckling under the weight of your needs and desires.

We will help you.

We will bring the firestorms to your body

We will bring the fever to your body

We will bring the burning, searing, and flooding to your lungs

that you might hear:

We are not well.

Despite what you might think or feel, we are not the enemy.

We are Messenger. We are Ally. We are a balancing force.

We are asking you:

To stop, to be still, to listen;

To move beyond your individual concerns and consider the concerns of all;

To be with your ignorance, to find your humility, to relinquish your thinking minds and travel deep into the mind of the heart;

To look up into the sky, streaked with fewer planes, and see it, to notice its condition: clear, smoky, smoggy, rainy? How much do you need it to be healthy so that you may also be healthy?

To look at a tree, and see it, to notice its condition: how does its health contribute to

the health of the sky, to the air you need to be healthy?

To visit a river, and see it, to notice its condition: clear, clean, murky, polluted? How much do you need it to be healthy so that you may also be healthy? How does its health contribute to the health of the tree, who contributes to the health of the sky, so that you may also be healthy?

Many are afraid now.

Do not demonise your fear, and also, do not let it rule you. Instead, let it speak to you—in your stillness,
listen for its wisdom.

What might it be telling you about what is at work, at issue, at risk, beyond the threats of personal inconvenience and illness?

As the health of a tree, a river, the sky tells you about the quality of your own health, what might the quality of your health tell you about the health of the rivers, the trees, the sky, and all of us who share this planet with you?

Stop.

Notice if you are resisting.

Notice what you are resisting.

Ask why.

Stop. Just stop.

Be still.

Listen.

Ask us what we might teach you about illness and healing, about what might be

required so that all may be well.

We will help you, if you listen.

The following poem presents the imagined beautiful “aftermath” of the pandemic in the positive, creative, and reactions of the people. The poem is composed by Kitty O’Meara:

In the Time of Pandemic

And the people stayed home.

And they read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still.

And they listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed.

And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

Children's poetry is full of cries, complaints of seclusion, separation from the loved ones, their friends, and they are asking when this will all end, and hope for a better future. "Will the door open?" Is a beautiful poem. The child is asking whether the closed door in the lockdown will ever open?

The virus has defined our role as human beings. We must see ourselves part of the global ecosystem and must live with other forms of existence and not ruthlessly consume them. To co-exist is to care for others and their wellbeing, work for their good as our own. Share what you have medical knowledge, artistic skill, or money. Scientists must create vaccine; artists create art to lift their spirit. Simply water a plant or plant a plant and read a story to an old blind woman. The social and digital media with advanced technology had provided us with unprecedented access to innumerable happy things people share across the globe. This is a beautiful and aesthetically appealing solution to sadness and depression which Decameron, Giovanni's world known creation shows us. The merrymaking of the people in the worst of the crisis of Plague. The creative writers can provide moments of happiness to uplift the spirit of the sunken and sad ones. Humour, satire are some more strategies simple, ordinary people are finding in the middle of the crisis. One does not have to be Giovanni, Eliot or Kabir or Gandhi for that matter.

A Nany, caretaker of seven children facing the crisis of political situation in Vienna, which had forced them in isolation, is portrayed in the movie Sound of music, tells the children not to be sad. They should think of their favourite things. Think, if you had them once you can have them again. She re-enforces the joy of the memory of beautiful things and their eternal joy—a thing of beauty is joy forever, its beauty increases; it never comes to nothingness:

When the dog bites

When the bee stings

When I'm feeling sad

I simply remember my favourite things

And then I don't feel so bad

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens

Bright copper kettles and warm woollen mittens

Brown paper packages tied up with strings

These are a few of my favourite things

Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes

Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes

Silver white winters that melt into springs

These are a few of my favourite things

A beautiful satire, which struck me recently is a short clipping from the Indian media (perhaps, you have all seen it).

It is a social satire and yet very funny.

A 7-8-year-old is telling people in the time of pandemic.

Agar sarīkrī aspatāl jāoge to jānse hāth dho baithoge,

Agar private aspatāl jāoge to zamīn zāydād se hāth dho baithoge.

Isliye,

Ghar men baitho aur hāth dhote raho!!

“If you go to a government hospital, you will lose your life (literally, you have to wash your hands with life). If you go to a private hospital, you will lose your property (literally, you will have to wash your hands with your property). Therefore, just stay home and keep washing hands.” The satire is on the government hospitals, which are not reliable, and private hospitals where one has to pay enormous money. Also, the beautiful pun is on the dual meaning of the phrase “to wash one’s hands” (to lose).

I would like to end this presentation on a serious note. Our role must be to create a proverbial leaf in O’Henry’s story, *The last leaf*. *The Last Leaf* is a short story by O’Henry, published in 1907 in his collection, *The Trimmed Lamp and Other Stories*. *The Last Leaf* concerns Johnsy, a poor young woman who is seriously ill with pneumonia. She believes that when the ivy vine on the wall outside her window, loses all its leaves, she will also die. Her neighbour Behrman, an artist, tricks her by painting a leaf on the wall. Johnsy recovers, but (in a twist typical of O’Henry) Behrman, who caught pneumonia while painting the leaf on that cold and damp night, dies.

We have to find our own corner where we are needed and we should create the leaf. Millions of “Johnsys” (the ailing people) are waiting for our help for our efforts to “paint leaves.” Do we have the power to do it? We may ask. We have tremendous power to help them. We have to find it. As my favorite Persian Sufi poet Rumi says, “You are not a drop in the ocean, you are the ocean in a drop.” That is our power. We must use it.

Thank you for listening to my views patiently. Let us pray for the well-being for all while doing our part in the struggle to get rid of the physical and metaphorical pandemic.