



## The year of dying and living

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I tried to write a poem on hibiscus, and I  
googled the word  
I wanted to picture them in my head,  
retrieve them from my memories  
Put them in a vase full of bad news,  
anxiety and boredom  
Or perhaps light an incense stick that  
leaves the smell of hibiscus in the air  
Meditate, take deep breaths, soak it all in,  
give myself assurances  
I close my eyes, and all I can think of is  
oxygen, *am I breathing properly?*

It's not that beautiful things stop existing  
in the world,  
flowers lie on a grave, incense sticks fill a  
prayer room,  
but you have to understand, the pandemic  
rages within me,

and all roads lead to death.

- Anicca, June 2021

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The year two thousand twenty-one was an extraordinary one. There was death all around. And so much grief. The human race had never seemed so fragile as in our lifetime. Vulnerability became a language that had to be learned. Amidst all that, there was also resilience and hope. Hope that human beings could come together to help each other. That they could care, support each other and collectively act to protect others. There were exceptions, of course, but they were not the norm.

It seems almost miraculous that we found a vaccine within a year of the start of the coronavirus pandemic. It would seem a miracle to anyone not familiar with the spirit of survival among humans. In any human stories of survival, there are always those who rise above and beyond their duties to save others. We have myths and stories so we can celebrate such people. But in 2020 and 2021, we didn't have to dive into the world of fiction to find heroes. They lived in our neighborhoods, and in our villages and cities. You could find them at a health center, at a clinic or in a hospital.

The world owes a lot to doctors and healthcare workers. And calling them heroes seems almost petty because their work is often endless, and without any of the validation that comes from individual glorification. They are not superhumans and they are flawed. And if you go around asking doctors and health workers most will tell you they are just doing their jobs.

A job that seems superhuman. Long shifts. Multiple day shifts. The pressure of saving lives. The fear of getting infected and hence infecting your loved ones. Death. No one watches death at such close quarters, as part of their daily routine. The trauma from all of this will unravel in the coming years and we have to think about how we can be more humane towards our healthcare workers.

The starting point should definitely be

paying them salaries on time. Give them the infrastructure and support they deserve. Don't stigmatize them for doing their jobs at great risk to their personal safety. These are the basics and if the pandemic has done anything it is to remind us that we must value our doctors, nurses and other health workers. Build a more equitable and extensive health system. People's health should determine the rise and fall of governments. One can dream.

When the pandemic started it unraveled like a dystopia. Now because of scientists, doctors and health workers it seems like something we can deal with. That is such a powerful measure of progress and the least we can do is to constantly remind ourselves of the people who were responsible for it.

Human fragility has many facets. Apart from the physical healing, we also need mental healing. The pandemic and the ensuing isolation it brought upon us has taken a toll on our minds. Our psychological and behavioral patterns have changed. And it hasn't even spared the best of us - the doctors and other healthcare workers. It is well past time that mental health becomes a civilizational issue for human beings. The question of access is important when we talk about mental health rights and we must get to work on it immediately.

Apart from all the other things, the pandemic underlines the urgent need for equity; in vaccines, in access to healthcare facilities, in access to therapy. The pandemic has resulted in job loss and anxiety around cost of healthcare and threat to life for many. The people living on the margins have been pushed further out.

Persons with disabilities, chronic illnesses and with life limiting conditions have, in particular, been severely affected by the pandemic. Not only did the virus have a more devastating impact on their health, it

also broke down their treatments, access to care and isolated them from the rest of the world, anxious and alone. If and when we make it through the pandemic, let's hope the vulnerability we experienced will change the way we treat disabled and ill people across the world. From the lack of accessibility to physical spaces or to language, to missing welfare systems that they can fall back on, we have to plan not only for future pandemics but we must plan for a better and more equitable world.

Apart from physical and mental health, the third aspect that is of utmost importance is our spiritual health. What do you do when you are isolated and alone for two or three weeks? When you are locked down for months, trapped in fear and anxiety, sensorily deprived? Do you listen to music, watch TV shows that make you laugh, or do you write a poem? The pandemic has us all reading our favorite books, looking toward other worlds, real or imaginary, for relief and hope. It has us delving deep within to find all the creative energy within us and turn it into a thirty second video or a song that helps us heal.

If the world was unsure of what the purpose of humanities is, why it should be taught everywhere, in every stream, the pandemic years give you some powerful answers. Stories, songs, poems: they talk to us, show us a mirror, give us joy, make us hopeful. We have never been so fragile and alone. The need to heal and to be one with ourselves seems like as urgent a need as any so that we can come out of this

pandemic as better human beings and show ourselves and the rest of the world the empathy we deserve.

We are judged by how we behave during difficult times. And our civilization will definitely be judged by what we did during the pandemic. Did we become more humane? The question is a difficult one and only in time will we know whether we have become better or worse after the pandemic. But if the last year is anything to go by, there is some reason to be hopeful.

That said, we also live in a world where there is increased polarization about everything and anything. Our addiction to the digital is causing us some harm, altering our social behavior. We are more interested in differences than in similarities. But we have enough lessons in our hands to teach us what we need to do, where we need to go. Ultimately, it is us who have to follow the cues.

Lastly, the last one year has also been a year of loss. Irreparable loss. People have lost their family members, friends, and their neighbors. Many doctors and healthcare workers have lost their lives doing their duties. It will take a long time for everyone to heal. A poem, a song, a book can heal but nothing can heal like the presence of another human being. If we just remember that, and value the presence of human beings around us, and give them the respect, sensitivity, and empathy they deserve, we will come out with a better world on the other side of this pandemic.