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## **The Pandemic as Paradox: Preserving Life within a Global System that Denies Its Flourishing**

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**Abstract:** Professor Kuruvilla Pandikattu invited me to share some thoughts on our current pandemic situation and the challenges we face. The author first provides a very short bio, so that the readers may know something about the origins of the author's perspective: As a scientist with a PhD in molecular biophysics, training in virology, and interests in evolutionary biology and the origins of life, and more recently in semiotics and metaphysics, the author has received his formal education through the public schools of Texas, an enormous state within the U.S. sharing its entire southern border with Mexico. He is a second generation American: his mother emigrated and his father and his family had to emigrate from fairly comfortable lives in Latin America. Then the author looks at the paradox of the pandemic that we face today.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Paradox, Flourishing of Life, Universal Basic Income

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We are in the middle of a global pandemic that by official counts, which are always underestimates, has infected roughly 3% of us in under two years. 3% of *all* of us – 219 million of our 8 billion lives, with 4.55 million lost. The pandemic is extraordinary in its scale and speed. And perhaps equally impressive, we have developed, tested, and given billions of doses of vaccine against the relevant viral pathogen, SARS-CoV-2, with most of us inhabiting ‘wealthier’ countries getting the first chance at protection; this asymmetric response helps indicate a larger problem in need of solving: our economic backwardness, which is both global, existing between borders, and present in the majority of our nigh 200 countries.

Let me rephrase the title of my short essay as an assertion: the pandemic is a paradox in which we struggle to preserve life, our own and the lives of those we love, within a global system that denies life’s flourishing by existing, in large part, at the expense of the many: the bulk of humanity and the greater part of the living world. I will illustrate by considering our failure to prioritize three basic necessities of human life: food, shelter, and medicine (yes, medicine — even in the face of the absolute triumph of billions of doses of vaccine given across the world in less than two years).

## Food

I live in Houston, Texas, one of the biggest cities in the U.S., and the so-called ‘energy capital of the world’ for its concentration of companies in the oil and gas industry; and I work in the Texas Medical Center, the largest collection of hospitals and biomedical research institutes in the world — so much wealth and power in a single city. On several occasions starting a few months into the pandemic, my 40-minute commute swelled to two hours from a miles-long queue of cars whose drivers were waiting to receive food from a charity operating out of NRG Stadium, a massive venue where our local professional football team plays (athletes who make millions of dollars a year for crashing into each other at high speed and taking an oblong ball from one side of a field to the other). My fellow people in their hulking gas-guzzling machines of engineered steel and glass, each vehicle an extraordinary artefact of our technological civilization, complete with air conditioning and comfortable seats

designed to promote upright and attentive posture while driving, each waiting for a box of food to avoid the pain of hunger. *Must I go on?* Something is deeply wrong here. We place the horse in front of the cart and overdesign the cart while leaving the horse to starve. We need a safety net that works, one that makes us more robust to the spasms of our increasingly unstable world. A universal basic income (UBI) would help ensure that all people have the means to avoid hunger. UBI of the right size would also liberate us from a subsistence economy organized around maximizing profit for a few, allowing us to work not out of desperation but out of a desire to grow and contribute to meaningful activity. UBI could also support an effort to incentivize localized and sustainable food production. Integrating the production of food into massive and grey cities like Houston would beautify them, provide meaningful employment, and make us more resilient to natural and economic disasters to come.

## Shelter

Another story, but one concerning events occurring immediately before the pandemic. For several years, I would walk 1.5 miles from an open parking lot to my place of work. (The open parking lot is cheaper than the garage attached to my building.) The route, like all routes through Houston, is hardly safe for soft-bodied humans; but, like any winding path touched by the sun and wind, it has its beauty. One day I noticed a man living in a tent on a patch of well-kept grass overlooking Buffalo Bayou, one of the main drainage canals for the city, and across the street from one of MD Anderson's newest buildings, which happens to look like an ultra-modern luxury cruise ship. (MD Anderson is one of the largest and most prestigious biomedical research centers here, known for their advancements in anti-cancer therapies, especially immunotherapy.) I admired the clean camp he kept each of the ten or so times I passed before one day finding the lot empty, the grass cut, and a new shiny sign indicating that the patch of green belonged to no one but the cruise ship across the street. And the cruise ship permitted no camping or loitering of any kind; and the grass must be kept cut, free of weeds and people... We value property over lives and our cities show it. Homelessness continues to increase here and across the country. This crisis combines with the rampant use of methamphetamines and opioids among many of the most desperate, making zombies out of us, and is fundamentally part of a larger instability in housing that has only been made worse by the pandemic. A

few wealthy people can become interested in an area, a neighborhood, ‘invest’ in it by buying homes and property and trigger a wave of displacement by the rise in property taxes accompanying the increase in home prices. The displaced often have nowhere to go. A society that values life would not allow this to occur. Housing and ensuring people can stay in their homes must be prioritized over profit, during and forever after this pandemic.

## Medicine

Medicine is more than drugs and surgery. It is every therapeutic, intervention, action, attitude, and daily activity taken and performed to preserve and/or enhance health. Early in the pandemic, the message from our public health authorities was to wear a mask and socially distance, wash our hands, and wait for a vaccine. We now have effective vaccines (which many of my neighbours refuse, a symptom of growing instability and general distrust of authority that we can discuss elsewhere) and the message is to get vaccinated if you are not already, and to wear a mask and perhaps socially distance when in public and indoors; we are also awaiting the potential need for new vaccines to cover emerging variants of SARS-CoV-2. I am convinced that our public health authorities should be empowered to say more about the ways in which all of us can maximize our chances of surviving this pandemic and, in general, lead happier and healthier lives. For example, in their repeated messaging, our public health authorities make little to no mention of the major risk factors associated with severe COVID-19: age and general health status. The elderly have been far more likely to become severely sick or die, as well as those of us with any number of comorbidities (asthma, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, renal disease, etc.): only 8% of American adults hospitalized with COVID-19 have no known comorbidities. This is not to suggest that terrible surprises are impossible. COVID-19 is sometimes severe to deadly in young people of apparently perfect health. But in their conformity and perhaps fear, our public health authorities repeat only what is incontrovertibly true in a simple world ruled by logic, thereby coming across as cold and distant messengers of bare truths. We need generalists empowered to lovingly speak to the masses of us, to help guide us through our stress-filled lives and out of this mess. Such an authority could lead the creation of a slate of public service announcements (PSAs) communicating actions that can be taken by everyone to better their health

and maximize their odds of surviving COVID-19. For example, a PSA appearing on YouTube might describe the connection between vitamin D levels and immune health. It would make clear that vitamin D (a steroid hormone) is a critical component of general and immune health and is synthesized in our bodies through a process requiring sunlight; darker-skinned people require more sunlight to obtain adequate levels of vitamin D than lighter-skinned people; but everyone needs it, and nearly everyone can make use of going outside and certain dietary sources (fatty fish, fortified foods, supplements) to obtain it. But we don't do these things. We succumb to fear, especially the fear of being wrong, and we prioritize corporate will over the needs of all of us. This has to change.

Our technological hyper-sophistication and difficulties providing the basic necessities of human life (food, shelter, medicine) point to the painful paradox we find ourselves in: preserving life in the face of a pandemic within a global system that denies life's flourishing. We did not even touch on the climate and ecological crises menacing us, our young people especially. *What can we do?* We can meet our high science and technology with legal and economic systems that prioritize the basic needs of a humanity living sustainably on a living Earth. We can and must make a global economic system unlike the present one: one that is a gardener, not a devourer, of worlds.



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