

## **Taking Stock When It Feels the World Is Falling Apart**

Nathan O. Hatch

March 17, 2020

The last two weeks have seen our world turned upside down. The spread of COVID-19 and necessary steps taken to fight its spread have led to the greatest disruption to higher education in our lifetime.

I am profoundly grateful to the Wake Forest community — faculty, staff, students, administration, trustees and alumni — and for the many ways they have responded to this crisis. We have had teams working day and night assessing in real time the advice of health experts, other universities, local and state governments, and experts in crisis management. And, on a daily basis, we have had teams giving advice on how best to structure academic life remotely, how to maintain operations for those students who remain on campus, how to handle visitors to campus and many other questions.

I am especially thankful to the faculty who this week are reorienting their whole approach to teaching, turning from in-person engagement to the delivery of quality remotely. And I am grateful to all the staff who are working with might and main to assist in that process.

Organizations are tested when crises descend upon them — and in recent days, we have faced an organizational tsunami. I could not be more grateful and proud of the Wake Forest community for the way it is banding together to meet these profound challenges. I have witnessed a remarkable weaving together of expertise, goodwill, cooperation, tireless work, strategic thinking and good humor. It is a privilege to be on a ship like Wake Forest amidst fierce winds and rising tides.

Times like this — when we feel as if the very world is falling apart — prompt questions, spur internal unrest and leave us seeking some semblance of normalcy. Because of that, I want to take a moment to share some thoughts with you.

In recent weeks, Julie and I have been reading the new book by Erik Larson, “The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family and Defiance During the Blitz.” It is an intimate, almost daily, account of Churchill and his family and close associates during the summer and fall of 1940. What was it like to endure 57 consecutive nights of bombing in London with death, fire and destruction their daily fair and a German

invasion imminent? How did they, and all of London, survive in these darkest hours “under Hitler’s tempest of steel”?

As their world fell apart, and fear gripped even the bravest soul, Churchill and his band were remarkably determined and resolute — even hopeful. The crisis at hand elicited from besieged Londoners a remarkable capacity for coming together and caring for each other. Amidst daily destruction, “fires raging all over the place,” larger buildings turned into skeletons and small homes into rubble, Londoners stuck together, braved walking to their jobs despite the danger and volunteered with self-sacrifice. At night, many Londoners would retreat for safety into the Underground, and several of these shelters even began publishing journals and bulletins to lift spirits and give orientation to those who assembled each evening.

Often disasters like war and earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes have the effect of bringing people together. A great example was the experience of Wake Forest Distinguished Alumna Jane Owens Cage (’78) who led a remarkable relief effort following the catastrophic tornado in Joplin, Missouri, in May 2011. In the face of unimaginable destruction, the citizens of Joplin banded together and, with her leadership, met immediate human need and worked to rebuild the city. [1]

But not every crisis brings people together. In fact, David Brooks has recently written that pandemics often do the opposite — driving people apart. He quotes the great diarist Daniel Defoe, who wrote about the 1665 London epidemic in “A Journal of the Plague Year”: “This was a time when everyone’s private safety lay so near them; they had no room to pity the distresses of others...” Yale historian Frank Snowden, the author of “Epidemics and Society,” suggests that such crises hold a mirror up to society and force us to ask the most basic of questions: What is it like to face mortality? Where is God in all of this? What is our responsibility to one another? [2]

We at Wake Forest all have seen our day-to-day reality turned topsy-turvy. The normal patterns of life have been rudely upended as we face the reality of COVID-19 and its implications for our own health and that of our families and communities.

In light of our situation, let me offer four thoughts about how we might approach life in a time of crisis.

**First, we must not overreact in fear.** Every precaution needs to be taken and medical and public health advice sought out and heeded. But we also should recognize

what can happen when, suddenly, we are not in control and are subject to ominous and unpredictable forces — in this case, a mysterious disease. It is okay to be scared, but we can easily feel trapped and let fear run wild. Taking one day at a time, we must regain our solid footing and not let irrational fear turn us against one another rather than toward each other.

**Second, we need perspective.** Life on planet Earth has, more often than not, been a vale of tears, where people forged meaning and found hope amidst dire situations. I am reminded of the words of C.S. Lewis who, at the dawn of the nuclear age, cautioned people not to fixate on the threats posed by the Cold War. These words ring with some relevance today if we replace “atomic bomb” with “coronavirus.”

In one way, we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. “How are we to live in an atomic age?” I am tempted to reply: “Why, as you would have lived in the 16th century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents.”

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. ... The first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things — praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children ... not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds. [3]

**Third, we need time for reflection, sorting out what is really**

**important.** Many of us focus far too much time and attention on achieving success — in the classroom, law office, hospital or boardroom. Others follow a quest for popularity or a journey of simply living the good life. Staying at home provides an opportunity to read and reflect, a time for self-examination: What are my priorities? Does my investment of time align with them? How can I become a better family member and friend? Is my personal ambition tempered by genuine commitment to serve the common good — to live in the spirit of *Pro Humanitate*.

**Finally, we need to make sure that the stress of this crisis bends us toward each other.** We need the discipline and conviction to lift our eyes beyond merely our personal and family safety and security when possible. What are the needs of our neighbors, our classmates, our colleagues from work? Who can we befriend even if it is

by phone or FaceTime?

We also need to recognize that a pandemic usually hits hardest the vulnerable. Even as we live, of necessity, in more isolated ways, we must find the means to become aware of the needs of those who may lose employment, struggle with child care, are unable to pay their bills or face medical emergencies. To be sure, the current pandemic poses severe challenges on all of us. But in the midst of that reality, we must find ways to take seriously those least supported in weathering the storm.

Friends, as we face the unknown together, take heart, gain perspective, renew your purposes, look up and reach out. We will surely endure this season and come out stronger on the other side.

Sincerely,  
Nathan O. Hatch  
President

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[1] A similar example is how the people of Anchorage Alaska came together after the Great Alaska Earthquake of 1964. See Jon Mooallem, "This is How You Live When the World Falls Apart, *New York Times*, March 12, 2020.

[2] David Brooks, "Pandemics Kill Compassion, Too," *New York Times*, March 12, 2020.

[3] C. S. Lewis, "On Living in an Atomic Age" (1948) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*