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A BRUSH WITH DEATH CAN STRIP US OF OUR HUMANITY, OR HELP US DISCOVER IT

IT WAS NOT that long ago that the future of work was a major preoccupation for those of us who practised, wrote about and studied management. We wrote about it with urgency and worked hard to be found prepared. The robots were coming, the gig economy was growing fast and in a decade or two even our jobs might be done by algorithms. We had so much future to worry about.

Those were the days. Since coronavirus arrived, we have not stopped worrying. We work and write with even more alacrity. But now the ‘new normal’ is our preoccupation. The switch has been so sudden that it has left me wondering what happened to the future of work. Maybe we fear that there is no future and we can’t bring ourselves to say it. Or maybe the future has arrived all at once, and all we have left to do is adapt.

The collapse of the future is shocking but it is not that unusual. In fact, the feeling that the future we had imagined has vanished, and the present is all we have to work with now, is a quintessentially human experience. It’s exactly how we feel when we encounter an existential threat – and come to terms with the proximity of death. All that stuff we usually try to avoid by either worrying about the future or busying ourselves with work.

If you have had a close encounter with death through accident, illness, injury, betrayal or bereavement, you know what it is like when our feeble defences fail. In some cases, it can be traumatising. We survive wounded, numb, trapped in the present and vulnerable to demagoguery that distracts us from despair. In other cases, we emerge from the rubble of a lost future more resolute, more generous and more hopeful.

Encountering mortality can strip us of our humanity. Equally, it can

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help us discover it. Which road will we take as we work through the collapse of the old future? To answer that, consider that the Covid-19 pandemic is not just a personal threat. It is a collective one that shrunk the future of work into an uncertain present, isolation and endless video calls. None of those are entirely new.

Workplace and market trends that had begun before the pandemic hit have spread faster. Institutional and personal vulnerabilities that we were already aware of have been fully exposed. The future, for once, is here and it is evenly distributed. I

have no doubt that the crisis will prove to be a boon for algorithmic capitalism, as we have turned even more to technology and its leaders to sustain and organise our lives. Unfortunately, the Taylorist and totalitarian leanings of much technology, and many of its leaders, risks dehumanising us by exploiting our desires, loosening connections and suppressing our defiance.

I have written before that we need a novel human relations movement that promotes human desires and protects our defiance. In that, at least, these months have provided some glimmers of hope. Many of us have found during the weeks of confinement that remote work does not have to be less human. Solidarity with essential workers. Efforts to be more honest and compassionate. Glimpses into co-workers’ private lives through the window of our screens. Care, frustration and exhaustion during those video conferences. Those have all been signs of a defiant humanity and of our desire to be our full selves and to be together at work all the more.

They have also been reminders that what makes us human is not the circumstances we work in – or the tools we use. It’s the connections that we are able to sustain. A crisis might rob us of our future, for a while. But so long as we have each other, we’ll make another one.