

Stop Fighting the Coronavirus

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Since COVID-19 stormed its way across the globe, we have found ourselves “fighting” the pandemic, singing paeans to “frontline” workers, and stoically accepting collateral damage. Did you spot something weird about that sentence? It was about a pandemic, not a military conflict. War has become the official metaphor of the pandemic and it warps the way we see ourselves, our colleagues, and our society.

Metaphors are compasses we fashion from familiar concepts and situations to navigate unfamiliar ones. Our relationship with war is ancient and it lends itself readily to many of our nonviolent endeavors: healing the sick, political campaigns, and debates. Martial metaphors are accessible and rally people with celerity in urgent situations. Yet, precisely because we have a long relationship with war, martial metaphors carry immense baggage.

The logic of war necessitates hatred of the enemy, abandonment of the indefensible, and an acceptance of collateral damage and the loss of life. When I hear vitriol against the Chinese, when I hear people argue that some deaths are acceptable to restart the economy, when I read that the virus ripped through homeless communities and slums, and when I see people find valor in defying social-distancing (“Give me liberty or give me COVID-19”), it is clear that the logic of war can become dangerous when extrapolated to pandemics.

War metaphors took their toll on my well-being. As an Infectious Diseases doctor, my clinical work strangely distanced me from COVID-19 patients since it was principally cognitive: translating clinical data into treatment recommendations based on the kinetic body of medical literature. I couldn’t quite meet the eye of clinicians who were breathing the same air as the patients thereby putting their own bodies at risk. After all, in war, most heroes are on the frontlines and people behind the lines are somehow less essential. I felt survivor’s guilt and desired to also put myself at risk if only for symbolism. I know I am not alone in feeling this way.

But pandemics are not wars. Blood pressure still needs to be managed, depression still needs to be treated, and research is crucial to understand what works and what doesn’t. Even beyond medicine, the role of essential workers who have toiled in obscurity has become evident. Grocery stores have to be stocked, electricity has to be generated, and garbage has to be collected. We all have a

part to play. It’s time to stop fighting coronavirus and find a new compass for navigating this pandemic.

Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement*, notes that there are only three types of stories: an individual pitted against nature, an individual pitted against another individual, or an individual pitted against themselves. Perhaps due to our ability to control our immediate environment, modern literature has focused on conflict between individuals or conflicts within individuals. Conflict with nature has been consigned to the realm of science fiction, fantasy novels, and magical realism. But we do in fact live in a world where earthquakes, hurricanes, and pandemics occur. Each exemplifies man being humbled by nature. Why do we force the metaphor of war, an anthropogenic strife, upon a pandemic?

My favorite American novel is *Moby Dick*. The novel accommodates all three types of stories: Ahab’s battle against his own demons, the conflict among the Pequod’s colorful crew members, and the battle between the Pequod and a 160-ton whale! The whale that batters the ship in the end is a force of nature. The whirlpool that sucks hapless crew members into lethal depths is not just a metaphysical concept.

Inspired by Melville, I recast the pandemic as a stormy sea, frothing with danger, and humankind as a weathered ship buffeted by the winds and waves. This metaphor captures the urgency of the pandemic and pits us as a collective against an all-engulfing natural phenomenon impartial to politics. On the ship every crew member has a crucial role to play: charting a course towards safety, manning the engines, or calming the passengers. There are no trenches, no front lines. Everyone can take pride in the role they play. Even the passengers play an important role by staying in their cabins, thus not jeopardizing their lives or those of the crew. Every life counts and people are never flung overboard to save the ship—everyone is in it together. I find that this is a more inclusive metaphor and arguably a more appropriate one as we can all find value in our role and none can be devalued. Our interdependence is explicit.

Importantly, the stormy ship metaphor gives us agency in a way that war does not. Declarations of war do not start pandemics and treaties cannot end them. The virus does not attack us out of malice or agenda-- it’s amoral, apolitical. In many ways, COVID-19 didn’t go viral; it

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went human. We are the vectors. Our lifestyle is the virulence factor. Our channels of trade and travel are the dynamic of transmission. We steered our global community into this storm through the way we live and the way we interact with our planet. We amplified it through denial, through regionalism, and by marginalizing the most vulnerable among us. When we emerge on the other side of the tempest, we must come together as a community and reimagine our world.

It's time to stop waging war on the coronavirus. Let's work together to bring our imperiled ark to placid waters.

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