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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I write because I want to know how you are doing. More than ever before, this is the time to build interconnectedness and community.

I write to you from New York City, one of the global epicenters of the pandemic. The “city that never sleeps” is now a ghost town. It is eerily quiet and bereft of the incredible sound and diverse people who used to be in constant motion. Its more fortunate denizens are safely confined to their homes as we learn about rising death tolls, monitor our health and figure out ways to cope with fears and anxieties. Those less fortunate are now forced to live in their homes with their abusers and to brave the outside to earn a living.

For those of us lucky enough to be able to maintain some degree of safety and health, this has been a time too for contemplation, meditation, simplicity, and hope. We are reminded of what matters most – health, family, civic responsibility, resilience and personal leadership. Some of us realize that this pandemic reveals how unsustainable our current systems have been. We are now called upon to act on these principles.

One of the key lessons that we are all witnessing is the centrality of leadership in our world. In a seeming surprising turn of events, this virus has brought the world’s richest nations to their knees. (The only exception right now is Germany, led by a widely admired female leader.) The U.S. has been temporarily vanquished and ceded its claim to being a super power. This crisis reveals the limitations of our leaders. No nation, no matter how powerful and rich, can fell this pandemic when dangerous and ignorant leaders lead it.

The rise of populism and nationalism over the past few years in the world has resulted in the election of a new genre of so-called leaders who threaten democracy, egalitarianism and secularism. How can we rapidly address this novel coronavirus crisis, with minimal social and economic consequences, with such leaders in charge? What will happen to nations with weak leaders and with extremely limited health care systems and resources? How can such leaders be expected to address the deepening global economic and social eruptions that this pandemic will cause, especially for low-income and marginalized communities? Will dangerous leaders use this pandemic as an excuse to avoid addressing the gargantuan problems of inequality, human rights and the climate crisis?

Dangerous and weak leaders cannot help us navigate this crisis. We desperately need other voices, other paradigms. As always, this is a time for each of us to play a role in changing these leaders and model the type of leadership we seek. Time is ripe for action toward the transformational change that most of us have spent our lives advancing. We have the opportunity now to advance a paradigm shift that is centered on the inter-related principles equality, justice, sustainability and health care for all. As Arundhati Roy articulately states:

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

Each of us has a part to play in building and maintaining this portal toward a new world. I choose to contribute by working in the nonprofit sector, by sharing knowledge and by offering my inspirations.

In terms of sharing knowledge, here is a recent blog I posted on key leadership lessons for nonprofits. Like nations and communities, the quality of our leadership in times of crisis is essential. We must lead with compassion and empathy for the concerns of all people, while also adapting our priorities to this extraordinary situation and to financial realities.

I’d also like to make an offering of some of what inspires me.

My first is an image of an art work that I am privileged to experience at every day in my home by the Brazilian artist, Beatriz Milhazes.



Photo credit: Beatriz Milhazes, “Water Dreaming”, Durham Press, 2013 Copyright: Beatriz Milhazes, 2013

In this work, entitled “Water Dreaming,” I sense the universality of a spiritual call about the fluidity and beauty of a key life support system – water. We each may dream differently

about water and perhaps it too contains collective dreams. This work inspires me to dream of worlds that I can't imagine, but that may exist – it has the siren call of the familiar yet unknown.

As always, poetry remains an endless source of inspiration and an offering I make in each of my letters. Here is something beautiful for these times by Hafiz, a 14th century Persian lyric poet who wrote numerous ghazals (a form of poetry) expressing love and spirituality.

All the Hemispheres

Leave the familiar for a while.
Let your senses and bodies stretch out

Like a welcomed season
Onto the meadows and shores and hills.

Open up to the Roof.
Make a new watermark on your excitement
And love.

Like a blooming night flower,
Bestow your vital fragrance of happiness
And giving
Upon our intimate assembly.

Change rooms in your mind for a day.

All the hemispheres in existence
Lie beside an equator
In your heart.

Greet yourself
In your thousand other forms
As you mount the hidden tide and travel
Back home.

All the hemispheres in heaven
Are sitting around a fire
Chatting.

While stitching themselves together
Into the Great Circle inside of
You.

From: "The Subject Tonight is Love"
Translated by: Daniel Ladinsky

I hope that you will choose to reach out and share how you too are building a portal to a better world. After all, the future has a future.

With best of wishes for health and safety,
Anika