Crises, and the Ethic of Finitude

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Abstract

In his postapocalyptic novel, *Those Who Remain*, G. Michael Hopf (2016) makes an important observation about the effect crises can have on human psychology by noting that "hard times create strong [humans]" (loc. 200). While the catastrophic effects of the recent COVID-19 outbreak are incontestable, there are arguments to be made that the situation itself could be *materia prima* of a more grounded, and authentic generation of humanity, at least in theory. In this article I draw on Heidegger's early, implicit *ethic of finitude* as well as his later work surrounding the nature of technology, and place them into dialogue with a global milieu contextualized by worldwide pandemic. I approach this discussion from two different angles: in the first part, I explicate the ethic of finitude, and use it as a framework to describe the observable behavior of communities worldwide in order to better understand how global crises impact the psychical welfare of individual human beings. In the second part, I apply lessons given to us by the later Heidegger, specifically those oriented around the movement away from calculative thinking, in an effort to define a loose, albeit fundamentally ennobling prescriptive aimed at easing the existential strain of the situation we have found ourselves in.

Keywords: Heidegger, finitude, existentialism, ethics, crisis

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In his postapocalyptic novel, *Those Who Remain*, G. Michael Hopf (2016) makes an important observation about the effect crises can have on human psychology by noting that "hard times create strong [humans]" (loc. 200). While the catastrophic effects of the recent COVID-19 outbreak are incontestable, there are arguments to be made that the situation itself could be *materia prima* of a more grounded, and authentic generation of humanity, at least in theory. In this article I draw on Heidegger's early, implicit *ethic of finitude* as well as his later work surrounding the nature of technology, and place them into dialogue with a global milieu contextualized by worldwide pandemic. I approach this discussion from two different angles: in the first part, I explicate the ethic of finitude, and use it as a framework to describe the observable behavior of communities worldwide in order to better understand how global crises impact the psychical welfare of individual human beings. In the second part, I apply lessons given to us by the later Heidegger, specifically those concerned with the movement away from calculative thinking, in an effort to define a loose, albeit fundamentally ennobling prescriptive aimed at mediating the existential strain of the situation we have found ourselves in. Make no mistake: there is a deep irony in the fact that this essay attempts to highlight the potential dangers that technology poses for humanity during times of crises while simultaneously relying on that same technology to exist, and be disseminated. However, the intent here is not to excoriate technology, or its users for that matter, but to draw critical awareness to the problem at hand since, as one has well said, "one inveighs against [technology], but one goes on using it" (Orwell 1958, p. 205).

It is important, before proceeding, to first define the ethic of finitude as precisely as possible since Heidegger (2008) himself never explicitly refers to the concept as such in *Being and Time*. In order to unpack the term it becomes necessary to examine each foundational word on its own terms, although, seeing as ethics are discussed across most academic disciplines, belaboring the issue by explaining what constitutes an "ethical system" is beyond the scope of

this essay. All that must be understood for the purposes of this discussion is that an ethic can

be defined as a certain, or particular way of acting in and toward the world, or, to maintain some

semblance of Heideggerian tone, how to "be" in our day-to-day comportment. This

understanding becomes especially significant in proximity to the notion of finitude, a term that

might be more easily recognized within a lexical framework typically associated with the

Swabian phenomenologist: *temporality*.

For those unfamiliar with Heidegger's (2008) oeuvre, temporality is the *unifying structure*

of *Dasein*.[1] From the perspective of authentic temporality, Dasein "wins" itself when it commits

to anticipatory resoluteness, a state characterized by a striving toward "Self-constancy and

totality" even though neither condition is completely obtainable within the bounds of Dasein's

finitude (p. 370/¶ 65). In accordance with Heidegger, *anticipation*, and *resoluteness* indicate a

facing, or conscious *Being-towards* something, specifically and ultimately towards one's

ownmost-potentiality-for-Being, namely death, as well as the array of possibilities through which

Dasein understands itself. By describing that which anticipatory resoluteness is "*coming*

toward," the past as "*having been*" makes itself known, a confusing statement that might better

be understood as such: whatever future one chooses to project oneself towards—within each

individual's field of possibilities—impacts or changes the significance of occurrences in that

individual's past, which in turn influences, in an almost unquestionable way, one's

predispositional understanding of one's ownmost possibilities, including death. While there is

not enough time in this essay to explicate the concept of death to the extent that it ought to be

discussed, there is still another relevant point that must be grasped before moving forward: in

describing the effect that death has on the they-Self—the version of the Self that is dissolved in

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[1] Dasein literally translates to "there-being," and for Heidegger (2008) indicates the existential condition [*eksistenz*] of a being for whom Being is a concern i.e. human Being. While there is hardly time to fully expound upon the intricacies of this term at this time, for this particular article it should be understood that when Dasein is referred to it is to be taken as a qualitative descriptor for a human being.

the benumbing effect of *das Man*—Heidegger notes a wrenching motion that pulls the Self back to itself, and away from the passivity of average-everydayness. This wrenching, according to Heidegger, is incontrovertibly tied to the conscience that arises from Dasein's anxiousness about, and subsequent resoluteness toward its own demise. Therefore death, or more precisely the conscious awareness of death, is that "thing" that narrows Dasein's horizon of possibilities, and forces it to consider the meaningfulness of what it is doing at any given moment. For a better lack of words, when properly acknowledged death's impending nature "puts things" into perspective for a human, thus individuating the Self "with respect to [its] Dasein" in the process (Heidegger 1977, p. 6). The question about which particular "things" are or are not put into perspective in such a way is, to a limited degree, a matter of individual temperament: what is meaningful for one person will certainly lack the same significance for another. Therefore, the things that matter can, on the whole, only be arrived after the Self and its possibilities have been genuinely thought through with respect to its finite nature.

That being said, the problem with a perspective oriented by finitude is that in addition to illuminating whatever potentiality an individual might be capable of, it also discloses, in acute fashion, the fullest extent of that individual's insufficiencies, which all too frequently humans seem keen to avoid at any cost. The evidence of this is all too apparent in recent headlines from various reporting agencies: For instance, the response to the first month or so of quarantine has, according to *Forbes*, been met with a considerable increase in less-than-productive, leisurely activities. While it would be inappropriate to delve into this report extensively, it is prudent to take a moment to describe a few of the article's key observations: "according to Nielsen, a nearly 100-year-old marketing research and ratings firm, studies show that 'alcohol sales were up fifty-five percent in the week ending March [21st]'"; 36 million dollars-worth of marijuana was sold during the month of March as well, and one prominent adult-entertainment site saw their monthly online traffic increase by nearly 12 percent (Kelly 2020). Those details may come as a shock to some, however, within an existential framework they make perfect

sense; similar responses to the bipolar threat of death and boredom are, for example, all too common in soldiers freshly deployed to the Middle East, and are what Heidegger would describe as *inauthentic*. For those who have not had the opportunity to wade through the neologistic bog that is *Being and Time*, this term might seem inherently negative, but such an interpretation of the matter is simply not the case. In fact, for Heidegger, inauthenticity is Dasein's typical mode of Being as far as its day-to-day comportment is concerned: "[It] does not signify any 'less' Being or any 'lower' degree of Being," says Heidegger (2008)," Rather . . . even in its fullest concretion Dasein can be characterized by inauthenticity—when busy, when excited, when interested, when ready for enjoyment." (p. 68/H. 43). In short, inauthenticity might be better understood as the un-conscious state[2] we experience when we are distracted—intentionally or otherwise—by the world in which we are inextricably enmeshed, and therefore ought to be regarded as totally natural, and, under certain conditions which will be discussed in the second half of this essay, a necessary aspect of a well-rounded existence.

Why then is it important to differentiate between the two states of being—authenticity, and inauthenticity—if both are considered natural conditions of the human Dasein? The answer to that question would have hardly been self-evident in earlier human epochs as evidenced by the thinking put forth in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2006). With that said, *Being and Time* was published in 1927, a year before the advent of sound films (Eyman 1997), and two decades before television would become a household staple in the West (Stephens 1993). Heidegger's (1977) thinking about inauthenticity would subsequently coevolve with technology throughout the years, culminating in *The Question Concerning Technology*, which sought to explicate Heidegger's growing concern with the way "modern technology" enframes [*ge-stell*] the human

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[2] It is important to note that when I speak of an un-conscious state, I do not mean the unconscious as described by psychoanalysts such as Freud or Jung, but the altogether different form of consciousness that Heidegger (1995) describes as "being-away," and is most conspicuous when one is asleep although can be experienced when one is "not there" in a social situation in waking life (p. 63). A more profound examination of this concept is explored in the works of Medard Boss (1957), which I have included in the references of this text.

experience into a commodified "standing-reserve" [*bestand*], not unlike the way electricity as it is

gathered, and stored by hydroelectric stations (p. 21).[3] In a fashion typical of his thinking,

Heidegger maintains that the issue is a manageable one, asserting that despite the possibility of

danger posed by enframing, and being in-reserve, the answer to the problems posed by

technology are to be found within the danger itself. That may well be true, however, it stands to

reason that, in consideration of recent technological developments, a reassessment of the

severity of the issues surrounding technology is necessary. One might be inclined to argue that

regardless of how benign inauthenticity might be as a naturally occurring state, that prolonged

technological distraction unmediated by the backdrop of death constitutes a point, if not *the*

point where existential suffering finds foothold in essence of Dasein.

To verify this, one need only turn to the 136,000,000 results for "what to do during the

quarantine" a simple *Google* search produces: according to *The New York Times*, domains

such as *Facebook,* and *Netflix* have seen a steep surge in usage, with the former seeing a 27

percent rise, and the latter a 16 percent rise in site traffic respectively (Koeze 2020). These

numbers are all the more startling when one considers the already preexisting, unhealthy

obsession with media that characterized the global community prior to the rise of COVID-19

(Pietrangelo 2019), and the lack of positive affectivity[4] it has shown during the resulting

quarantine period (Kirzinger et al. 2020). With respect to this issue, there are arguments to be

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[3] Heidegger's (1977) example of this is the power station that was recently constructed at the mouth of the Rhine River around the time he composed this essay (p. 16). While this may seem innocuous at a glance, Heidegger's observation is important because he was effectively able to predict the direction technological advances would take, and the effect they would have on the human condition.

[4] While the issue of technology is not explicitly discussed in Kirzinger et al.'s article, the rather significant 19 percent spike in individuals who feel as though their mental health has been significantly, negatively impacted during the quarantine period throws the mollifying effect of technological access into doubt at the very least. It would be interesting, in future research, to determine how our reliance on technology ultimately impacts the psychological welfare of humanity after COVID-19 is quelled. It may come to pass that the technology of the 21st century may exhibit more positive, redeeming effects on the psychological condition of humanity than I am capable of recognizing in any substantial way at this particular moment.

made that the issue of the Internet can, and should be considered a digital "public sphere" using a Habermasian framework, or an "evolved superego" from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, however, there seems to be no immediate reason to deviate from a Heideggerian (2008) line of thinking that would qualitatively assess such unreconciled distractions as manifestations of *das Man*, otherwise known as the "They." For those unfamiliar with Heidegger (2008), a more negotiable conceptualization of *das Man* would be to consider it "the One"; an impersonal, external force that prescribes that "one ought to do this," or "that" in any particular situation. The presence of *das Man* has a variety of implications for Dasein: everyday Being-among-one-another; distantiality; averageness; levelling down; publicness; the disburdening of one's Being, and accommodation are all effects to be contended with whilst absorbed within the pacifying dictatorship of *das Man*. Individual Dasein who allow themselves to thoughtlessly exist as "They-Selves" have their vision clouded, and, according to Heidegger, are "constantly *going wrong . . .* in [their] projects, as regards the genuine possibilities of Being" (p. 218/ H. 174).

It becomes necessary at this juncture to pause, and consider precisely what it means to be "going wrong" in such a way. Although the word *wrong* (n.d.) is Old English in origin, it stems from variations of the Proto-Germanic word *wrang*, which means "to bend," the Old Norse *rangr*, meaning "crooked," and to a lesser extent the Dutch word *wranc*, "to sour." Not ironically, the root of each of these terms, *wer*, (n.d.) is part of a greater Proto-Indo-European language that means "to turn." Those comfortable with classic horror film tropes might recognize this as the linguistic prefix for the lycanthropically affected, otherwise known as were-wolves. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise when we stumble upon instances of "turning" in our day-to-day lives, and immediately recognize its inherently negative quality: Anakin Skywalker turns to the dark side of the Force in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy; milk sours or turns when left unrefrigerated, and, as a popularized inversion of the old idiomatic phrase goes, "one wrong turn deserves another" (Michell 2002). In response to the psychopathological state of his

patients, Medard Boss (1982) characterizes this phenomenon as a distortion or arrestation of

Dasein's fundamental "world-openness," which contextualizes or illuminates the Being of

entities it encounters (p. 170). This, however, seems to be an inadequate assessment of human

psychology given the current situation unless we are willing to consider the possibility that a

large portion of humanity *in globo* has developed a pathological, and especially pervasive form

of neuroses. That possibility may well be true in the final analysis, but at this particular moment

in time it would, at best, be an especially difficult position to maintain since it implies a deliberate

facing, and being-toward-death punctuated by inauthentic comportment.

Heidegger's conceptualization of "fleeing in the face of death" appears to be a more apt

description of the present state of things. "This looking-away from [the end of Being-in-the-

world]," says Heidegger (2008), "is in itself a mode of that Being-towards-the-end which is

ecstatically futural," albeit inauthentic, and characterized by levelled off interpretations of time

punctuated by statements proclaiming that one always "has time" (p. 477/H. 425). That claim,

as a matter of fact, could not be farther from the Truth. In actuality we are always losing time,

and there is no amount of time that is lost without existential consequence. While it is important

to recognize the necessity of "taking time for ourselves" in small doses, especially when faced

with the proposition of prolonged (or renewed) quarantine, I see no other recourse but to argue

that continually using technology to avoid confronting the reality of death—an event no person

will ever actively encounter, but each is destined to fulfill in their own particular way—constitutes

an abdication of a categorical, existential obligation that everybody shares equally in measure,

albeit individually in consequence: the obligation to choose authenticity or inauthenticity for

ourselves. Winning authenticity for any individual, at least in the Heideggerian sense, requires a

continual process of communication and struggle, both with the world, and the other entities one

is always alongside in-the-world as well as one's own possibilities. This process, it should be

noted, is nothing short of heroic in its undertaking, and the possible consequence of not

committing to this ethic on an individual level, namely, an irreparable incongruence or total loss

of Self, would be nothing short of catastrophic in an existential sense. This should not be misinterpreted as romanticizing death's unavoidability, but the struggle of understanding ourselves and our possibilities in reference to our impending demise; what is heroic about authenticity (or resolute anticipation) are the sacrifices finite beings make as individuals in order to exist authentically. As it pertains to the specific issue of the Internet, it has already been made clear that there is nothing intrinsically authentic or inauthentic about it, or any other "thing" for that matter. If what determines authenticity is how an individual chooses to act in reference to their potentiality contextualized by the tragedy of finitude, then even the Internet and all of its trappings can play its part in a manifoldly authentic existence.

At any rate, it is impossible to deny that the critique I am levying at humanity's apparent interwovenness with technology has taken on a decidedly censoriousness, finger-wagging tone that must be reckoned with if Heidegger's lost ethic is to be appropriated by a wider array of people. It is worth taking a moment here to clarifiy realities about the current situation that juxtapose my previously critical assessment: first, I believe it reasonable to suggest that the technology we have on hand, particularly that of the social variety, will, for all its troubles, be viewed by future generations as the keystone that allowed the greater social structure to remain workably intact. Second, it is important to acknowledge the understanding that the technology is already here, and has been for some time now; the genie cannot, as it were, be driven back into its bottle, and any attempt to hypothesize as to how one might do so would be little more than a fruitless thought-experiment, and possibly not even that. Be that as it may, I believe Orwell (1958) said it best when he admitted that "the machine has got to be accepted [although] it is probably better to accept it as one accepts a drug—that is, grudgingly and suspiciously" (p. 203). Unfortunately, Orwell likely would have been critical toward our lack of judiciousness regarding the matter, although Heidegger doubtlessly would have been unsurprised by such a turn of events. Ultimately, there seems to be little justification for the frivolous manner in which have imbricated our existence with the digital sphere. Therefore, for the rest of this article I shift

focus from the existential threat posed by contagion, and our arguably unadmirable response to that threat toward a different modality that, although idealistic, presents itself as a way forward in a time when humanity *feels* lost, if only we had the fortitude to seize it.

Before moving on, it would be useful to briefly summarize the main points that have been discussed thus far: the ethic of finitude describes a way of being in the world oriented by our Being-toward-death. Resolute anticipation i.e. "being authentic" toward death brings individuating possibilities into focus, and compels us to act thusly in the world, however briefly. This is not some "mere" epiphanic or visionary moment, in spite of the poetic language Heidegger utilizes to describe the matter in the second half of *Being and Time* (Maltby 2002, p. 88). It is not some pre-historical, unmediated, or monadic form of transfigurative knowledge that emanates from within. To the contrary: the transfigurative truth of Being-towards-death is precisely and distantially that which is farthest away from us, and it requires nothing short of a miraculous and constant struggle on the part of each and every individual to achieve. And even if individual humans do, in their own, atomized way, "come to terms" with the concept of their respective deaths, it is never, in any way, an unmediated experience. Technology—social media in particular—is useful in that it distracts Dasein from confronting its unique Being-toward-death, or more appropriately, the struggle of becoming resolute toward death. A relationship with technology unmediated by finitude enmeshes us in *das Man* more thoroughly than any distraction of modernity. The question, therefore, is how to contend with such a distraction in an era when such technology is all too prevalent?

In order to answer that question, perhaps it would be appropriate to acknowledge what one ought not do, namely "over-theorizing" about the situation in which we happen to be situated, something apparent in everyday life, both on the part of contemporary news sources as well as everyday-Janes and Joes who theorize about this or that on their respective social media pages. This should not come as a surprise to anybody; relevant literature on the subject has made it clear that humans are pattern-oriented creatures (see Szyf, McGowan, Turecki, &

Meaney, 2010; Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, & Peterson 2009; Lynch 2014), therefore when we

believe we see a pattern in a given narrative the natural inclination is to point it out, which in and

of itself would be theoretically useful, provided, of course, it move beyond superficial

observation into something deeper, and more transformative. That being said, the problem with

"tedious intellectualness," says Kerouac (2005), is that all too frequently it tends to be the

manifestation of a technocratic ideology that neither researches, nor argues the "knowledge" it

claims to be able to justify (p. 7). This ideology, as is suggested, is "beyond the province of

experts and therefore accessible to . . . (appropriately attuned) ordinary [individuals]" (Maltby

2002, p. 102). Over-theorizing fetishizes perceived knowledge. In fetishizing, those who over-

theorize resort to doing little more than producing mere representations or explanations for a

given situation, which itself is nothing other than a modality of distraction *par excellence*.

But from what are individuals turning away from when they abdicate their existence to

distractions such as these? It would be easy, based on the discussion thus far, to assume that

distractions obfuscate the reality of death itself, which, as anyone who pays attention to other

people can attest to, happens not to be the case. What one turns away from when distracted by

apathetic or over-theoretical idleness is precisely Being-towards-death, but what exactly does it

mean to "Be-toward" any particular thing? Sartre (2007) would say "that a man is no other than

a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the set of relations that constitute

[those] undertakings" (p. 38). Indeed; Dasein is inextricably tied to that which it cares about, and

the associated works that accompany that concern. However, while it would be right to ask

"what is at work in [these] works" (Heidegger 1971, p. 35), doing so would unnecessarily

distance us from our primary concern, to wit: the distractions humanity indulges in, and the

turning-away-from our individual works when facing the "possibility of the absolute impossibility

of [Being]" (Heidegger 2008, p. 294/¶ 250). Death and finitude concomitantly act as an

existential judge by disclosing to Dasein the fullest extent of its insufficient works, and it is

precisely those insufficiencies that one turns away from, but must recognize, and "Be-toward" if any modicum of authenticity is to be achieved.

So how should individuals think about their respective works in lieu of a global catastrophe? This is where Heidegger's later theorizing becomes increasingly important, not as a standalone set of concepts, but as a precursor to the hermeneutics of the Self posited by philosophers like Gadamer, and Ricour. Dasein cannot, after all, interpret and appropriate its Self without having thought about itself meaningfully in the first place, and thinking, as has already been discussed, has less to do with calculated representation or explanation than one might initially be inclined to consider. Calculative thinking has already been hinted at in the previous discussion about distraction; how else should one assess apathetic and over-theoretical modes of being-distracted if not the consequence of some Benthamite process that tallies the costs, and benefits of any given situation; which "never stops," and "never collects itself," as it "computes ever new, [and] promising" albeit "economical possibilities" to a given problem (Heidegger 1966, p. 46)? Although not without merit, such utilitarian thinking is wholly inadequate as it pertains to the issue of authenticity. The reason for this is in the immediacy of calculation; in the pursuit of its "one-track course of ideas," calculative thinking relies on that which is proximally closest to the thinker, causing the individual to lose track, for better lack of words, of the primordial clearing that unconceals, and illuminates the essential nature of that which is. Calculative thinking, for all of its promise, is, in a very fundamental way, that which most prolifically and thoughtlessly obscures perceptual truth, in this instance, the truth about one's Self.

In thinking about the Self from a conceptual standpoint, and how Dasein ought to consider itself in lieu of the totality of its works, it seems—in the absence of a full examination of what it means to think about anything at all, which Heidegger (1971) himself spends so much of his later works considering—that the thread of this discussion has looped back around to the concept of finite existence. This circularity cannot be vicious if the theme of this article's

deliberation is taken to heart because it leads directly back to where the danger is, the danger being "the threat that assaults man's nature in relation to Being itself, and not in accidental perils" (p. 115). Here the most profound danger is not the tragedy of pandemic, but the act of turning away from that which brings Dasein to profound self-realization: the finitude of its Being. This danger is compounded by the way "returning to normalcy" threatens us with a backslide into the familiarity of average-everydayness, a notion we have little affordance for in our increasingly complex world. Even so, "where there is danger," says Hölderlin, "there grows also what saves," a statement that bears striking resemblance to Jung's (1967) axiomatic understanding of the development of a fully articulated individual: *in sterquiliniis invenitur*—in filth it shall be found (p. 35). Therefore, in an ideal sense, individual beings should abstain from thinking about their lives and works in a calculative manner because calculation is the negation or turning away from that which touches humanity in its very nature, namely finitude. What is required of individuals in order to live authentically during trying times is responsive affirmation to the questioning of their temporal nature, and such a response cannot be a simple matter of calculation, but one of genuine, focused thought. This is easier said than done: Heidegger (1968) is correct in noting that "the thinking of thinkers is in essence much more difficult [than calculative thinking], not because this thinking is still more involved but because it is simple—too simple for the easy fluency of common notions" (p. 239). All the same, it would be to humanity's great benefit to attempt to re-discover such modes of thinking even if the limited purview of this essay prevents us from exploring the matter at this time.

  The demise of the Self is an inexorable event in the temporal structure of human existence, and when situations arise that make our implicit knowledge of death's impending nature unmistakably conspicuous, we, as a species, have a relatively limited set of behaviors through which we can respond to that understanding. On the one hand there is the path of least resistance; of distraction, where the awareness of death is sublimated into one or more types of behavior and their associated modes of thought. In its most benign manifestation, this

inauthenticity is altogether typical, and ought to be considered evidence of a relatively healthy, and well-balanced human experience. Conversely, to be distracted to the utmost extreme is the doctrine of those convinced that always having time means that time is theirs to lose without consequence. If that were true; if all of the evidence pointed to a reality where lost time did not affect our psychological welfare, then that which is meaningful, however defined, would cease to have any bearing in the world. However, Dasein does have the capability of being meaningful; individuals can be meaningful in the larger world; and as such the time that they claim to always have—time they are always losing—is not lost without consequence. That is the fundamental idea behind Heidegger's ethic of finitude: in understanding that they are, in fact, always losing time, and that that time is meaningful beyond comprehension, those individuals who voluntarily adopt such a perspective take on an ultimate ethical obligation which allows for the possibility of mediating the characteristic suffering of existence through the appreciation of those fleeting moments, which occur most prolifically during crises, where human authenticity shines forth, and makes itself known.

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