

**MENTRE LA TEMPESTA COLPIVA FORTE by ALBERTO PELLAI**  
**WHILE THE STORM HIT HARD – what parents have learnt during the**  
**Covdi-19 emergency**

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Our commitment for Covid-19, by Caritas Ambrosiana

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## THE STORM

### How our life has changed overnight

Who could foresee it?

We were saying: "It's impossible, imagine if...". It was, in effect, truly unthinkable. We simply didn't want to believe it.

And think that the tv showed us images from Wuhan, where from the end of December life completely stopped. We saw on screen a ghost city. Everyone shut up in the houses. Deserted streets. Closed schools. But we thought that these were images of another world. A world told by media, maybe overstating the catastrophe. Because now, in our lives, it's difficult to distinguish what's real from what's is virtual. But the reality is real and, sooner or later, will knocks on your door too. Life can't stay outside.

While the storm was raging, we were facing the umpteenth government argument. The Sanremo Festival with Amadeus was filling our lives and media, in that early February where the worries seemed just the usual ones. Carnival was already in the air. Lockdown, epidemic was a problem of someone else, not ours.

We knew that were no fake news, that the disaster was real. It was happening somewhere. And yet, like children, we were mistaken about the virus, thinking it was only there and wouldn't arrive here. But in the global world, everything become local. Out there become right here. And vice versa. And it happens at the speed of light.

So, one day we woke up and suddenly we were Wuhan.

I became aware of it the evening when, around eight o'clock, I was in the car and I received a phone call. I was going to a conference in Piacenza. I was 20 km from my destination, near Lodi. On the other end of the phone, the organizer tells me that the police commissioner of Piacenza just forbid all public events expecting people gathering. Therefore only 30 minutes before, my conference is canceled. They tell me: "We are sending people home. Go back to your home as well". I'm one km from the toll booth of Lodi. I'm in the core of one of the first center of infection. But I don't know yet. I complain a little with myself. I think: "These guys are exaggerating. Go figure, they cancel a conference just 30 minutes before the beginning". So, I exit the toll booth just to enter it again a minute later, on the opposite direction.

From that moment, is my life, our life, everyone's life that starts to go on the opposite direction. We will have to make a U turn, all of us, on everything.

Very shortly after, all the North of Italy become that piece of China we were watching on tv just a few days before.

Suddenly, we became the new Chinese people, about whom media all around the world talk about. Firstly, people from Lombardy and Veneto, Emilians and Piedmonteses. Then us all, the Italians.

This is not a war

Few weeks later, all the world, globally, end up in lockdown. A word that we could translate with many nouns, each of them recalling different images: “total closure”, “curfew”, “confinement”, “imprisonment”.

Now that we all know what it is, since we lived it, these possible translations weigh a lot on us with all their realism, but before March 2020 they were just words on history books, related to particularly dramatic periods, often related to epochal wars. Now, that the Coronavirus pandemic is an epochal event, is clear to everyone. It will be in the history books that our grandchildren will study on. But the truth is that, in the first months of it, we weren't at war.

Even if politicians, statesmen, economists used this word frequently, we were not living a period of war. We were living a threatening moment, scaring us, filling us with anxiety. That made us feel vulnerable and at the mercy of the events. But while everything was changing, everything also stayed standing. On its way but stayed standing. School was going from desks to pc monitors. The work of many people went from the office to the kitchen thanks to the smart working. Every morning supermarkets stocked up their shelves with every kind of food. The supply chains of necessities were granted. And so, all the essential services. During war, it doesn't happen.

Above all, during war images of progressive and constant destruction surround you. Instead, us to be safe just had to stay at our home. Go out once a week to buy huge groceries that would have fill our pantry. Radio went on with music and news. We could call and video call. It wasn't a war. It was a lockdown.

Family as tree trunk

Suddenly, we were all required to stay in our houses. All involved in the probably biggest social liability project that has ever been realized in the world. To stop or slow down the infection of a virus turned up from who knows where, became the responsibility of each, children and teenagers included.

World emergency led to a refined -and often difficult- familiar survival and resistance strategy. All together, all united, 24/24 h. A forced cohabitation experiment never saw before. Tens, hundreds of millions of people in every corner of the world shut themselves at home.

Parents that never had time enough to spend with their kids, found themselves in a suspended time, endlessly together, from day to night, all under the same roof. No

more: "Hurry, or I'll be late for work!", or "Not now, I got to go". With the time dilated and shared space, family became the outpost against Coronavirus. It became clear that, if moms and dads would have endured, with their children and the rest of the world, never leaving their houses' boundaries for a rather long period of time, sooner or later this epochal tragedy would have become a happy ending.

But to succeed meant to learn to take a break. To live a suspended time, made by ourselves, our kids, our intimate relationships, becoming the absolute center of our lives.

Never before the first months, family had been a resource and at the same time the core of a global prevention strategy.

Us, mothers and fathers, had to take our children by the hand, literally or metaphorically, and take them in a no-time and a no-space, where the only path allowed was the bedroom-kitchen one, with a stop for toilet.

Us, the third millennium parents that traveled a lot with our kids since they were babies, us that taught them to be world citizens, were forced to keep them in a reduced domestic space, trying to make them feel good even in prison. A luxury prison, well, but always a prison.

#### Time for reflection

In the confined space of our houses, we became kindergarten teachers and high school professors, comfort from loneliness and guarantors of the rules for a good cohabitation. We had to become entertainers of days that risked to be filled by a dead-end boredom and sometimes ambassadors of sudden bad news, when a relative passed away for the infection. We learned to laugh and cry together. We talked about life and death. We stood by and hugged, kissed and cuddled because we could do it only between us. And no one else. Absolutely no one else.

We felt deeply lonely and with too much company. Very strong and very weak. All together, all mixed up. But after the first wave, the after began, an after that cannot erase all that happened, but we need to understand what that time of effort and revolution left, for better or for worse. What it took from us and what it gave us.

Above all, it's important to focus on the role that family can play in a state of emergency. How it faces a calamity, a negative event that hits the lives of each with the intensity of a hurricane. Because that it was: a hurricane. That forced us to find shelter in our houses.

Our family relationship became the tree trunk to grab on to when the wind of the storm tried to tear off everything.

But we knew that we just had to stand by there, grabbed on that tree trunk, hugged with all the world strength to those relationships providing a solid base, a shelter from the storm, a lighthouse in the night.

During this long period, I've been shut up in my house with my wife and my four children, a nineteen, sixteen, fourteen and eleven years old. My university asked me to become a "remote" professor. I got organized with video lessons and went on with my job as a psychotherapist and developmental age prevention therapist with all the online channels available. Therefore, my job went from the real world to the virtual one. I appeared on tv shows via Skype. I took part in radio programs, closing myself in a corner of the house free from the rest of the family. I also made my Facebook page a sort of self-help community. I wrote motivational posts, told about my family life situations, gave advices to strengthen parents-sons relationship in such a complex context. I wrote letters to teenagers, explained Coronavirus to children, reassured grandparents, asked fathers to swap the Father's Day custom and to write a letter to their kids instead to receive it, in order to fix their emotions in a unique moment, during which they had the chance to stand 24h/24h by their children.

Probably, this has been the only way I found to give meaning to my lockdown. To keep being, in a new form, what I used to be and what my profession made me become, before all this started. I tried to do my best. But I also made many mistakes, as all of us do. Some of my posts have been contested. Some strong opinions maybe today would have been milder. But I feel that there was a huge sharing spirit between me and hundreds of thousands of parents, moms and dads whose stories, words, questions and remarks are part of this book.

If at the beginning media was only focused on counting the new cases, the intensive care patients amount, the deaths, as weeks passed, on tv, newspapers and web started to come to light the family's topic, the world of those families that, locked in at four walls, tried to make the best of it. And so, day by day, we shared survival techniques, knew stories of resilience and of strain.

Millions of people read what I wrote, shared with me their situation, wrote the pages of a familiar resilience book of which I'll try to share with you, after some working out and systematization, chapter after chapter.

Because to build an educating community, a community where everyone teaches something through the experiences, it's possible even in emergency situations. And maybe, it's just when the challenges are more demanding that family shows all its strength. The evolution asked the men to leave the loneliness of the cave and nomadism for organized resident communities based on unit called families. What happened not only made us discover the beauty of family boundaries, but also, and mostly, it showed us that this beauty can become, when needed, a defending strength, a protective cohesion, a supporting solidarity.

Of course, not all the families achieved it. Also, in Wuhan, immediately after the lockdown, the amount of divorces and separations. According to the media, in Xi'an

and other districts (like Yanta's) the lines at the offices for this kind of procedures can be very long. If in part these can be adults that were already thinking about separation before the lockdown, but had to wait the period of closure of offices that couldn't accept nor open new files, on the other hand we can suppose that the forced cohabitation for several weeks has not been a chance to strengthening or enhancement the familiar bonds but instead it had been a mortal wound to couples with already wavering relationships.

Surely, one of the first challenges that every family had to face was to comprehend what was going on and find the right words to explain it to their children.

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