**The silver lining**

BY N E D A M U L J l 2021-03-15

THE old adage `every dark cloud` carries a special relevance in pandemic societies where people have shown unprecedented survival skills, resilience and even growth.

Teachers have kept students afloat by engaging them through various learning channels, parents have found remarkable ways of factoring in physical activity in lockdown.

Schedules have been disrupted and jobs have been lost but families have held together and found ways of splitting time between work and leisure, even in very confined spaces while the planet is rejuvenating itself with much lower harmful gas emissions.

There is more to this silver lining. In a countrywide survey, 95 respondents from 16 different cities had very similar answers.

They spoke of the need to limit social interaction to those who matter and cut down on time spent with not-so-cherished friends and acquaintances. Parents of small children said lines of communication with teachers have opened up there are now fewer barriers as mutual efforts to work as a team to address children`s learning gaps have yielded great results. Still more were happy to see that people, even strangers, have been relatively considerate. `People have realised we are all in the same boat,` said one respondent, `the pandemic has been a great leveller.

University students have found cross-border online learning opportunities that they had never had a chance to explore before, given the clockwork daily schedule prior to the pandemic. `There have been connections and collaboration across continents and we even have a video-gaming group with people we have never met,` said one teenager. While globalisation made the world a village, Covid-19 seems to have further shrunk it. In almost all aspects of economic life, cross-border collaboration is now the norm, and this applies across the board to people of different ages.

Young people have found new ways of cultivating friendship through common interests such as video gaming and found innovative ways of earning money and gaining influence through social media projects.

Many have experimented with online gigs as a short-term measure to ride out the extensive lockdown. While their physical interactions are undoubtedly upended and plans overhauled, young people may yet have learnt the skills needed to brace themselves through a tough tide.

Personal lives aside, many have also experienced a pendulum swing in familial bonds and social values. `We take care of our elders more,` said a young mother, who has started checking up more often on her extended family`s well-being. `People are sharing more philanthropy has increased,` she goes on to add. The eco-nomic vacuum may have spurred greater compassion and a spirit of teamwork that may help mitigate some of the effects of the ever-growing income disparities. At the very least, in the absence of substantial results, there is some hope for greater awareness of poverty exacerbation that we have overlooked for decades.

The deeper psychological impact of Covid-19 on societies remains to be seen.

For many, this has been a time that has tested coping skills as well as survival skills in an acutely uncertain environment where grief and loss are more rampant than before.

Would this help our next generation the coronials` internalise uncertainty as a necessary part of life? Will they learn to embrace uncertainty, rather than resist it? As we prepare to brave the third Covid-19 wave, the silver lining may yet give us grit and resilience, a way forward in the postpandemic journey, quite akin to post-war recovery where the capacity of citizens to earn a living is the biggest buf fer for the fra-gility of a state.

Population demographics are certainly on our side, with 60 per cent of Pakistan`s population between the ages of 15 and 64.

The greatest hope for economic recovery comes from an active, worl(ing population, particularlythose on the precipice of stepping into the workforce after graduation as they can grab the reins of new skills better than those who have had to unlearn the old ways. As Wordsworth said in the wake of the French Revolution, `to be young was very heaven`.

Narratives that centre on the idea of reimagining our world have taken over most aspects of life and, as generation C begins to plot a dramatically different future, they might find unprecedented ways of existing, interacting and working with each other. In this brave new world, which societies manage to stride ahead of others remains to be seen but there is no doubt state and society will need to come together to weave a path that galvanises us and creates opportunities rather than piling on liabilities. After Partition, didn`t Jinnah hope to rebuild the nation on the premise that we must `expect the best, prepare for the worst?` The writer is senior manager, professional development at Oxford University Press, Pakistan.

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