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The Twenties: Anxiety and Self Destruction

Our parents used to talk about pieces of history, and thinking that they lived in those periods, which we study at school, seemed almost surreal to me. How was it possible that our parents had witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fall of the USSR, the moon landing and the first color televisions? Our grandparents lived the Second World War and for what concerns me, I was born after 9/11. There is a pretty evident difference in how the generations are dealing with all the things happening these years: on one hand we have those people still remembering serious illnesses that occurred in the past and how destructive they were, on the other hand we have young kids that do not know how to act in front of this situation. Most importantly, older generations are stressing the fact that young people are unaware, creating tension between the two "parts". Truth is, we really do not know how to behave, we do not have past experiences like the people who actually lead the country and nobody is teaching us how to. It was nice not to have the weight of history on you, it almost made you hope that the world was really changing for the better... but then 2020 occurred and all of a sudden we, as kids, had to face serious problems. Australia was burning, America and Iran were on the verge of a war and suddenly Corona Virus joined the already tragic party.

Society is made by all the people who are living in it and it is said to reflect them, but sometimes it is not completely true: is everything that happens really today's people's fault? Most certainly not. It can not be our fault that glaciers are melting and the environmental situation is critical. It is not our fault that there are nations still at war now and there are people suffering all around the world. Certainly one day, when we have our chance, we will fight for a wonderful world and it will be our duty to do so, but for now it is unfair to blame us when the situation gets critical. This has led to a generational gap that we can witness everyday on tv, where they blame the younger generations on going outside and not caring at all, when the kids doing such a thing had the permission of their parents. From this point of view, 21st century is not as different from the Age of Anxiety period. Starting from the new discoveries and studies, during the so called "Age of Anxiety", there was a new and particular attention for man and his subconscious: relationships between parents and children changed for instance, in complete contrast to the idea of the perfect Victorian family. The 20th century was also characterized by a positive faith in science and progress, the same faith that brought us where we are today, and it was most importantly characterized by a generational gap caused by the fact that young people firmly believed that the loss of warriors was due to the older generation. We can not say that it was not true, the ones representing the country were the ones with the power to stop the war after all. Typical of this period was also the feeling that it was impossible to deal with the chaotic universe. Our situation today is quite similar to exactly one hundred years ago, which is terrifying, for the fact that there is truly an important generational gap, but not only this characterizes our period. How should we manage an international crisis, which we are told is rampant without control? We find ourselves alone to manage a very difficult moment, no gods helping us, no heroes solving the situation, which seems to have no pity for anyone. We do not trust the ruling class, which sometimes does not communicate what is happening and confuses us. On television, every day we are bombarded with a kind of war propaganda: this disease is compared to a war, we must fight and we must win. Hopefully this type of communication is being used to give courage to the population, or at least was firstly used with this aim, but accompanied by shocking images of people in China and the ever-growing numbers of the dead is not helping much. Furthermore, the use of a war semantic field does not promote tranquillity. They tell us that in case of danger we should react calmly

so as not to cause further damage, but the panic and anxiety generated by this half-given information or pounding images of death, led to general panic, and to many people that decided buying large amounts of products in the Supermarkets because of the fear of being held home, which in fact happened. This is our Age of Anxiety, but in our case people are not dying because the government decided to declare war to another powerful nation. This time citizens are dying because of a disease that was treated like a simple flu for months, and now seems like the Doomsday has arrived.

2020 is not on the verge of a war for now, but we are facing some serious problems that will probably permanently affect our world. Not only do we maniacally wash our hands, but we also learned not to trust others and we have become even more racist towards Asian people. Some people even started to think that this virus was only a weapon invented in labs in China. In Italy, a sense of nationality and alliance was born among the people the last few days. People sing out loud from their windows famous Italian songs and the hashtag *#iorestoacasa* is becoming viral. These little things, like singing all together, are the ones that give us hope. Everyday, when we all shout out of our windows, in some kind of subtle ways we are breaking the rules: we are having interactions with others, even though we are safely in our houses, and it makes us feel like we are still humans. Our situation reminds me of the dystopian novels, mostly *1984.* Orwell was able to express how people were becoming humanoids, emotionless and cold creatures, brainwashed and tortured; the book was meant to be scary in some kind of ways and nobody is really being tortured in our reality, but *1984* was just a reflection of Orwell's feelings about his world. WWI and WWII inspired the authors that we studied to write masterpieces highlighting the horrors of the war and the evil nature of humankind, and set a standard for other more modern novels. We may think that our reality is in no way at the level of Golding, Huxley and Orwell's novels, but there are nuances of what is really going on that could be frighteningly similar to what we have read. If I ever had to write a dystopian book, I would refer to the Chinese government that pushes the individuals to spy on their neighbors and report anyone who leaves the house. I would write about the Italians looking out the windows because a higher evil forces them to give up what characterizes them the most, human relationships. I would certainly dwell on forbidden love, on lovers who meet at a distance in supermarkets just to look at the each other in the eyes once in a while. In my book I would write about my family who stays at home all day to study, to teach and to work. I would tell about the restrictive measures that the world has imposed: at least twenty countries immediately closed the borders with Italy and as many closed them with China and assemblies and sports activities are prohibited. It is true that it is not a government's fault that all this is happening, but it is frightening and for the first time we are the country to avoid. People started to point the finger at the "patient zero", blaming a boy who happened to catch the virus. Tell me if I am wrong, but I think we have several ideas today for a new dystopian novel.

Even if everything seems lost, the world can still have hope. It can be seen in the countries that donated masks -the most useful and rare good today- to help doctors and the sick, in the Italian flag projected on buildings around the world and perhaps, now that more countries are affected by this virus, more than ever you can feel global solidarity. 2020 marked a record already in the first two months: according to the Doomsday Clock, we arrived at 23:58:20 and this means that the real end of the world has never been closer. At times like this you have to understand what the real priorities are and selfishness is not one of them. According to a holistic vision, the concept of totality is at the basis of the world.
As Pope Francis expresses in the Encyclical "Laudato Si", if we do not understand that we must consider every aspect of society, from the family to the state, we will never have hope. Pope Francis referred

specifically to the climatic emergency, but the concept can be extended to whatever happens. By now we are so tied to each other, proof of this is the fact that the virus has spread very quickly, that it would not be smart to leave everyone to chance. We should learn to collaborate, the world has never been an easy place to live indeed. If each of us did something even small for the environment or for the people, it would be seven billion small actions. We are so many that it is literally impossible to think of being completely independent, "no man is an island" after all. Many times, when we speak of "world", a global vision, it seems a general and abstract concept. If someone came to tell us that he wants to save the world, we would look at him strange, as to say how should it be done, solving world hunger? By improving people's economic condition? And what about hurricanes and earthquakes?

Instead it is not an abstract concept, because we ourselves are not abstract. Mars without humans survives, the Earth because of us is suffering and bleeding. If each of us, in our own small way, thought about the person next to us, if we left selfishness behind and understood that everything that happens has effects in every little corner of the world, then perhaps we would have hope. Above all, it is useless to blame certain governments, at the end of the day it is us who have the power to decide whether to recycle or throw the paper on the ground, whether to insult a person or not to do it, whether to do nothing or get up from the sofa and demand to have our own part in the world history. Just as society is made up of all the individuals who make it up, the world and the population of the Earth are made up of various nuclei, referring both to the states and, in their small way, to the families themselves. All these parts should be taken into consideration, otherwise it would be like building a chain and leaving a pair of links open while having a hundred other links closed: the chain will break anyway.

Maybe one day, a hundred years from now or even more, children the same age as we are today will study our period. I hope they will look at us the same way we look at our ancestors, the heroes of their age. Today we are different from before: even if our reality is frighteningly similar to dystopian novels, in one way or another we are more aware of the consequences of our actions, even if it does not seem. We have failed to prevent nuclear rearmament and we are not even reaching the goals set by the United Nations for 2030, but at least we are trying. In the 20th century, people suffered for the constant danger, death and war. We too, in our small way, have panicked on various occasions. In the Twenties, people believed that technology would save them, bringing misery and despair far away. Today, in our Twenties, great inventors have designed things that were not even imaginable before, even losing hope about Earth and going to live on Mars. The real difference between the "Age of anxiety" and the 21st century is the fact that we have the opportunity to learn from past mistakes, but often we do not succeed. As we have said, Orwell, Huxley and Golding have left a model for more modern dystopian books. But today, our real concern is no longer to lose our humanity, but to lose humanity in general. How many books, movies, video games talk about the end of the world? Maybe we are afraid, maybe we have lost hope. On the other hand, to quote a post-apocalyptic novelist, Suzanne Collins, "We're fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self destruction."