
ZOOMSDAY
PREDICTIONS
Marian Salzman | Trends for 2021

Contents

HAS THERE EVER BEEN A YEAR MORE HIGHLY ANTICIPATED THAN **2021**?

If there is one thing this past year has taught us, it is that the notion of *annus horribilis*—a term introduced to many in 1992 by Queen Elizabeth II—is genuinely a thing. The year we are frantically trying to leave behind has been brutal. And I think the only thing stopping us from wholly embracing the promise of January 1, 2021 is a gut-wrenching fear that events and circumstances might actually worsen. Definitely puts a damper on New Year's Eve party planning.

A YEAR AGO, MY ANNUAL TRENDS REPORT CENTERED ON THE THEME "CHAOS AS THE NEW NORMAL." I WROTE:

As we approach the new year, people everywhere are uncertain about the future and whether it's too late to change our present course. We're feeling emotionally out of touch with one another—and hungry for physical touch. We're fearful of the destruction we're collectively wreaking on the planet and clinging to the hope that our small acts of mindfulness will go some way toward reversing the damage. [...] We're frantic to slow down the spiraling changes long enough to take a restorative breath and [...] want reassurance that it's not too late to figure out a path to a better, more stable future—for us individually and for society as a whole.

Little did I know when I wrote those words in December 2019 that we would soon have no choice but to slow down—nor how much faster the chaos would spiral. A few months into 2020, we were amid a global pandemic that wreaked havoc on a scale that far exceeded anything most of us could have imagined.

Y2K > C-19

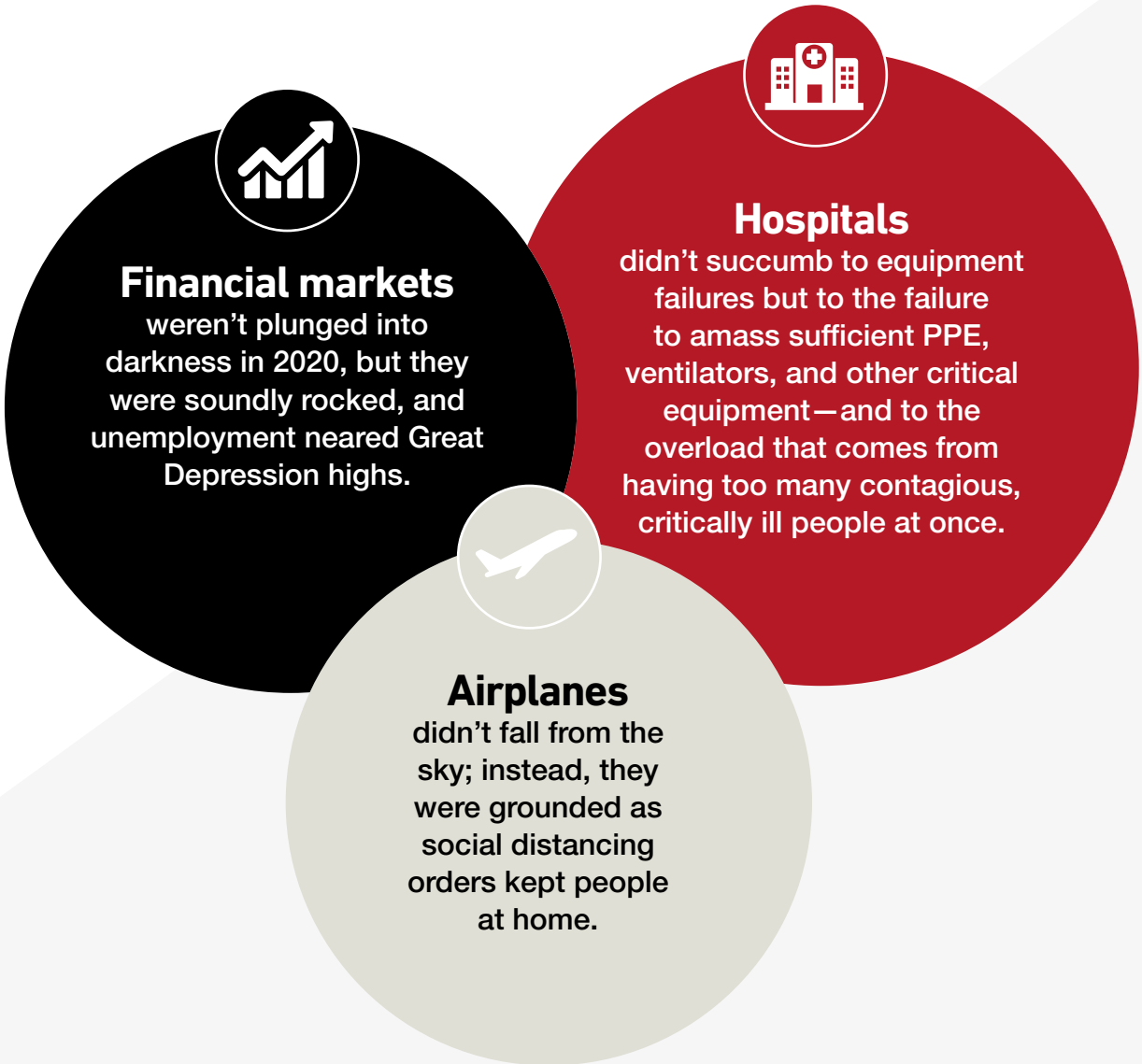
Two decades back, I remember bracing for a different type of threat amid warnings that the much-dreaded "Y2K" computer bug would plunge the world into chaos the moment the clock struck midnight on January 1, 2000. The fear was that our electronics would interpret "00" as the year 1900 and go haywire. Critical systems would fail, experts warned, potentially causing financial markets to collapse, airplanes to drop from the sky, and hospital equipment to go dead. Thankfully, New Year's Day 2000 arrived with barely a whimper, due largely to a concerted global effort to update computer systems. Let's pause for a shout-out to preparedness—while bearing in mind that some still consider Y2K a panicky hoax.

Experts warned that the "Y2K" computer bug would plunge the world into chaos the moment the clock struck midnight on January 1, 2000.

6 ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

INTRODUCTION

If only we had spent even half as much time worrying about the double 20s as we did about the double zeros. In 2020, we have felt the blast impact we braced for 20 years earlier—an impact ignited by the COVID-19 pandemic and fueled by the resultant economic implosion and—in the U.S. especially—a primal scream for racial and economic justice. Our fears related to the Y2K bug materialized, but far later than anticipated and in different form:



7

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

INTRODUCTION

We thought we had sidestepped an existential crisis in 2000, never realizing the tsunami that would engulf us 20 years later. (Let's hope we don't have this same discussion in 2040.)

Having lived through Y2K and now, like virtually everyone everywhere, trying to survive COVID-19, one of the clearest distinctions I see between then and now is in people's ability to make smart decisions based on the best available information. During the Y2K panic, our institutions were robust enough and our faith in experts sufficiently sound that the world was able to mount a concerted effort to stave off the harshest impacts. In a January 2000 interview on CNN, Microsoft founder Bill Gates commented that the Y2K rollover "ended up being a fairly minor issue because people really worked together. If people had ignored the thing, then we would be seeing the real impact." Fast forward 20 years, and Gates was on BBC Breakfast admonishing the world's governments for having failed to adequately prepare for the novel coronavirus. We have all seen the result of that.

In a January 2000 interview on CNN, Microsoft founder Bill Gates commented that the Y2K rollover "ended up being a fairly minor issue because people really worked together."

Bill Gates
Microsoft founder

The truth is ...

We are in a different world in 2020 than we were in 1999. More divided. More skeptical. Less willing to put aside partisan ideology in service to the greater good. Our calendars have advanced two decades, but society appears to be moving—sometimes at hyperspeed—in the opposite direction.

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN: HOW PATTERNS FROM THE PAST INFORM THE FUTURE

I find it instructive to view the present—and future—through the prism of the past, seeing obvious parallels between this past year and Y2K and, of course, the 1918 flu pandemic. It is all part of my approach to trendspotting, which centers on pattern recognition—looking for signs and symbols across a myriad of information sources, from consulting traditional news outlets and social media to surreptitiously scanning the cart contents of my fellow shoppers at the grocery store. Over time, the patterns I detect begin to tell stories and shed light on where cultures, communities, and society at large are moving.

Sometimes, the emerging trends I see feed off of one another—and not always for reasons I foresee. My 2020 trends forecasts included a heads up that we would see a heightened "bunker mentality," featuring the stockpiling of essential goods (toilet paper, anyone?)—and the increased use of face masks. I'm hardly clairvoyant; I thought we would be masking up because of poor air quality, not for reasons related to a novel coronavirus.

In December 2019, I tweeted: "Next up, high-design air filter masks becoming must-have accessories as people come to realize the severe health impacts of pervasive air pollution—breathing is not optional, so we may as well breathe with style." Eleven months on, designer face masks are a hot item. Artisan-created masks are being sold on Etsy, while the big luxury brands are vying to outdo one another on style and elitism. In August, an Israel-based jeweler announced that he had been commissioned to produce a white gold, diamond-encrusted coronavirus face mask valued at $1.5 million. It makes Christian Siriano's $525 black pearl–encrusted mask seem like a steal.

Futuresighting

Just as the wearing of face masks in public became common in some East Asian countries post-SARS, the practice will linger in parts of the world post-COVID-19, including the U.S. This is not to say that streets will be crowded with masked pedestrians, but the use of face coverings will be more prevalent on subways and planes and in other packed venues. Now that we have come to regard public transit and crowded stores as petri dishes for all sorts of disease, it will be hard for some of us to return to our old, unprotected ways—especially during cold and flu season.

So, what can we expect for 2021? In the following 11 trendsightings, I have laid out my best prognostications for shifts that will make their mark in the coming dozen months or so. Not all of these trends will be evenly distributed—trends never are; they will come on stronger in some markets than others and will affect some population segments more deeply. All of them, though, will help to shape the next "normal" that will coalesce as we move into our post-pandemic future.

01 ZOOMED IN (AND OUT)

11 ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

ZOOMED IN (AND OUT)

Looking for a silver lining to this global pandemic seems heartless when so many have died and so many millions more are grieving. Still, I don't think we can ignore a potentially enormous impact: COVID-19 and the related shutdowns stopped many of the world's busiest places in their tracks. It has provided us an opportunity to slow down, reflect, assess our satisfaction with the present, and reshape our thinking about possible futures—leading us to zoom in more closely on the essential aspects of our lives and also to zoom out to capture a bigger-picture view.

Can many of us claim to have been truly satisfied with our lives in 2019? Our world was—and still is—on a collision course with catastrophe.

Can many of us claim to have been truly satisfied with our lives in 2019? Our world was—and still is—on a collision course with environmental catastrophe. Going into this pandemic, half the world's population had no access to basic healthcare, while more than a third lacked adequate sanitation. One in nine people do not get enough food to lead healthy and active lives. Meanwhile, as I and countless others have talked about ad nauseam in recent years, societies have ruptured, experiencing a sharp uptick in hate speech, political polarization, nationalism, anger, and incivility. People have been talking about the so-called "rat race" since at least the 1930s, but the pace of that race has become practically supersonic in the digital age. Most of us spend far more time engrossed in our screens than with our loved ones and only rarely venture into the natural world. Our pre-pandemic commutes were insane. For all the modern marvels of the high-tech workplace, commuters in Los Angeles in 2019 spent an average of 100 hours stuck in traffic jams. In Moscow and New York City, it was 91 hours. In São Paulo, 86. On top of this, our hyperconsumerist economic models have crammed the nooks and crannies of our lives and homes with goods we neither need nor use, momentarily gratifying our impulses but leaving many of us in wealthier nations deeply unsatisfied with how we are living—and maybe even with who we have become.

The "great pause" of 2020 has given us a chance to reassess, to think about whether we want to maintain our current direction or grab hold of the wheel and yank hard to veer off toward a different future. This global period of reflection—and the experience of the pandemic itself—will have numerous repercussions. The one I believe will be most immediately impactful—making it my "big trend" for 2021—is the embrace of a new iteration of localism, what I am calling "zoomed in." The yang to that yin is that we are also "zooming out" to get a better sense

of the broader world and how we can more positively impact it.

Zooming isn't just a set of behaviors. It's an attitude. An approach to life. We have slowed down enough to consider more deeply what we want in our lives—and in our world. Introspection had gone out of style for a while (who had the time?), but I see signs that people are ready for self-examination and fundamental change, as well as conversations about genuinely meaningful topics, including thorny issues such as systemic racism, privilege, and inequity. Whereas *localism* once spoke mainly to the social experiences of farmers markets, mom-and-pop bodegas, and food ingredients sourced from within 100 miles, in 2021 and beyond it will expand to incorporate intimate dialogues (virtual or in-person), sharing facts and figures and reactions to what's happening within our small worlds (geographic, familial, or otherwise), and a renewed emphasis on our personal environments. We are zooming in to focus on what truly matters—and to figure out which aspects of our lives we need to rethink.

We have slowed down enough to consider more deeply what we want in our lives —and in our world.

WE ARE ZOOMING IN ON PEOPLE ...

One of the most noteworthy shifts of the pandemic is that we are now "seeing" other people in ways we rarely did before. Those of us who had the luxury of sheltering in place last spring became acutely aware of those "essential" workers who afforded us that privilege. The grocery store clerks and delivery drivers. The warehouse workers and mail carriers. First responders and medical personnel. Many of us paid attention—in some cases, for the first time—to how these people were being compensated, taking note, for instance, of which employers were increasing salaries for in-store workers during the pandemic. Many of us tipped food-delivery persons and others far more generously than we would have just a few weeks prior.

During my first extended quarantine—I've experienced five so far, necessitated by my need to travel back and forth between Europe and the U.S.—I did things that turned out to be very much on trend: having pizzas delivered to hospital emergency rooms to support the folks working on the front line;

shipping baked goods to colleagues from a friend's small bakery in Pennsylvania—an effort to both boost people's spirits and keep her small business alive; and organizing vegetable and fruit deliveries from a local distributor who was rerouting produce normally reserved for restaurateurs in the area. When I returned to Switzerland, I found people doing similar—buying meats and seafood from businesses that typically supply Lausanne's better restaurants, both because they wanted quality goods and also to help local businesses and producers survive while restaurants were closed.

That's an important aspect of zooming in: Those of us who remain employed are more focused on putting our paychecks to good use, including by bolstering local businesses and helping neighbors in need. Many are also zooming out, going beyond their communities to support businesses located hundreds, even thousands of miles away—helping booksellers, cafes, florists, and others weather the economic storm. I read a story in the *Washington Post* several months ago about the owner of a tiny grocery store in New Orleans who was struggling to stay afloat while extending credit to customers of limited means.

By the time I went online to find his address later that day—thinking I would send a small donation—a GoFundMe site had sprung up and raised more than $100,000. It's now grown beyond $400,000. We feel disconnected and helpless against the virus, and so we seek ways to contribute, to connect, whether by donating to someone in need, by tracking down a much-missed teddy bear, or by banding together to find a runaway dog.

Those of us who remain employed are more focused on putting our paychecks to good use, including by bolstering local businesses and helping neighbors in need.

... AND WE ARE ZOOMING IN ON PLACE

This newest iteration of localism also extends into our homes. We are zooming in on our new "one places," reconfiguring and refurnishing our living spaces to act as hubs for work, schooling, entertainment, socializing, creative expression, meal prep, physical fitness, and more. The Commonwealth Bank of Australia reported that spending on household furnishings and equipment in that market grew 53 percent in early May compared with previous weeks as people busied themselves with home improvement projects. Those of us in multi-person households are finding new ways to balance togetherness and "me time," carving out personal spaces to which we can retreat while also focusing on creating communal zones.

And we are zooming in, too, on local news—having grown accustomed to monitoring the COVID-19 outbreaks in our communities, obsessed with R_0 figures and hospital capacity. Where we live matters far less now (for some of us) in terms of work, but it is crucial in determining our potential exposure to the virus. More so than in our recent past, we want to keep tabs on what's going on around us—health-wise, politically, and economically. Sites and apps such as Nextdoor are flourishing thanks to people craving connection with their neighbors without the danger of potentially contracting or spreading the virus. (Amazon Ring's Neighbors takes a more fear-based approach, alerting users to local crime news and letting them share footage of "porch pirates" and other content from Ring doorbell video cameras.) And we are even seeing signs of a return to professionally produced local news, a much-lamented casualty of the digital age. Axios announced recently that it is launching Axios Local—daily, early-morning e-newsletters to help readers "get smarter, faster about their hometown." First up (there are plans for expansion): Denver, Des Moines, Minneapolis, and Tampa.

We are zooming in to reconnect with people and businesses around us. We are zooming in to examine how we can change direction and lead more fulfilling lives. We are zooming in to create homes that work better for every occupant and function. It's living the vida hyperlocal.

What's next

The localism trend has always supported independent and community businesses. That will continue, but we can expect to see more community-wide efforts as people and companies join forces to help each other through the financial crisis. In Oklahoma City, owners of an ice cream store came up with the concept of CITY BOX to help out struggling area businesses. People who live within the city limits can order a box—filled with prepared meals, flowers, coffee, and other items from local retailers—and have it delivered to their homes.

We'll see, too, more people banding together to take care of essential needs. Community food co-ops are proliferating, providing a lifeline to locally minded consumers and to producers whose wholesale businesses tanked during the shutdowns. Neighbors also joined together to create micro summer camps, and there has been an increase in community-minded actions such as people opening up front-of-house (or -business) food pantries.

Futuresighting

In 2020, resourceful (and resource-rich) parents across the U.S. are creating learning pods, hiring an educator to teach a small group of children as an alternative to remote learning. I think this is just the start of a new approach to education in which parents who have the means to do so reject traditional schooling in favor of more customized strategies. Look for more companies to offer modular packages, providing both virtual and in-home learning experiences. We can expect more branded learning modules as well, such as we saw during the shutdowns when McLaren Automotive teamed with Dell to provide free online lessons focused on STEM subjects ranging from algorithms and probability to aerodynamics and the science of nutrition. I can see private certification of courses completed and skills acquired pushing aside traditional transcripts on college and workforce applications.

02 SCRAMBLING TIME AND SPACE

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

SCRAMBLING TIME AND SPACE

We like to imagine that there is an orderliness to time, that it is as regular as the ticking of a clock, with one second flowing into the next minute, the next hour, the next day/week/month/year/era. And yet no two people's perceptions of time are the same. Einstein called the distinction between the past, present, and future a "stubbornly persistent illusion." Poet William Carlos Williams described time as "a storm in which we are all lost." In some respects, January 2020 feels like a lifetime ago. The weeks that many of us spent in self-quarantine and lockdowns seemed at once mind-numbingly slow and blazingly fast. What happened to April, to May? people asked. Did we have spring? This distortion isn't unique to 2020. Time felt like it was being scrambled—in turns, elongated and truncated—even before the pandemic. There is a rule of thumb that one internet year is like one dog year, roughly equivalent to seven human years. I think that factor should be increased to 10 human years. At least.

One impact I foresee of the COVID-19 era and the reboot it has precipitated is a rethinking of time and linearity. For so long—too long?—we have adhered to rigid dicta regarding time and place. The workday is 9–5 (longer in many industries). The workweek is M–F (or Su–Th in some cultures). Meetings are held in 30- or 60-minute increments, no different from traditional television formatting. Students not entering the workforce move directly from secondary school to university. Legal retirement kicks in between age 58 and 67 (depending on country). But now the big question attached to all of the above is WHY?

Why are we clinging to such rigid parameters at a time when agility has emerged as an essential strength? As work and life converge even further for the work-from-home (WFH) crowd, why are we adhering to segmentations of time that prioritize the needs of clients and employers over everything else? Why do

One impact I foresee of the COVID-19 era and the reboot it has precipitated is a rethinking of time and linearity.

so many school systems continue to have extended summer breaks when we know it puts some students at further disadvantage? For that matter, why do secondary schools start at an earlier time in the morning than some experts consider optimal for adolescent health and development? And why are students expected to advance in lockstep through lessons, subjects, and grade levels when the evidence supports an individualized approach to learning? Why do we pack our "leisure time" into the final years of our lives rather than take extended sabbaticals when we're in our prime?

What's next

Although the pull of inertia is strong, more people and companies are going to get serious about pushing back against outdated mandates related to time and place. There is a pressing need for flexibility in an era when work burnout has clear links to our growing mental health crisis. Categorizing burnout as an occupational phenomenon, the World Health Organization (WHO) committed in 2019 to develop evidence-based guidelines on mental well-being in the workplace.

Already, we are seeing more businesses shift to remote work in part or whole. Companies such as Basecamp, GitLab, and LivePerson are "fully distributed," meaning that they maintain no physical office space. "Remote-first" companies such as Fujitsu, Shopify, and Otis maintain office space but design their processes around remote workers. "Remote-friendly" companies—including Facebook, Microsoft, Siemens, and Zillow—blend in-person and remote work. You can watch this trend grow via LifeShack.io's remote work tracker.

More generally, we will see a reappraisal of traditional approaches to both daily and life schedules, with more people applying the lessons of flexibility and agility they have seen bear fruit in the business world. Is it time to retire the agrarian clock and think instead about a 24/7 workweek in which individuals can program their own agendas—working, socializing, eating, studying, and relaxing on the days of the week and hours of the day that work best for them? During my U.S. quarantines, it suited me best to telecommute to my European "desk," starting my workdays between 2:30 and 3:00 a.m. EST. Not an approach for everyone, I'm sure, but it worked for me.

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

SCRAMBLING TIME AND SPACE

Futuresighting

Might we be on the cusp of a four-day workweek as standard? Already, we are seeing more serious discussion of such an approach, including its benefits to people and the planet. Microsoft Japan's experiment with a four-day workweek earlier this year resulted in a 40 percent rise in worker productivity. Other companies that have adopted or are considering a shorter workweek include U.S. burger chain Shake Shack, New Zealand trust management company Perpetual Guardian, and U.K.-based Radioactive PR. What a revolution it would be if working fewer but smarter hours turns out to be the ultimate productivity hack.

03 A RETURN TO "WE"

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

A RETURN TO "WE"

Narcissism already was coloring the zeitgeist in the last century—I was a schoolgirl at the time that writer Tom Wolfe was talking about the "Me Decade" in the mid-1970s—but our focus on self has been turbocharged by the technology that has permitted us to live in discrete virtual worlds. Was anyone surprised that *selfie* was the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year for 2013?

Technology long has held the promise of being the great communicator, the great connector. And in some ways, it has delivered. The Arab Spring protests of 2010 were made possible by citizens bypassing state-controlled media and communicating instead via Facebook and Twitter. The Black Lives Matter movement has been accelerated by the sharing on social platforms of videos exposing police brutality. Digital platforms have helped grow social movements, from #LoveWins to #MeToo, and have been used to pressure corporations—and governments—to change their behavior. And during the pandemic, technology has enabled tens of millions of people to carry on something like normal life remotely. It has made it possible to work from home, learn from home, shop from home, and even "gather" with friends and family to celebrate and commiserate despite being thousands of miles apart.

And yet, simultaneously, new technologies have narrowed our worlds. They have allowed us—in fact, algorithmically encouraged us—to create highly personalized environments in which we listen (alone) to our customized playlists and watch (alone) our streamed entertainment on our personal devices.

We need never see anything or anyone that makes us uncomfortable. Unless we make a deliberate effort to break out, we remain hermetically sealed within our biased media bubbles and echo chambers, existing in worlds of our making—and inhabited by parties of one. These bubbles have allowed and perpetuated separatist ideologies of all persuasions. They feed us with what we want to hear; they present us with "evidence" that confirms our world views rather than challenging and expanding them. They give rise to divisive memes and stereotypes such as Karen and Ken, the current catchall symbols of overbearing, hypocritical white privilege.

The comforting notion of "together apart" took hold during the COVID-19 lockdowns, but how many people were physically in the same space but electronically segregated into their customized digital worlds? We have all witnessed family outings in which each member is glued to his or her screen.

The technological disconnect is only one aspect of this problem. Self-centeredness has become our worldview, with even children being encouraged to build their "personal brands." Tiger Moms, meet Instagram Influencer Parents. Didn't have a parent who forced you into the limelight? Not to worry. The internet is crawling with personal branding courses.

What's next

Is it too late to change our me-me-me world into something a bit less self-obsessed? Perhaps not. COVID-19 has given some people their first inklings of community in a long time. With free and easy physical mingling limited for months on end, we have felt more acutely what we are missing and so have gravitated toward shared experiences, from must-see TV (*Tiger King* or *The Last Dance*, anyone?) to the Houseparty app. Selfies are being eclipsed by friends-and-family video chats. In business, too, we see a new emphasis on togetherness via Zoom, Teams, and other platforms. Employees may appreciate the benefits of working from home, but they miss the in-person interactions of a shared physical space. Companies have been taking care to nurture as well as network their people, with regular check-ins and virtual activities intended to bring far-flung employees together. I know one PR agency that has used everything from cocktail recipe exchanges to Zoom magic shows and trivia challenges to help people stay connected and offer socialization opportunities to those who live alone.

As social distancing restrictions continue (self-imposed or otherwise), we suddenly are desperate to be together—even as we rapidly adapt to life apart. Many of us are finding ourselves revising our social circles, drawing in closer people we haven't seen for years while drifting away from friends and acquaintances we used to see all the time. Now, it's less about proximity and convenience and more about intimacy and connection. We are more aware, too, of the interconnectedness of the planet's peoples, understanding that no country will be safe from this virus until all countries are safe. A push for collaboration was on full display between pharmaceutical companies and scientists even before the coronacrisis. And if all this sounds a little too kumbaya, let's not forget that the desire for community and solidarity is also expressing itself in less positive ways such as public demonstrations against mask mandates and the networks growing up around conspiracy theories.

One of the big questions is to what extent the yearning for community will bring people together to collaborate across traditional boundaries or drive them into mutually hostile tribes. We can expect both, but we all have the power to skew the result in the direction of our choosing.

Futuresighting

Arguably, the most potent "we" the human species has experienced is the birth and growth of democracy—the notion that "we, the people" can be self-governing. That every person—and every opinion—counts (however inadequately that has been put into practice through the centuries). In 2020, the bedrock institutions that support and stabilize democracy—a free press, unfettered voting rights, and faith in the electoral process—are under assault as authoritarian tendencies come to the fore. Is democracy doomed? In moments of optimism, I would say no—and largely because of what I am seeing around the self-empowerment of women and the rise of female leaders. Even as early as the global shutdowns last spring, there had been talk about the effectiveness of female heads of state in containing the spread of the novel coronavirus. Now we have the data to back that up: In October, medRxiv (pronounced "med-archive") published a study that shows that countries headed by women leaders experienced sixfold fewer deaths from COVID-19 compared with those led by men. Among the contributing factors cited by the authors are more progressive social policies and the fact that female heads of state were more apt than their male counterparts to take decisive action in the early days of the crisis rather than question its seriousness or prioritize economics over public health.

In recent years, we have seen girls and women—from Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg to Emma Gonzalez and Patrisse Cullors—step out of the shadows to fight for change. In the U.S., we saw a record-breaking number of women seated in Congress as a result of the 2018 midterm elections, spurred on by groups such as She Should Run, Higher Heights for America, and Get Her Elected. Founded in 1983 to safeguard and strengthen democracy, nonprofit NGO the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has prioritized empowering women in politics because "evidence is strong that as more women are elected, countries experience higher standards of living; the priorities of families, women, and minorities are addressed; and confidence in democracy goes up."

In this #MeToo era, women are finding their voice to an extent we have never before seen.

> Diversity and inclusion and equality are key to a positive future, and we have seen that confirmed during the COVID-19 crisis. This is now on the agenda, and it won't go away (as is 'big green' —i.e., sustainable capitalism). We will either have this solved by 2030 or face stark consequences.

Gerd Leonhard,
futurist
(Switzerland)

04 REAL GETS UNREAL, UNREAL GETS REAL

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

REAL GETS UNREAL, UNREAL GETS REAL

We have been navigating a changing notion of "real estate" for a while now. While studies and our general consciousness of the effects of the internet largely have centered on its social impact, especially on young people, we also opened up a whole new form of real estate when we moved away from tangibles to intangibles. With all of our historical wisdom about economic theory, did we ever imagine that data would be more valuable than oil? That bits and bytes would be valued more highly than atoms? That the bulk of a company's worth would be tied to intellectual property and brand value rather than physical product and infrastructure? That purchasing "skins" on Fortnite would be a billion-dollar business? It seems like only a few minutes ago that we invested in real (i.e., tangible) things exclusively. And yet, almost as soon as Banksy's $1.4 million "Girl with Balloon" self-shredded, the art world started musing about its price going up. The conceptual is now valued more highly than the concrete.

At the same time, we have an uneasy sense that virtual is ephemeral and not quite real (although maybe that "we" applies more to those of us who grew up in a pre-digital world). Can a college degree earned online be as valuable as a degree earned over four years on a physical campus? Can video-conferencing with colleagues, business clients, teachers, and friends develop the same depth of relationships as face-to-face meetings and social events would? How trusting a relationship can you develop with a doctor you have only ever seen via video chat and who has never examined you physically?

We saw with the mortgage crisis of 2008 how quickly a virtual house of cards can collapse. And so even as we continue to push the boundaries of all things digital, we will seek to get our hands back into honest-to-goodness dirt—literally, by tending backyard vegetable gardens and figuratively, by valuing those things we can touch: handcrafted furniture, handmade clothing, simply prepared meals, preferably from fresh, raw ingredients. No froth. No molecular gastronomy. Just the simple preparation of what we pull from the ground or waters.

As soon as Banksy's $1.4 million "Girl with Balloon" self-shredded, the art world started musing about its price going up. The conceptual is now valued more highly than the concrete.

What's next

Real or virtual? There will be a smarter blending of our two worlds as we realize what we would lose by giving up too much of our real estate, by going totally virtual. Many employees now know from experience that, despite its myriad benefits, WFH also carries costs. They know that working hours tend to creep up as the boundary between workplace and home disappears.

We will see, too, a return to valuing the real—and ferreting out the fake. Even as sales of plant-based "meat," nut-based "milk," and vegan "leather" surge, people are hungry for a return to the real—including age-old values such as integrity and self-sufficiency. In an era of deep fakes, we are attracted to the deeply authentic—even as we continue to migrate our lives over to the virtual realm. Are we moving toward a point when the cerebral will outweigh celebrity? Perhaps not, but don't be surprised if the public grows less tolerant of vapidity and more attracted to feeding their minds, even if only by streaming the latest TED Talk.

> "I think celebrities have lost a lot of their mindshare with the public."
>
> **David Houle,**
> futurist/speaker/author,
> co-founder and managing director
> of The Sarasota Institute—
> A 21st Century Think Tank
> (U.S.)

REAL GETS UNREAL, UNREAL GETS REAL

Futuresighting

For years, people have been talking about taking breaks from the internet in general and social media in particular. We have even seen the advent of “digital detox” family vacation packages. The social distancing necessitated by this pandemic will put the urge to go analog into overdrive. Expect far more people to get serious about social media cleanses and even to go cold turkey, leaving social platforms behind.

This is one of the most underreported crises we face as a global society. Unregulated social media and app algorithms are at the heart of driving both misinformation and disinformation while the mass majority of people are oblivious to how our brains are being manipulated and rewired. As the long-term mental health repercussions and side-effects of smartphones / social media come to greater light, people will demand government regulation around app algorithms and social media as a human rights issue. Along with Darwinism in action, there will be a drive to reestablish common fact repositories that will be led and managed with AI.

Amelia Kallman,
futurist/speaker/author
(U.K.)

05 DAY OF THE DRONES (AND DROIDS)

HAS THERE EVER BEEN A BETTER TIME FOR THE DROIDS TO TAKE OVER?

At the height of the lockdowns, who wouldn't have wanted to dispatch their personal R2-D2 to a local grocery store to pick up the week's supplies? Or to have a drone deliver essential goods with zero human contact? Around the world, tragedy is unfolding as grocery store employees and other essential workers succumb to the virus, unable to protect themselves from airborne transmissions from customers and coworkers.

During these COVID-19 days, it is humans who are the points of weakness and vulnerability in business—as in life.

What's next

We have been creeping toward the automation of work for some time, but this pandemic may prove an unstoppable accelerant. Already, robotic pods such as Nuro, Starship, and Serve are delivering restaurant meals and other goods. For those looking for a bit more range and speed, Alphabet's delivery drones—Wing—are busy making deliveries in the U.S., Finland, and Australia. Drones also have been deployed in 2020 to deliver medical supplies and COVID-19 test kits and to disinfect public spaces in Spain, Indonesia, China, and elsewhere. One San Francisco man got around the city's shelter-in-place order by delivering toilet paper to a friend via drone.

Amazon claims full automation at its warehouses is at least a decade away, but Japan's Uniqlo, the world's second-largest fashion retailer, has already replaced 90 percent of the workforce at its flagship warehouse in Tokyo with robots. And, in the early days of the novel coronavirus, China's Alibaba set up an unstaffed grocery at a hospital in Wuhan. It's getting increasingly less sci-fi to imagine AI and algorithms being even more widely deployed across a whole range of jobs currently carried out by humans, giving rise to what historian Yuval Noah Harari has called "the useless class": people who—however important they are to loved ones—are deemed useless by the economic and political system and, thus, are no longer employable.

Unsettling news for millions of workers—but an opportunity for governments, academia, and businesses to get serious about offering or funding reskilling and upskilling programs geared toward a radically different future.

Futuresighting

It's a sure bet that automation also will progress by leaps and bounds inside our homes. Already in our sights: a robotic sous chef, a disease-detecting smart toilet, and an AI nanny. Technology that would have been a "nice to have" in 2019 will be deemed essential by many in the WFH era.

06 STAYING BATTLE READY

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

STAYING BATTLE READY

In my 2020 trends report, I talked about the bunker mentality so many were exhibiting in late 2019—in part a reaction to chaos as the new normal. At the extreme end of this trend are the doomsday preppers, many of whom have been stockpiling goods (and, in the U.S., guns) for years. I'll bet a few people were jealous of those caches of toilet paper and canned goods last spring.

COVID-19 promises to swell the ranks of preppers. Canadian Prepper reports that its YouTube channel saw monthly views rise from 1 million in January to 4 million in March. Its e-tail site carries everything one might need for a zombie apocalypse or whatever else may come—from tactical gas masks, infectious waste biohazard bags, bug-out rolls, and emergency radios to toilet paper pucks (I don't want to know …). WaterPrepared, retailer of water storage tanks, says it's having trouble keeping the units in stock. And an online prepper store in the Netherlands reports it sold more masks, meal rations, radios, and water filters in February than in six months of 2019.

In my 2020 trends report, I talked about the bunker mentality so many were exhibiting in late 2019—in part a reaction to chaos as the new normal.

What's next

Not everyone is going to go into full-on prepper mode, but we can expect households to get a lot more serious about stockpiling and for businesses to step in to fulfill these new desires (while stoking fears at the same time). Already, you can buy long-term emergency supply rations from sites such as campingsurvival.com, overstock.com, and Walmart.

Futuresighting

Don't be surprised if apartment complexes and housing developments start competing on stockpiles / emergency preparedness rather than fancy gyms and clubhouses. A friend reports touring an upscale residential community recently that boasted a two-year store of emergency supplies and a quasi emergency room, complete with ventilators and oxygen tanks. It only takes a brief period of panic for people to reevaluate what matters most. Alarmingly, this mindset threatens to open up an entirely new gap between the haves and have-nots, with the wealthy potentially creating their own mirrored infrastructures rather than bolster poorly funded public systems. It was only a few generations ago that the Rockefellers of the world pumped billions of dollars into public health and other communal resources. What happens when today's high-net-worth individuals opt instead to create separate and extremely unequal alternatives? Where does that leave the rest of us?

We will also see further extension of the trend toward self-sufficiency. Already, more people are looking to grow their own vegetables, raise chickens or other livestock, and make soap, candles, and yogurt. It's a macro trend that touches on all sorts of layers of dissatisfaction with modern life. People are pining to feel more connected to nature and the land. They're envious of what they perceive as the simpler existence of generations past. They're seeking to control the purity of what they eat and drink by producing it themselves. They want to disconnect from the internet long enough to do something "real."

COVID-19 added urgency to these impulses. For months, retailers had difficulty keeping vegetable seeds in stock. Yeast and flour also were hard to come by as more people tried their hands at baking bread during the shutdowns. Nielsen reports that sales of yeast grew 647 percent in the U.S. in the week ended March 21 compared with a year earlier.

Post-pandemic, we can also expect an upswing in the trend toward DIY repairs and practical skills. Again, it's an existing trend with multiple layers. People have grown weary of overconsumption and horrified by its impact on the environment, and so they want to know how to repair electronics and other goods rather than discard and replace them. We want to be able to do things for ourselves rather than have to rely on others who may not be there when needed.

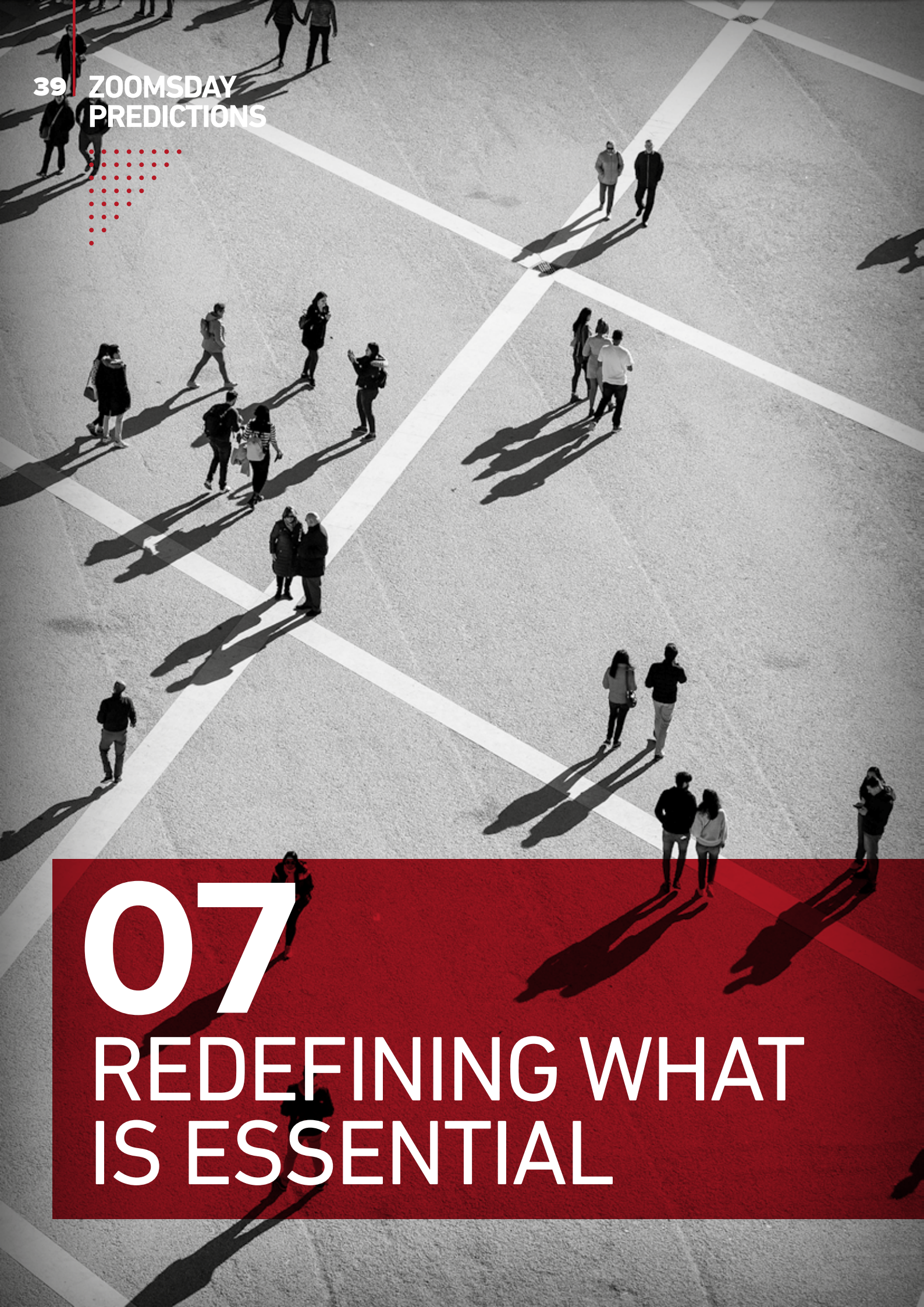
Futuresighting

Concierge medicine has been a thing for a few years now, with subscribers paying a monthly or annual fee for more personalized medical services. What about crisis concierge services? Would you start paying now to ensure that when a covered crisis hits, you will be protected by experts who will advise you and arrange regular home deliveries of essential goods? What if they could promise also to furnish in-home visits from healthcare workers and in-demand medical equipment? Yet more potential for a public-versus-private divide in healthcare and emergency management.

We will also see the trend toward self-sufficiency play out on a national and regional level. Just as, for the U.S., 9/11 exposed the deficiencies and failures of the country's intelligence community, COVID-19 has exposed gaps in manufacturing—for instance, reliance on China for critical medical supplies. Look for an intensified focus on manufacturing as a national security priority.

> One thing we've learned from this pandemic is that we can't rely on a single-source foreign supply chain. Supply chains have to be both local and global for us to survive; however, the immediate reality is a lot of local businesses don't have the support they need to make it through this time, especially if they are competing with a company like Amazon.

Amelia Kallman,
futurist/speaker/author
(U.K.)



07 REDEFINING WHAT IS ESSENTIAL

The question is: What is required to be a "have" in 2021 and beyond?

For several decades up until the financial crisis of 2008, abundance ruled. It seemed that there was plenty of everything for everyone. The world's two most populous nations, China and India, were developing a middle class that could increasingly afford consumerist lifestyles. With the economic meltdown of 2008, it became clear that things weren't as rosy as they had seemed, and the last decade has seen the world grow increasingly divided between those who have and those who do not—including access to technology and adequate housing, job opportunities, and medical care.

The question is: What is required to be a "have" in 2021 and beyond? In 2020, we're seeing Maslow's hierarchy of needs being revisited as people rethink what is essential. Strictly speaking, the must-haves for basic survival—food, water, shelter—remain the same. Anything more—electric power, a bicycle, a television, a mobile phone—is arguably a luxury. But modern societies, especially the most successful ones, now think it essential that their citizens have the means not merely to survive but also to thrive. That's not generosity of spirit so much as self-interest: Empirical data indicate that high levels of inequality are bad for the whole of society, not just for those who are barely getting by. Glaring inequality correlates with low life expectancy, infant mortality, obesity, intentional homicides, teenage pregnancy, and higher imprisonment rates, not to mention political instability.

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

REDEFINING WHAT IS ESSENTIAL

With the pandemic, the notions of surviving and thriving have taken on extra resonance. At a time when jobs and education are moving online, is universal broadband—and the devices that access it—a luxury or a necessity? At a time when pandemics spread swiftly and lethally through communities, what is the base expectation for sanitation and healthcare?

For communication translated into every locally used language?

Tragically, even as we recognize existing inequities and wish to reduce them, we know they will worsen as the effects of the pandemic drive up unemployment—just as we know that climate change will disproportionately impact the poor.

What's next

The existential threat of the pandemic and the enforced downtime that so many have experienced has whetted an appetite for change and increased people's willingness to challenge the status quo. For some, this has meant a lower tolerance for social inequities—expressed through a strong impulse to vote in change leaders, push for more equitable practices in our workplaces, and redirect spending to support smaller businesses and progressive causes.

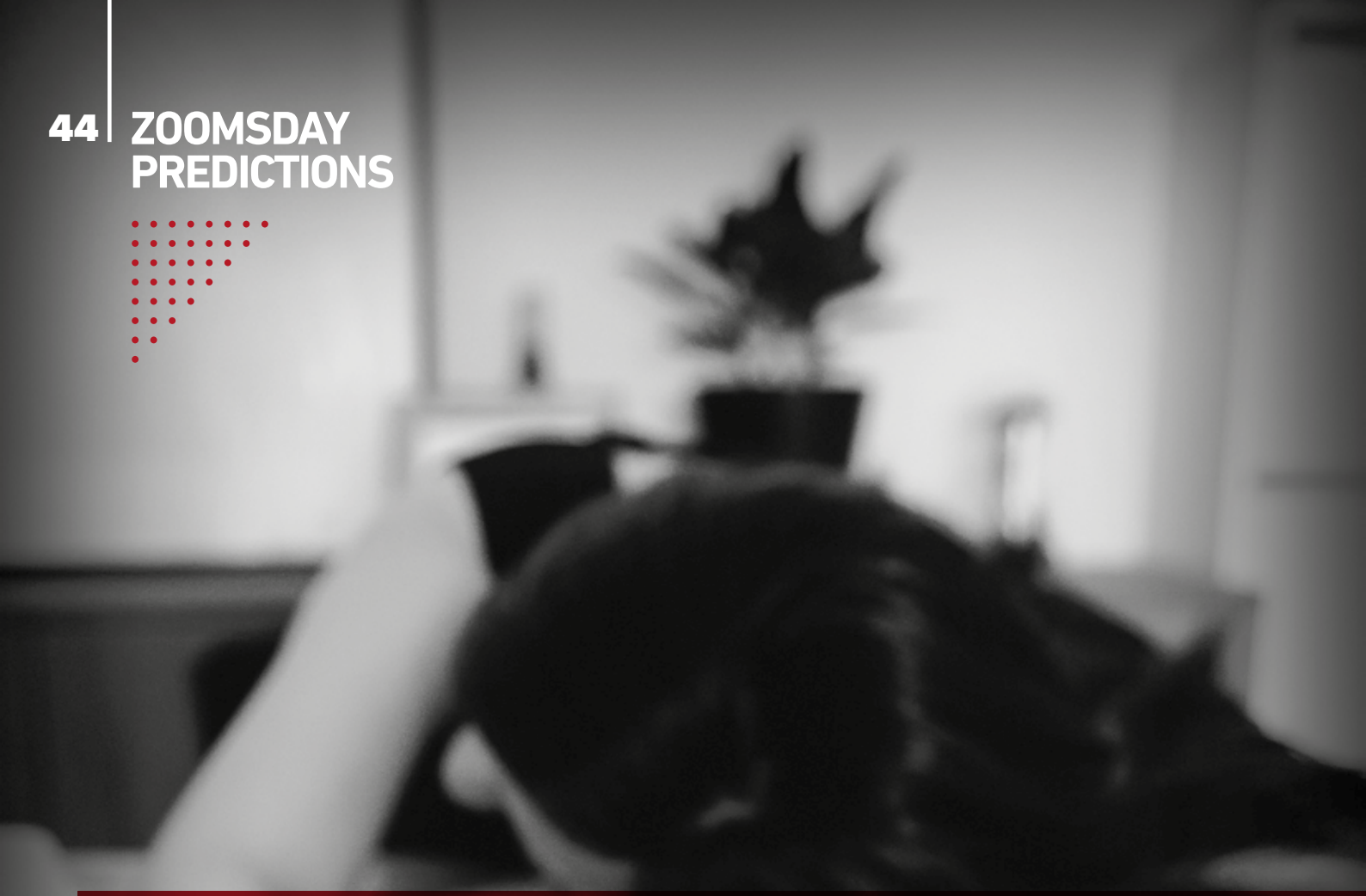
Disparities we were able to dismiss or ignore in "normal" times have risen to the surface, and more people are coalescing around the notion that society as we have created it is no longer working for many. As economic inequity continues to grow and social safety nets remain strained (or absent), there will be greater interest in exploring potential avenues of change. Watch for the rise of cooperative business models, the adoption of some facets of democratic socialism where they don't currently exist, and increased support for resource sharing, more-equitable taxation, and diversity in business, entertainment, politics, and elsewhere. Also watch for the yang to that yin in the form of sharper resistance to the change that some fear is happening too fast and going too far.

Futuresighting

With the pandemic having made us more acutely aware of the poorly paid, low-status workers who have kept things humming—and the tenuousness of job security—more people will find the notion of a universal basic income (UBI) not quite so radical. In the U.S., many were introduced to the concept of UBI by 2020 presidential candidate Andrew Yang, whose platform included a "Freedom Dividend"—a guaranteed monthly payment of $1,000 to every American aged 18 and older. Yang ultimately dropped out of the race, but several months later, leaders of 25 cities—including Atlanta, Los Angeles, Shreveport, and St. Paul—have put together the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income coalition, aimed at addressing the "twin pandemics" of COVID-19 and structural racism. In an extraordinarily short time, the notion of a UBI has gone from a fringe, far-left fantasy to what many consider a commonsense solution.

> **The generational divide is likely to increase as younger generations struggle to find work and use social media to fuel their anger over student debt, a lack of opportunity, a lack of attention at policy level, and a belief that resources are being unevenly distributed.**

Rohit Talwar,
futurist and CEO, Fast Future
and editor of *Aftershocks and Opportunities: Scenarios for a Post-Pandemic Future* (U.K.)



08

SAVED BY THE INTERNET— BUT TALLYING THE COSTS OF ONLINE HABITS

45 ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

SAVED BY THE INTERNET—BUT TALLYING THE COSTS OF ONLINE HABITS

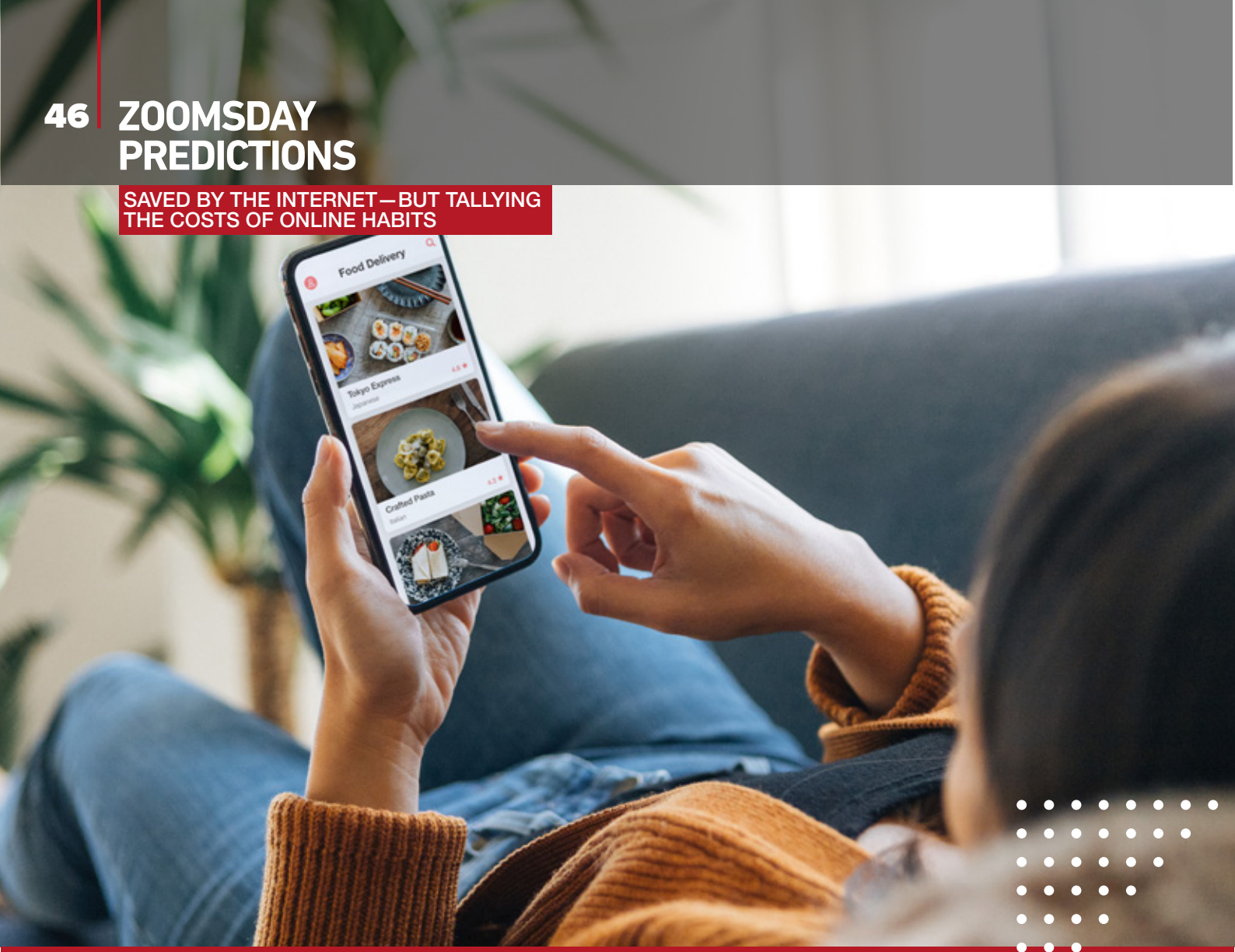
The COVID-19 pandemic hasn't been easy for anybody, but imagine how much harder it would have been just 20 or 40 years ago, let alone back in the dark days of the 1918 influenza pandemic. Without high-speed, high-capacity internet, how many more people would have been unable to earn a living from home? How many more people would have been cut off from family and friends? How many more people would have been unable to safely procure essential goods or manage their finances? How many more students would have been unable to access learning resources or advance to the next grade?

The pandemic has arguably been the first global stress test of the internet as a utility that enables modern life as we know it. It's a test that the internet thus far has passed with flying colors. As more and more places went into lockdown in the early months of 2020, there were concerns that the system would buckle and break as demand surged by 70 percent. Some streaming services cut back bandwidth usage to avoid overloading the system. Yet the system has proved sufficiently resilient to handle all the demand without any major outages.

For more than a decade, people have been talking about how the internet could be used to reshape and reconfigure some essential services. There have been experiments and tryouts, but it took the pandemic to get them taken seriously by the mainstream. After years of hemming and hawing over telecommuting, the virus forced companies to accept their employees doing their work from home as a better alternative to not working at all. And they found it worked. Now many employers and employees are figuring out how they can make WFH a regular part of their working practices. Meanwhile, healthcare practitioners and patients have found that telephone or video consultations do the job just as well as office visits in some instances, with a lot less inconvenience. We see, too, a surge in e-therapy. The practice is not new—sites such as BetterHelp and Talkspace were connecting users with licensed therapists well before the pandemic—but its growth during COVID-19 may be the boost needed to alleviate the persistent shortage of mental health professionals. Ginger, an app that connects people with psychiatrists, behavioral health coaches, and therapists, saw a 50 percent increase in active users during February and March of this year. In recent years, we've also seen tax preparers move online, along with legal services and financial planners. Now, we're seeing real estate transactions taking place via the internet, and the U.S. Supreme Court is hearing arguments via phone. It seems to me that the real question isn't which aspects of life can move online, but which cannot.

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

SAVED BY THE INTERNET—BUT TALLYING THE COSTS OF ONLINE HABITS



Futuresighting

Opportunity exists for a trusted brand to create a portal to certified professionals across industries—medical, financial, legal, and more. Would you be more apt to consult a Google-verified financial consultant? An Apple-certified physical trainer? The desire to tame the "Wild West" of the Internet will lead to increasingly urgent calls for robust verification and certification systems across categories.

And, of course, there's the yang: Even as we increasingly accept the infiltration of screens and online services into our worlds—just as we have accepted conveniences such as cars, flights, ATMs, ready meals, and microwave ovens—we are seeing intensified concern over the potential costs. Is more screen time impairing the development of preschooler brains? Are digital lifestyles reducing attention spans and the capacity for empathy? What happens when technology has developed so far that it does some tasks better and more cheaply than humans? (We are already seeing artificial intelligence take the jobs of journalists and actors.) What happens when tech algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?

What's next

Questions about the cost-benefit ratio of technology are unlikely to be on everybody's mind all the time—and there will always be a societal tendency to gravitate toward the newest and shiniest gadget and gizmo—but the more digital and internet-dependent life becomes, the more such concerns will bubble up in media and popular culture. Certainly, stories are circulating about individuals and families who took the opportunity of the "great pause" to ease off the digital gas pedal, consciously reducing their reliance on digital streaming for entertainment and spending more time on analog pursuits. NPD reports that sales of boardgames and jigsaw puzzles have soared during the pandemic, including a 240 percent spike in the U.K. during its first official week of lockdown. British booksellers Waterstones cited a "Christmas-like boom in sales" just prior to the lockdown, with classic novels among those most prized.

An enduring trend in the digital era has been many people's sense that they are not quite up to snuff intellectually—that conversations are dominated by nothingness and gossip, that our minds are being dulled by diets heavy in reality TV and Candy Crush. Drawn-out political and philosophical conversations in cafes and coffee shops have given way to Twitter feuds and trolling. "There's no point talking to you about this" has replaced Aristotelian argument.

Is it possible that smart will be sexy once more?

Futuresighting

When we outsource everything, turning our lives into hubs of paid-for services, what are the implications? For some of us, we don't know how to cook because we have Grubhub and Deliveroo. We haven't bothered to develop a sense of direction because we have Uber and GPS. We haven't learned how to mend clothing or devices because it's easier to dispose of them and get a quick replacement from Amazon or Taobao. We have managed to winnow down our areas of responsibility and, in doing so, have lost wisdom and what used to be considered essential expertise—from sewing on a button to simple carpentry. As a countertrend, look for a surge in "adulting" classes that teach the skills responsible parents once handed down to their children.

09 CORPORATIONS AS CHANGE AGENTS

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

CORPORATIONS AS CHANGE AGENTS

A 2017 study found that 69 of the world's top 100 economic entities were companies, not countries.

This century, we have seen seismic shifts in centers of power as mega-corporations have become "economies" in their own right, dwarfing entire nations and concentrating wealth in the hands of the few. A 2017 study found that 69 of the world's top 100 economic entities were companies, not countries. Meanwhile, growing numbers of people have lost faith that their nations' leaders have what it takes to solve the world's most critical challenges, including climate change.

Into the breach: corporations. The pandemic has intensified a trend that has been apparent at least since the Y2K scare: the shift of responsibility and expectations from governments and NGOs to big businesses. For the many critics of Big X (e.g., Big Pharma, Big Food, Big Oil), this may seem counterintuitive or even heretical. But it bears closer scrutiny.

For one thing, people trust business to get things done. In the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, business ranked highest in competence, holding a massive 54-point edge over government as an institution that is good at what it does (64 percent vs. 10 percent). After all, a business that doesn't get things done is liable to get squeezed out or taken over by a business that does. But what about serving the interests of the wider society?

During the years when "creating shareholder value" was the mantra and overriding mission of high-profile CEOs, society at large was a secondary consideration at best for businesses. But over the past couple of decades,

new generations of senior executives and employees are reshaping the way businesses think and behave. Digital technologies have made business far more transparent. They have made it easier and quicker for journalists, customers, whistleblowers, and the public at large to criticize companies, to question their leaders and hold them to account. As consumers, many of us feel we can influence the behaviors of companies far more than we can change the course of governments. Witness the success of Sleeping Giants' #StopHateForProfit campaign against Facebook.

For some observers, COVID-19 put into stark relief the differences in capability between the public and private sectors. At the outset of the pandemic, some governments and public health institutions were accused of being slow to act and ineffective. Meanwhile, businesses large and small stepped in (and up) to produce ventilators and personal protective equipment and to communicate to the public with a voice of reassurance, togetherness, and hope. Car insurers proactively refunded a portion of premiums, banks waived fees, retailers offered curbside pickup. The message was clear: We have your backs—and we will get through this together.

What's next

Corporations are shaping up to be potentially our best hope for devising solutions to life-and-death issues such as climate change, pandemics, and the global healthcare crisis. Of the major institutions that can make things happen, businesses have the greatest freedom to undertake initiatives, and they needn't contend with the vagaries of election cycles. They have broad scope to pursue larger-scale projects that benefit their own interests and those of society, as we have seen, for instance, with Unilever's leadership in sustainability and the Citizen Verizon plan for economic, environmental, and social advancement.

Futuresighting

Are the pandemic-era collaborations—such as in the race to develop a vaccine—a sign of a new era of private-public partnerships the likes of which we haven't seen since GE teamed with NASA on Apollo 11?

10 RETHINKING PLACE

ZOOMSDAY PREDICTIONS

RETHINKING PLACE

For the first time in a long time, 2020 put a question mark over urbanization and the steady migration of people to more populated locations. At present, around 56 percent of the world's population counts as urban, and, for the fast-developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the pull of cities is still irresistible. But for residents of some of the big cities in the most developed countries, the pandemic has sparked a reevaluation of the relative merits of cities versus less-populated locales.

For years, relentlessly rising demand has been driving up real estate and rental prices and squeezing down living space in the world's magnet cities, including London, New York, Paris, San Francisco, and Toronto. All those densely packed residents, plus all those others commuting in for work and the hordes of tourists, have made for crowded venues, crowded transit, crowded green spaces, and polluted air. For the most part, people have been willing to put up with the costs associated with city living because of the payoffs in the form of culture, fine dining, shopping, top-tier schools, employment opportunities, and more. Let's face it: Cities are where creativity is fired up, where there's always something interesting to do and interesting people to meet.

People have been willing to put up with the costs associated with city living because of the payoffs in the form of culture, fine dining, shopping, top-tier schools, employment opportunities, and more.

AND THEN CAME COVID-19.

Within weeks, the advantages of cities became disadvantages as residents were confined to their homes with limited or no access to green spaces and fresh air. Fearing the infection risks, residents avoided mass transit if they could. Commuters working from home have virtually given up on coming into the cities. With drastically fewer passengers, transit systems in urban centers such as London, New York, and Paris have been starved of the revenues they need to keep running. The theaters, cinemas, concert halls, art galleries, museums, restaurants, and bars that make cities so vibrant and attractive are more or less off-limits until further notice. In October, New York's Broadway League announced that its famous theaters would remain shuttered at least through May 2021—a devastating blow for producers, actors, and theatergoers alike.

Faced with life under lockdown for the foreseeable future, some city dwellers have started looking at out-of-town options. Why work from home in a cramped apartment when you can relocate somewhere with more space—green, closet, and otherwise?

What's next

Moving homes for a better life is a lot easier to dream about than to do, especially for those who can't count on remote work over the long term. But the longer the pandemic restrictions carry on, the more time and incentive urban residents will have to dream. Expect smaller cities and towns, and their real estate and PR agents, to ramp up efforts to play on those dreams and attract the most mobile city dwellers. The same holds true for rural areas. In the U.S., as of 2016, rural areas accounted for 97 percent of the nation's land area but just 19.3 percent of its population. That's a lot of room in which to spread out.

Longer term, it's never smart to bet against cities. Most have lived through much worse than COVID-19 (Black Death, typhoid, cholera, war, the 1918 influenza, bankruptcy) and bounced back. They will create new ways to attract residents, including with more green spaces, more affordable housing, and smarter infrastructures. The nature of cities likely will evolve away from business and finance and toward more multipurpose uses. Think: more hubs of entrepreneurship, creativity, and art.

Futuresighting

Expect a shift in what people value in second and vacation homes—maybe even in first homes—as they put less weight on status and more on physical separation. We will also see an uptick in sales of tiny houses—including mobile ones—on far-off sites for use during future crises. And don't be surprised if likeminded people create "colonies" of tiny homes with communal amenities such as high-speed broadband, school pods, and recreational facilities. Think: "blue" outposts in lower-cost red U.S. states and expats from colder climes joining forces in sunnier oases.

11 TIME TO MAKE PEACE WITH UNCERTAINTY

Many are scouring the internet for clues in a bid to make sense of it all, but they are unlikely to find definitive answers. It is all too new and too complicated.

Is this thing a pandemic, a syndemic, a hoax, or what? (Hint: It's not a hoax.) Does wearing a mask increase or reduce one's health risk? Do people get immunity once they have been infected, and how long does it last? Does a negative test result really mean you don't have the virus and does a positive result really mean you do? Will there be an effective vaccine, and will it be safe? Will the long-term economic, social, and psychological effects of fighting the pandemic be worse than the disease itself? Whom can one trust to answer any of these questions?

These are all live questions being asked by hundreds of millions of people. Many are scouring the internet for clues in a bid to make sense of it all, but they are unlikely to find definitive answers. It is all too new and too complicated. There are too many unknowns and too many moving parts for anything to be predicted with certainty.

In the middle of the COVID-19 crisis (or is it the beginning? near the end?), it is easy to forget the uncertainties that stressed people

just last year. Will robots and AI destroy whole swaths of jobs, making millions of people effectively obsolete? Will I have enough money to meet my next unexpected bill, let alone see me through to the end of my life? Is climate change really a threat, and is there anything that can be done to curtail or even reverse it? How vulnerable am I to cybercriminals, and have they already infiltrated my computer? Will my children's use of social media damage their development? Will not having access to social media damage their ability to socialize and learn critical digital age skills? It's hard to know what to worry about first.

Maybe life now is no more uncertain than it ever was. After all, it wasn't so long ago that whole populations were one or two bad harvests away from starvation—as is still the case in some parts of the world. It wasn't so long ago that giving birth was a big risk for women. It wasn't so long ago that normal life was precarious and even more vulnerable than today to infectious disease, fire, and other assaults.

Perhaps what is different today is that we have to face potential perils as individuals and families rather than as communities. (As an American, I am keenly aware that those without adequate health insurance are just one inflated hospital bill away from financial ruin.) Perhaps our acute feeling of uncertainty also has to do with the false sense of control many of us have felt for decades. In wealthier parts of the world, many have been lulled into complacency by all the mechanisms that work as they are meant to. Where there are higher expectations of certainty in life, people are more vulnerable to suffering from uncertainty.

What's next

Most of the problems prompting today's uncertainty won't disappear. Maybe COVID-19 will be brought under control, but what about the second shoe, the next pandemic that is bound to hit sooner or later? Traditional and social media companies may do a little (more) soul searching about the effect they are having, but they are as addicted to angst-inducing content as their audiences are. My sense is that many people will look for ways to further inoculate themselves against risk. They will be seeking safer investment vehicles; securing their homes with cameras, power supply backups, and alarm systems; simplifying their living styles and getting more serious about amassing savings; and even investing in escape pods—places to which they can retreat in times of panic.

TIME TO MAKE PEACE WITH UNCERTAINTY

Futuresighting

As a society, we are good at treating immediate problems—setting broken limbs, dumping retardant from helicopters to douse wildfires—but we are less good at conditioning ourselves to withstand the unanticipated vicissitudes of life. As the toll of perpetual stress and even PTSD grows more apparent, look for greater investment—on the part of individuals, companies, and governments—in emotional and mental health. Prior to the pandemic, the WHO estimated the global economic cost in lost productivity due to depression and anxiety at $1 trillion annually. Expect more focus, too, on teaching resilience. We will see this on an organizational level—with employers reskilling workers to adapt to a range of possible futures—and on a personal level, as schools and families prioritize tenacity and grit alongside creativity and critical thinking.

HERE'S TO A RELENTLESSLY DULL AND PREDICTABLE **2021.**