

Twenty-twenty.

The positives out of a crisis-COVID-19

The year 2020; the first year of the 2020s decade; the twentieth year of the twenty-first century and the twentieth year of the third millennium. A leap year, it is said to be, and again it is a year with a palindromic date (02-02-2020). With such characteristics, one could assume that this would be a remarkable year in the history of life. But when the books of history are written, they will undoubtedly focus on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and all that transpired in South Africa, in Africa and in the world during this epoch of its reign.

COVID-19 is truly a defining phenomenon in the world's history. It is a phenomenon that has left the world standing on the edge of precipice, with the number of reported cases and the death toll continuously spiking up and claiming hundreds of thousands of lives globally. The world has been shrouded in the darkest cloud that reached into every nook and cranny. But the experiences that I endured and witnessed from my country South Africa are the ones that brought me to the point of writing this account.

At midnight on Thursday, 26 March 2020, South Africa entered a national lockdown in a united effort to prevent the spread of this disease. Events were moving with the speed of light and with the greatest velocity. Suddenly, everything came to a stop and life was paused for a moment. Silence took the centre stage as the streets were emptied so that one could hear a pin drop on the streets of the Pretoria CBD and other major cities.

We had to stay inside, and fear became the order of the day. We looked at nature from the windows and the birds seemed to have finally won. For they were the only ones that could enjoy the luxurious freedom and we could only look at them with envy. With people no longer going to school and work (except the ones who were called essential workers), neighbours became close, yet so far from each other. Families were left distraught as the prohibition to travel to be with each other was put forward as one of the regulations during this period.

We all had to adjust to a whole new way of living, and technology was befriended as we used our cell phones, computers and TV screens to stay in touch. Thanks to the music, art and literature for keeping us sane. Thanks to the comedians who managed to put smiles on our faces and crack laughter for a moment and helping us escape reality for a fraction of a second.

This has truly been an unprecedented and tumultuous time, when dreams and aspirations were temporarily put on hold and plans for the year dissipating. Everything slowed down. In trying to keep abreast of the destructive path of the COVID-19 pandemic, we consumed everything that was made available for us on the internet and TV. But not only did we stay informed; we also invited in the psychological violence that paid visits to our minds. Although our security forces were put on the streets to remind us to stay home, our minds said it louder.

But should the year really be labelled as a time when the world stood still? Should people really remember hand-washing as one of their main activities during this epoch?

Consider the story of a young lad named Mpho. Like everyone else, Mpho was affected by the problems that prevailed when the pandemic broke out. He was a waitron at one of the fast food restaurants in the city of Pretoria and, as a result, had much time on his hands when the pandemic forced him and everyone else to stay at home. He had much time to reflect.

He deepened his friendship with his cell phone as he spent more and more of his time on different social media platforms, drawing inspiration from this space. From the news feeds and stories shared by his friends and followers, Mpho came to realise that people were actually being productive during these trying times. He saw many of them tapping into their creativity during the lockdown.

There is the case of the woman who, months before, had been complaining about her fitness and lack of time to exercise because of her work. With the help of an app downloaded to her phone, she set herself a 30-day body transformation challenge, seeking to emerge from the lockdown fit and healthy, and feeling positive.

Michael on the other hand, has been improving his cooking skills by taking online courses. Themba, who had wished for years to use his writing talent, finally had the time in hand to manifest this. Motivated by the idea that William Shakespeare had written *King Lear* in isolation during the plague, he managed to complete his once-abandoned pieces of work and now has a completed manuscript with his first book awaiting publication. Thato and his friends created an online space where people could share their thoughts and access motivational talks.

“Themba, who had wished for years to use his writing talent, finally had the time in hand to manifest this.

Twenty-twenty. The positives out of a crisis-COVID-19 continued

They and also created extra tutorials for matriculants to help them make up for lost academic time.

Poets and comedians among Mpho's friends had many new topics to focus on and attracted more attention than before. Lerato managed to launch her own "Insta iso" beauty lessons. The couple that were always having conflicts were able to reflect with the time in hand and spend more time together. They were able to resolve their problems and now with the extraordinary and unprecedented bonding family experiences, their children were blessed with a warm home and hobbies to do together as a family.

Mpho also attended lockdown house parties streamed live on Channel O from 6pm to midnight every Friday and Saturday, to which the whole of Mzansi was invited. Sportsmen and women posted videos and images of their home workouts to maintain their fitness and gear up to hit the pitches once the health crisis subsides.

This kept on getting better and more inspiring even every time Mpho logged onto these social media platforms. Even his colleague Chemist, who had been known to be shy, had started to trend with his videos.

Martin, who had always had a passion for music, now channelled his emotions into songs. Jason also unleashed his creativity through painting, sharing his work online and receiving a welcoming response from people. Tebogo and her cousin Tshepiso started writing blogs and journals, building good followings. Harriet transformed her garden into a tranquil space, creating a beautiful spot for that much-needed rest and recuperation and took pride in taking its pictures to Facebook.

This abrupt break had also given Mrs Mulaudzi an opportunity to do something different from her work at the bank and started teaching free classes online. Potlako worked from home and was able to save the money that he usually spent on his commute. He has raised enough money to start his "side hustle" business that he had been dreaming off.

While some were into trading, others were into coding or learning new languages, posting their progress on social media platforms. Thapelo achieved his goal for reading books and continued to participate in his book club through video calls.

For others, the freneticism of life before COVID-19 had not taken a break. They continuously sought opportunities and solutions to the projects they were working on from their homes. Others took the

opportunity to start or boost their businesses, producing masks, latex gloves and sanitizing detergents, which were in great demand. This was also what kissed Mpho's mind most because he had always had a business mind and was interested in having his own one day.

Having achieved the right state of mind to start reflecting more on his dreams, he became imaginative. Knowing that the South African economy would be affected negatively by the pandemic, he began to think of to put the economy in a better position to recover and provide more opportunities for employment and business ventures.

He saw immense opportunity for youth or disadvantaged people of South Africa to venture into the business sector and establish new businesses. And, in listening to the address of President Cyril Ramaphosa on 21 April 2020 on further economic and social measures in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, Mpho learnt about the additional money that had been set aside for the protection and creation of jobs. He then drafted a business plan so that his ideas would come to life when the health crisis subsided.

Perhaps it is true that any crisis can be used to stake a positive legacy. In the words of Albert Einstein, *"in the midst of every crisis lies a great opportunity"*. And perhaps this is a message that we should not wilt in the face of this storm, but rather lean on the adversity and rethink our development; that we should rather not squander this opportunity but be more innovative and agile in driving change. That it is rather a time for us to create than only just wait to consume.

With the courageous words of Mahatma Gandhi, that *"a man is the product of his thoughts, what he thinks he becomes"*, and of Jean Paul Sartre that *"man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself"*, we can only gain courage in that we can do it if we visualise it and will to do it. And perhaps we could choose to be grateful for this abrupt break and see this crisis as a good crisis.

We still owe our highest gratitude to those who serve out of the spotlight and to those in the frontline, our medical professionals, our security forces, our leaders, all essential workers and all the people of this country who have abided by the rules and regulations of the lockdown and are helping to curb this pandemic. As our President Cyril Ramaphosa has said, *"We shall recover, we shall overcome, and we shall prosper"*.

Mother-nature-God bless South Africa, Mother-nature-God Africa and God bless the world. ☀

"Perhaps it is true that any crisis can be used to stake a positive legacy. In the words of Albert Einstein, 'in the midst of every crisis lies a great opportunity'."