


If We Only Knew

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By  [Julie Ponesse](#) November 28, 2022 November 28, 2022 [Philosophy](#) 19 minute read

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Last September, I released [a video](#) in which I explained my moral objection to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate being implemented by my employer, Western University. That video went viral.

Since its release, I have watched the video only a handful of times, and not once at my direction. I find it hard to watch, it being an acute reminder of the unfathomable world in which we now live.

But I have wondered, why did it resonate so much with people? Was it because I had the science right about the mRNA vaccines? Maybe.

Was it because I gave a good ethical argument against the mandates? I think so, but that surely isn't the whole story.

Or was it something else?

I'll let you think about that and offer my answer in a little bit.

One thing that video did is it instantly and irrevocably gave me outlier status. It put me on the outside of a system that has no tolerance for questioning or independent thought of any kind.

How many of you, at some point over the last two years, felt like an outlier, a misfit? How many of you felt like a foreigner within a new operating system in which conformity is the social currency, its reward the ability to keep your job, preserve your reputation, and avoid the censure of rebellious thought?

For its devoted followers, the stigma and bother of questioning that system is too costly, too inconvenient. But for you, it's the price of conformity that is too high, and the need to question and, possibly resist, too hard to ignore.

It's this social operating system that singled me out, expressed its intolerance for my nonconformist ways and, ultimately, did its best to string me up in the proverbial public square.

Until last September, I lived the quiet life of an academic, removed from the world of politics, podcasts and protests. I published in journals only a few colleagues ever read. I taught ethics, but it was always theoretical and, often, relied on the entertainment value of fantastical thought experiments like:

"What would you do if a trolley was barreling down a track toward five people inexplicably tied to it?"

Teaching ethics, I always felt, honestly, like a bit of a hypocrite, trying to envision what one *would* do if a crisis arose, or criticizing history's moral villains. My work mattered, or so I told myself, but only in a big-picture way. There were no acute moral crises, no bioethics emergencies, as a good friend used to tease.

Not until last September, anyway, when all the theory culminated in what felt like the supreme ethical test. Faced with the decision to comply with my university's COVID-19 vaccine mandate or refuse and lose my job, I chose the latter, for better or worse, and was efficiently terminated "with cause."

I failed the test spectacularly according to my colleagues, our public health officials, Justin Trudeau, the *Toronto Star*, the *National Post*, the CBC, and even the NYU ethics professor who said "I wouldn't pass her in my class."

When I spoke at events at the height of the crisis, when almost unfathomably, we couldn't even legally gather to do what we are doing today, I talked a lot about science and evidence, and why the mandates are unjustified and harmful. But I couldn't imagine doing that now.

And I don't think that's why you are here today.

We have all drawn our battle lines on that front and we aren't seeing much movement across those lines. The pro-narrative position is alive and well. Conversions are uncommon and mass revelations unlikely.

Events are starting to impose vaccine passports once again and masking is returning. A Moderna plant is being built in Quebec...with production to *begin* in 2024.

And, honestly, I don't think the situation in which we find ourselves was generated by a miscalculation of the data in the first place but by a crisis of the values and ideas that led to it.

So when I was invited to speak today, I started thinking about where you are these days, I wondered about *your* stories. What are your experiences of alienation and cancellation? What would you have done differently over the last two years if you could go back? What keeps you on the road less traveled? Are you ready to forgive?

So what I offer today are some thoughts on the themes of regret and endurance, thoughts on how we created the deep culture of silence that now stifles us, and what we can do now to move through it.

First, regret. Regret is, simply, the thought that it would have been better to do otherwise. If you give your friend expired milk that makes her sick, you might think "It would have been better first to check its expiry date."

If you comply with COVID public health measures that end up causing harm, you might think "I should have questioned the lockdowns *before* McMaster Children's Hospital reported a 300% increase in suicide attempts last fall, the vaccine rollout *before* the mandates came along."

But the vast majority of us who should have known better, done better, didn't. Why not?

There is no doubt that the government response to COVID is the largest public health disaster in modern history.

But what is interesting is not that the authorities demanded our compliance, that our sycophantic media was too lazy to demand the right evidence but that we submitted so freely, that we were so ready to trade freedom for the assurance of safety that we inverted the demands of civility to the point where we applaud sarcasm and cruelty.

And so the question that keeps me up at night is, how did we get to this place? Why couldn't we see it coming?

I think part of the answer, the part that is hard to hear, hard to process, is that we did know. Or at least the information that would have allowed us to know, was available, hiding (we might say) in plain sight.

In 2009, Pfizer (the company that claims to “profoundly impact the health of Canadians” — no doubt) received a record-setting \$2.3 billion fine for illegally marketing its painkiller Bextra and for paying kickbacks to compliant doctors.

At the time, Associate Attorney General Tom Perrelli said the case was a victory for the public over “those who seek to earn a profit through fraud.” Well, yesterday’s victory is today’s conspiracy theory. And, unfortunately, Pfizer’s misstep is not a moral anomaly in the pharmaceutical industry.

You might be familiar with some of the notable moments of the industry’s history of collusion and regulatory capture: the thalidomide disaster of the 50s and 60s, Anthony Fauci’s mismanagement of the AIDS epidemic, the Opioid epidemic and the SSRI crisis of the 90s, and that just scratches the surface.

The fact that drug companies are not moral saints should *never* have surprised us.

So we really can’t say “If we only knew” because the evidence was there; the collective ‘we’ did know.

So why didn’t that knowledge get the traction it deserved? Why did our blind adherence to “follow the science” lead us to be more unscientific than at, arguably, *any* other time in history?

Do you know the parable of the camel?

One cold night in the desert, a man is sleeping in his tent, having tied his camel outside. But as the night grows colder, the camel asks his master if he can put his head in the tent for warmth.

“By all means,” says the man; and the camel stretches his head into the tent.

A little while later, the camel asks if he may also bring his neck and front legs inside. Again, the master agrees.

Finally, the camel, who is half in, half out, says “I’m letting cold air in. May I not come inside?” With pity, the master welcomes him into the warm tent.

But once the camel comes inside, he says: “I think that there is not room for both of us here. It will be best for you to stand outside, as you are the smaller; there will then be room enough for me.

And with that, the man is forced outside of his tent.

How could this happen?

Well, it seems you can get people to do just about anything if you break the unreasonable down into a series of smaller, seemingly reasonable ‘asks.’

It is the humble petition of the camel — just to first put his head inside the tent — that is so modest, so pitiful, that it seems unreasonable, even inhumane, to refuse.

Isn’t this what we’ve seen over the last 2 years? It’s been a master class in how to influence a person’s behaviour one step at a time by encroaching a tiny bit, pausing, then starting from this new place and encroaching again all the while making us feel somehow beholden to those who are coercing us.

We got here because we consented to tiny encroachments that we never should have consented to, not because of the size but the nature of the ask. We got here not because we fail to see the harms we do or because we consider them to be a reasonable sacrifice for the sake of public good (though some surely do).

We got here because of our moral blindness, because we are temporarily unable to see the harms we do. How can little things like collateral damage and “autonomy” and “consent” possibly stack up against the deep, blinding devotion to the idea that we are “doing our part,” saving the human race?

Let’s go back to the camel for a moment.

One way to describe what the camel is doing is to say he is ‘nudging’ his master’s behaviour for his own purposes, in much the same way we have been nudged over the last two years.

I mean that literally. The COVID response of most major world governments was framed by the nudge paradigm, a form of behavioural psychology that uses the active engineering of choice to influence our behaviour in barely discernible ways. Based on the 2008 book Nudge by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, the paradigm operates on 2 very simple ideas:

1. Someone else, a supposed expert, will make better choices for you than you could make for yourself
2. It is right for that person to make those choices for you

The real-world actualization of this model in the UK is MINDSPACE, a behavioural insights team (or “nudge unit”) composed largely of academics from the London School of Economics.

Some of the unsurprising insights of MINDSPACE include the fact that we are deeply influenced by the behaviours of those around us and by appeals to ego (i.e. we typically act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves proven, I think, by the virtue-signaling practices of masking and social media vaccine stickers.)

Our equivalent of MINDSPACE is Impact Canada, housed within the Privy Council Office, which not only tracks public behaviour and sentiment but plans ways to shape it in accordance with public health policies. This isn't a secret. Theresa Tam bragged about it in an article in the *Toronto Star* last year.

These “nudge units” are composed of neuroscientists, behavioural scientists, geneticists, economists, policy analysts, marketers and graphic designers.

Members of Impact Canada include Dr. Lauryn Conway, whose work focuses on “the application of behavioural science and experimentation to domestic and international policy,” Jessica Leifer, a specialist in self-control and willpower, and Chris Soueidan, a graphic designer responsible for developing Impact Canada's digital brand.

Slogans and hashtags (like “Do your part,” #COVIDvaccine and #postcovidcondition), images (of nurses donning masks that look like something from the movie *Outbreak*), and even the soothing Jade green colour on the “Get the facts about COVID-19 vaccines” fact-sheets are all products of Impact Canada's research and marketing gurus.

Even the steady flow of more subtle images — on billboards and electronic traffic signs — normalizes the relevant behaviour through the subtle suggestion and justification of fear.

With greater than 90% vaccination rates, our nudge unit's efforts are wildly successful.

But why were we so susceptible to being nudged in the first place? Aren't we supposed to be the rational, critical thinking descendants of the Enlightenment? Aren't we supposed to be scientific?

One of the great lessons of the last two years is just how much we are all affected by fear. The world's nudge units masterfully manipulate our fears according to a precisely calculated cadence. But this is a dicey business.

If we feel helpless, fear appeals will make us defensive but, if we can be made to feel empowered, like there is something we can do to minimize the threat, our behaviours are highly moldable. We need to believe, for example, that the little mask we theatrically don at the entrance to the grocery store will fight a deadly virus, that the injection we take will save the human race (or at least give us the reputation for doing so).

But where did the idea that we *should* be manipulated in these ways come from?

None of it happened quickly and it didn't start in 2020. Our moral blindness, our moral panic, is the culmination of a long-term cultural revolution and a devolution of our core institutions. As Antonio Gramsci, founder of the Italian Communist party, proclaimed, to achieve socialism's triumph in the West, we must "Capture the culture." And what he envisioned to do so was what Rudi Dutschke described in 1967 as a "long march through the institutions."

Gramsci's followers created, as Allan Bloom wrote in *The Closing of the American Mind*, the powerful cultural left. With the universities as their laboratories, the West's radical leftists for decades taught students the virtues of relativism and groupthink.

These students graduated, worked their way up their respective professional ladders, molding each of the institutions we have been trained to trust: academia, medicine, media, government, even the judiciary. Molding them with the guiding ideology of the "politics of intent" which assumes that, if your intentions are noble and your compassion boundless, then you are virtuous, even if your actions ultimately lead to disaster on a colossal scale.

There is no accountability in the politics of intent. No apology. No autonomy. No individuality.

This is what's behind social activism, progressivism, wokeism, neoliberalism, purity politics and the cancel culture that seems to run roughshod over reason in the frenzied rush to protect "acceptable" ideas.

And this is why language came to be the ammunition of the COVID war: because it is the most expedient and effective capture-the-culture tool. Think of everything from "Self-isolate" to "covidiot" to, of course, "Anti-vaxxer," the linguistic scalpel that carved society up at its joints. Even the fact that "COVID" came to be capitalized (in the US, Canada and Australia, in particular) has an effect on the weight we give it.

These insidious shifts in our language help to entrench a social operating system that has proven its ability to reshape society without limitation, that led to my termination, that upheld the suspension of Dr. Crystal Luchkiw for giving a COVID vaccine exemption to a high-risk patient, that made Tamara Lich and Artur Pawlowski political prisoners, that saw narrative spin at its finest as our Prime Minister testified (under oath) at the Public Order Emergency Commission in Ottawa yesterday, that demands amnesty for the (apparently) innocently ignorant, and that brought us all together today.

If this is the cause of our moral blindness, how do we cure it? How do we 'wake people' up to the harms of what we are doing?

As the Belgian psychologist Mattias Desmet says, jarring awake an acolyte of this system is like trying to wake someone up from a hypnotic state. If you try to do so by giving arguments about the effects of pandemic measures on children starving in India, for example, it will be

futile because you are relying on ideas to which they give no psychological weight. Like the hypnotized person who feels nothing when a surgeon makes a cut, evidence that runs counter to the narrative is outside their focus of attention.

I have, personally, yet to hear of a case of someone being convinced of the absurdity of the COVID narrative on the basis of reason or evidence alone. I worked for months with the Canadian Covid Care Alliance to provide evidence-based information about COVID but I didn't see any real traction until I made a video in which I cried.

Why did you cry when you watched that video? Why do tears well up when we meet at the gas station or while walking the dogs?

The answer, I think, is that none of this is about evidence and reason. "Effective versus ineffective" was never the point. It's about feelings, on both sides. Feelings that justify our purity obsession, feelings (for many of you here today, I suspect) that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," as *Hamlet's* Marcellus quipped, and that we don't matter.

Do facts matter? Of course they do. But facts, alone, will never answer the questions we really care about. Let me say that again. FACTS, ALONE, WILL NEVER ANSWER THE QUESTIONS WE REALLY CARE ABOUT.

The real COVID war is not a battle over what is true, what counts as information, what it means to #followthescience; it's a battle over what our lives mean and, ultimately, whether we matter. It's a battle over the stories we tell.

Do we keep telling the seductive story of statism (which is what happens when we ask the state to assume authority over all spheres of our lives)? Do we outsource our thinking and our decision-making to the state that says:

- Don't worry about providing for your family, we offer welfare;
- Don't worry about taking care of each other when sick, we'll give you free health care;
- Don't worry about caring for your aging parents, there's long-term care for that;
- And now insurance and overdraft and lines of credit, and even perfect student loan forgiveness?

Do we tell the story that our individual lives don't matter, that we are expendable for the sake of the greater good, that technology will purify us, that if only we elect the right leaders, all our problems will be solved?

Or do we tell a better story? A story according to which our leaders are just a reflection of ourselves, that making ourselves wiser and stronger and more virtuous will *always* be better than relying on the state to make us healthy, safe and good, a story according to which we

keep reaching for what we all deeply crave: meaning, mattering, and connecting with the humanity in others. This, I think, is a much more compelling story and the one we need to tell as we continue to fight.

So, where do we go from here?

Much has been written about the moral qualities of today's outliers. In an eloquent letter to the unvaccinated narrated by Del Bigtree: "If Covid were a battlefield, it would still be warm with the bodies of the unvaccinated."

Very true, but lying there alongside them would be anyone who refuses to outsource their thinking, who refuses to wallow in the comfort of willful ignorance, and who keeps trudging along through the darkness without a lantern to light the way.

Moral endurance is a problem these days. Empathy is low, and not just on the pro-narrative side. I don't know about you but the feeling I can't quite ignore or reconcile these days, something I am not proud of as an ethicist or a human being, is a palpable feeling of being numb. Numb to the repetition of history's atrocities, numb to the laziness of the compliant who helped to create the world in which we now live, numb to inauthentic pleas for amnesty.

Those who have been speaking out are growing tired and we don't even know what round of the fight we are in. With the injury of time, even the most devout can fall away, and what once seemed a noble, unrelinquishable goal can start to lose its force in the haze of shifting crises. And it will be a long time before the choir of humanitysings our praises, if it ever does.

But those who can persist are the ones, I believe, who will one day lead us out of this moral catastrophe, those who can remind us that more rules, restrictions, and signals of our apparent virtue are just a veil over our moral emptiness.

You might wonder, what if I'm ignored? What if I'm not brave? What if I fail?

The truth is, we all fail... every day. It's unavoidable. But I think the greatest human failure is to pretend that we are gods, saints, or perfect heroes, that we can be made pure and invincible.

We all want to be the hero in our own story, of course — to slay the villains around us. But it's turning out that the real villains are living inside us and growing stronger every day.

The true COVID war won't be fought across the aisles of our parliaments, in our newspapers or even in the boardrooms of Big Pharma.

It will be fought between estranged sisters, between friends uninvited from Christmas dinner, between distanced spouses trying to see something vaguely familiar in the person sitting across from them. It will be fought as we struggle to protect our children and give our parents

dignity in their last days. It will be fought in our souls.

Is COVID amnesty possible? Of course it is... if we hold onto our willful blindness, if we whitewash our mistakes. It is possible if I forget that within the last year, my prime minister called me a racist, that police came to my door, that I stayed home while friends sanctimoniously went to restaurants without me, that I lost rights that only the truly unreflective enjoyed, and that I am trying to teach my 2 year-old how to play and imagine and hope while the world crumbles around her.

But to “forgive and forget” will only solidify our brokenness. We need to look our mistakes in the face. We need to say our sorries. And we need to mean it.

We are going to be in this war a while longer and there will likely be more casualties than we can fathom in this moment. As Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Strand wrote, “... if only we knew how long the ruins would last we would never complain.”

In the meantime, we tell our stories. We tell our stories because this is what we’ve done for thousands of years to make sense of our fears, to communicate with people from other tribes, to give our ancestors some degree of immortality and to teach our children. We tell our stories because we believe a cry in the dark will eventually be heard. These stories are what set a crisis in context. And sometimes a crisis can be productive.

In 1944, Jean Paul Sartre wrote an [article](#) for the *Atlantic* about those who fought against the occupation of France. Sartre begins the article with an apparent contraction:

“Never were we freer,” he wrote, “than under the German occupation. We had lost all our rights, and first of all our right to speak. They insulted us to our faces....The deported us *en masse*.... And because of all this we were free.”

Free? Really?!

For Sartre, it isn’t our circumstances that control us; it is how we interpret them. Sartre said they were unified because they all experienced the same fears, the same loneliness, the same uncertainty about the future.

And it was the courage of those who resisted suffering amidst all of this that led them out of it.

Leading us out of this will be up to those who, for some reason, choose resilience over helplessness, whose need to question is as natural as breathing, whose voice rings out in the silence, and who can see the humanity in others through the thick fog of shame and hatred.

It will be these outliers — people like you who were brave enough to be here today — that will make us look back on this moment in history and say, “Never were we freer.”

Author



Julie Ponesse

Dr. Julie Ponesse, 2023 Brownstone Fellow, is a professor of ethics who has taught at Ontario's Huron University College for 20 years. She was placed on leave and banned from accessing her campus due to the vaccine mandate. She presented at the The Faith and Democracy Series on 22, 2021. Dr. Ponesse has now taken on a new role with The Democracy Fund, a registered Canadian charity aimed at advancing civil liberties, where she serves as the pandemic ethics scholar.