

## **Growing in Wisdom During the Coronapocalypse<sup>1</sup> as a Character in a Science Fiction Novel**

**Thomas Lombardo  
Center for Future Consciousness**

One day a few months ago, when the world began to change, I said to my handyman that the emerging coronavirus pandemic seemed to me like a science fiction disaster novel. He quickly replied that yes, that was true, except we were *in* the novel having to live through it. At that moment it suddenly dawned on me that indeed it made very good sense to approach the pandemic as characters in a science fiction disaster novel.

In *The War of the Worlds* H. G. Wells envisioned how humans, while complacent and going about their normal daily business and personal affairs, were shocked by a “bolt out of the blue,” unsettling everyone and everything. Since then science fiction writers have vividly imagined all kinds of possible global disasters and have written numerous dramatic stories describing how people would react to such worldwide cataclysms. Science fiction writers have illuminated the kind of reality in which we now find ourselves.

Whereas our collective consciousness is primarily focused on current events and the here and now, science fiction delves into the fantastical, and the diverse possibilities of the future and strange alternate realities. Science fiction writers aspire to break out of the norm and the normal and expand our consciousness beyond the accustomed here and now. In the midst of the coronapocalypse we have moved out of the normal and the everyday here and now and entered into the expanded universe of science fiction.

Importantly, science fiction provokes us into thinking more deeply about the future, heightening our “future consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> We are now in one of those imagined futures of science fiction. Pervasive change is upon us. The shielded and narrow mindset the status quo has been shattered and fractured open. Yet as history reveals and science fiction has repeatedly argued, we were always just floating on an island of momentary protected stability, surrounded on all sides by the turbulent fluidity of transforming time. The waves of change have now come rushing in over the barriers of civilization. We are in a science fiction novel heading into a strange future.

Indeed, a disaster heightens our attention to the future. Personally living through a disaster shocks us out of our routine habits of thought and behavior. We can no longer assume and realistically feel that tomorrow will simply be like today. The future rises up

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<sup>1</sup> The word “apocalypse” means both great catastrophe and profound revelation. I first encountered the expression “coronapocalypse” through my editor, Tim Ward. I think the term, in both senses of the word—a colossal disaster provoking deep enlightenment—succinctly and dramatically captures the essence of our current reality.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Lombardo, *Future Consciousness: The Path to Purposeful Evolution*. Winchester, UK: Changemakers Books, 2017.

in our lives as a uncertain reality, filled with sound and fury and turmoil, and we have to grapple, mentally and viscerally, with this revelation and new emerging reality. We are in a science fiction novel riding the roller coaster of the time, being forced to look ahead, as our bodies and minds are pulled and yanked and kicked into tomorrow.

As I first observed the numbers, nationally and globally, I realized that we were riding on an exponential curve, where each day there were more new cases and new deaths than the day before. As I watched the news, I listened commentators and public figures present an array of viewpoints regarding what was happening, where it all was heading, and what we should do about it. On social media I observed a multitude of opinions: The pandemic was a fake, a conspiracy, an attempt to rob us of our freedom. As to be expected from reading science fiction disaster novels, there were many different voices and characters in this unfolding narrative of our times. Some people scream and panic, some hide their heads and go mute, some blame others, some dismiss and minimize the severity of events, some act like lunatics, many act bravely, and many try to be thoughtful, collaborative, and forward looking. The disaster is bringing out the best and the worse in us. It is all part of the drama, confusion, tragedy, and inspirational qualities of the story we find ourselves within, the kind of story frequently envisioned in science fiction.

Amidst this cacophony of voices, I noticed a scenario that routinely has appeared in the science fiction disaster novel. The scientists warn the government and the general public that a great disaster is coming and we had better prepare. Yet various leaders, their minds clouded and myopic wanting to preserve the status quo downplay the severity or even reality of the imminent danger. And many people listen to the minimizers and deniers, and resist facing or acknowledging the cataclysm. As increasingly becomes apparent though, with tragic consequences, the scientists are right, and as in many science fiction disaster novels, they emerge as one key group of heroes in the story. An important strength in science fiction stories, bringing credibility and plausibility to the narrative, is that the author is thoughtfully informed regarding relevant scientific knowledge and principles, and the science presented in the story enlightens the reality of the situation.

There is though much more than science and technology involved in understanding and confronting a catastrophe. Realistic and engaging science fiction is not just about science and technology. As noted above, there are social, political, and psychological factors at work in any disaster. The news has highlighted the economic repercussions, politicalization, and psychological effects associated with our present pandemic. As I have argued, science fiction is actually about the “future of everything,” from society, culture, politics, and the environment to the inner psyche and our deepest values and most intimate thoughts and feelings.<sup>3</sup> The present pandemic is affecting and will continue to impact all dimensions of human reality. As in numerous science fiction

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Lombardo *Science Fiction: The Evolutionary Mythology of the Future. Volume One: Prometheus to the Martians*. Winchester, UK: Changemakers Books, 2018; Thomas Lombardo “Science Fiction: Cosmic Consciousness and the Future of Everything” *Human Futures*, July, 2019.

disaster novels, advances in science and technology may play a key role in successfully dealing with the worldwide challenges ahead, but all spheres of human civilization have become engaged in this struggle for survival, sanity, and well-being. Science fiction jolts us out of the narrowness and complacency of the present, propelling us into the future, but a realistic future that involves transformations across all spheres of life.

One special reason why I see the value of taking a science fiction perspective on the pandemic and the unfolding future is that science fiction presents realistic narratives (albeit imaginative) involving unique characters and personalities who live through extraordinary events. The future and the fantastical is personalized and painted in rich sensory detail. The reader of science fiction vicariously lives the future, feels it, and perceives it in all its complexity and nuances. How does it feel to live through a disaster? This is what science fiction answers.

The human mind naturally resonates with the story or narrative. We are storytellers and inspired by our stories. As with any good story, science fiction touches all aspects of human experience. Our thoughts, emotions, sense of personal identity, and values are all affected through the science fiction story. Science fiction educates and expands our consciousness along all these dimensions through psychologically engaging stories of the strange and extraordinary. We are now directly within such a reality, each of us feeling and thinking about the transforming world as it impacts our lives and our futures.

Recently, Victor Motti (Director of the *WFSF*) and myself produced a *YouTube* dialogue discussing approaching the coronavirus pandemic as a character in a science fiction disaster novel.<sup>4</sup> Victor suggested that there were (at least) three different ways people were responding to the pandemic: A quick knee-jerk reaction, often out of fear; optimization of current ways of doing things; and an open, flexible mindset involving an “embracing of the novelty.” The third choice strikes me as especially resonant with the science fiction mindset on the future. The future is going to be different than the present and past, and there will be great novelty and surprises. This is the revelation dimension of the apocalypse. A key feature about the future that both science fiction writers and futurists emphasize is that the future is filled with uncertainty, risk, and adventure. The coronavirus pandemic pushes us into having to address the uncertainty and transformational nature of reality and the future. Often the heroes in science fiction novels are those who most willingly embrace the novelty, courageously facing the unknown. As the famous futurist Barbara Marx Hubbard stated, “Our crisis is our opportunity.” The crisis can provoke evolution. We should not return to the good old days (which in many ways were not that good) but rather we should thoughtfully venture forward into a new day and new way of being.

In our dialogue I suggested that in living and growing through the pandemic we should attempt to live “wisdom narratives.” It might seem odd to associate science fiction with wisdom, but numerous science fiction stories include central characters who through

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Lombardo and Victor Motti “Science Fiction and the Future of the Corona Pandemic” -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WAUBNtWsUE&feature=youtu.be>

challenge and struggle, persevere and learn and grow, acquiring wisdom in dealing with unsettled and difficult times. Many of the great science fiction novels are “wisdom narratives.” Psychological studies on the development of wisdom indicate that wisdom grows through trauma, adversity, and transformation being successfully faced. The growth of wisdom occurs within pronounced transformational experiences. Given its fantastical and extraordinary scenarios, science fiction is a great laboratory of “thought experiments” for understanding the growth of wisdom. So modeling ourselves on those heroic individuals who face the uncertainty, strangeness, and shifting currents of time, as portrayed in science fiction, we can aspire to live wisdom narratives through the cataclysm and furor of today. We can be on the road to wisdom as the volcanoes erupt around us and within us.

Aspire toward living wisely and growing further in wisdom, as you navigate through this unsettling reality of great transformation. We need to become heroes for ourselves, learning how to wisely guide the wave of change around us and within us toward an unknown destination. If enough of us do this collectively, we will discover, indeed create, both a new world and new selves as we journey across the turbulent sea. As is often envisioned in science fiction novels, in the process perhaps we will create a better human society and wiser individuals.

An “intelligent” living force is attacking all of us. “The Martians have landed!” And amidst the chaos the weaknesses of our existing mindset and ways of life have become glaringly conspicuous. Will science find an answer? Will our gadgets save us? Or will the solution most importantly require an evolution in our character, our minds, and our hearts? It is time to create a new tomorrow on the battlefield of earth.

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There are countless engaging and enlightening science fiction disaster stories. Starting from Jules Verne’s *Off on a Comet* and H. G. Wells’ *The World of the Worlds*, *The War in the Air*, and “The Star,” a sample of some of the best, include *The Purple Cloud*, *Darkness and Dawn*, *The Poison Belt*, *The Second Deluge*, *When Worlds Collide*, *Earth Abides*, *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Wanderer*, *No Blade of Grass*, *The Crystal World*, *The Drowned World*, *Lucifer’s Hammer*, *Doomsday Book*, *Blood Music*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, *Parable of the Talents*, and for a contemporary Chinese vision of invasion, disaster, super-science, and emerging wisdom read the wondrous *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy by Cixin Liu.