



COMING OUT OF THE PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNED, CHANGED HABITS AND NEW VALUES

*So often times it happens that we live our lives in chains,
And we never even know we have the key.
"Already Gone," by Jack Tempchin and Robert R. Strandlund
-Recorded by the Eagles*

*I do not accept any absolute formulas for living...
So I think we should live with this constant discovery...
We should stake our whole existence on our willingness to explore and experience.
-Martin Buber (1878-1965), philosopher*



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are the connections and oppositional forces at work between individual habits and routines and society's way of operating?
- Will individuals who have changed the way they prefer to live force changes in how institutions function?
- How will what we are calling the Great Lessons of the Pandemic force changes in society and its institutions?
- In what ways will those lessons push society toward a different way of organizing?
- How easily do society and the economy change after individuals have changed?
- Will people's changing attitude about how they want to spend time alter workplace dynamics?

HOW IS THE NOVEL VIRUS CHANGING US?

Curious Changes

We have recently been taking note of curious twists in the way individuals have been thinking and functioning. For instance, in the time before the pandemic, work seemed to be encroaching on personal time, and burnout was resulting. But since the advent of the pandemic, personal time seems to be encroaching on work, with time away from work becoming more important to individuals. People's perspectives on having time off seems to be edging out their erstwhile interest in working longer hours to make more money. Such a dynamic shift in attitude seems curious, given that throughout much of recent U.S. history, work has given meaning to many people's lives. Are individuals no longer in need of such meaning? Or are they moving toward something different? Jobs provided workers the wherewithal to live comfortably, and jobs often guided workers' perspectives on societal issues in general. Have individuals moved away from those needs?

People who once commuted into offices for a long day "at work" have now said they are not so crazy about going back to the office. Some say they miss the office life, while others say they are fine working from home...forever. In the past, idle hands, as the saying goes, were the devil's workshop, meaning that time spent not doing useful things was considered wasted time (or, worse, unbusy hands got the person into trouble). But in another curious twist, time "wasted" – that is, time not spent producing – is no longer seen as wasted time.

Technology, via broadband connectivity, enabled this change in perspective, but technology cannot explain how and in what way individuals came to make such a change. Experiencing the pandemic – not only for those exposed to the virus but also for those dealing with the

economic and sociological effects of the pandemic – changed people's perspectives on their willingness to work some kinds of jobs, how to spend their time and where to place value on experiences and activities. The pandemic changed many people's behavior, perspectives, attitudes and values, and that leads to the question: What just happened, really? And that leads to another question: What is going to happen?



Habits and Routines

Humans are creatures of habit, as the saying goes. Habits are, according to psychologists, automatic behaviors that have been embedded in the brain. Humans can form maladaptive habits, which have a deleterious effect on the person, or they can form adaptive habits, which have a positive effect. Unfortunately, the brain does not recognize the difference between good and bad habits. It just has habits.

Whether they are good or bad, habits form via a three-step process: a cue or trigger, a behavioral response and a reward or positive reinforcement. Hear a smartphone make a sound (cue), look at the smartphone (behavior) and receive a dopamine shot (reward) as positive reinforcement for the behavior by which one learns that a recent post has just received a "like." Do that often enough, and looking at the smartphone becomes a habit.

Prior to the pandemic, habits and routines (a complex of habits) had developed surrounding how humans spend their time. Whatever those ways were, the pandemic disrupted them, breaking workers' routines and habits and interrupting practices to which they had become accustomed. Disruptions of one's habits and routines can do that. To take one example, the 2014 strike at the London Underground disrupted many commuters' daily routine, forcing them to find connecting alternatives for the two days the strike lasted. Even after the strike ended,

five percent of all commuters who had discovered a different commuter mode stayed with it – and that was after just two days. The disruption forced them to make a change that they could have done anytime, and the change stuck. (*Spectrum*, 6/21)

One interesting impact of the pandemic was how it created a set of conditions that seemed quite similar to the way psychologists say habits are broken, especially maladaptive habits. For example, becoming aware of one's habit is a first step to ending it. Isolation, quarantine and other insulating behaviors experienced during the pandemic made people aware of their habits. Many individuals looked at those habits, thought about the effects such habitual behaviors were having on their lives and decided they needed changing. They intentionally started new habits and new routines. For instance, 40 percent of Americans said they were reading more, and that led to a 20 percent increase in print book sales in the first six months of this year. Smartphone users downloaded twice as many apps in 2020 as they did in 2019. Also, the sharp decrease in many employees' need to commute during the pandemic saved them time, on average, equal to 8.5 days for the year. The pandemic was encouraging individuals to change their habits and routines. (*Economist*, 7/3/21; *Publisher's Weekly*, 7/12/21; *positivepsychology.com*, 3/23/21)

Healthcare workers in increasing numbers are saying they are considering leaving their jobs. That might make sense, given the relentless pressure they have been dealing with. Nearly 70 percent of all workers said they were burned out before the pandemic, and they were already thinking about leaving their careers. Their sense of self-worth also started shifting. For instance, the lowest wage that non-college-educated workers said they would accept jumped from \$48,800 in March 2020 to \$61,500 one year later. (*The Week*, 7/2/21; *Time*, 8/2/21; *CNBC*, 5/30/21)

The pandemic has been forcing changes in personal behavior and altering individuals' perspectives and attitudes as well. With so many disruptions in their routines, what have individuals learned from this



seemingly unique experience? What new ways of seeing things are changing the way individuals and society operate? More to the point, in what way will the lessons learned shape new habits, new priorities and new values in the months and years to come?

The Great Lessons of the Pandemic

Lessons are absorbed more slowly than habits are changed. Habits are set in motion by cues and brought to fruition by a reward. Lessons are

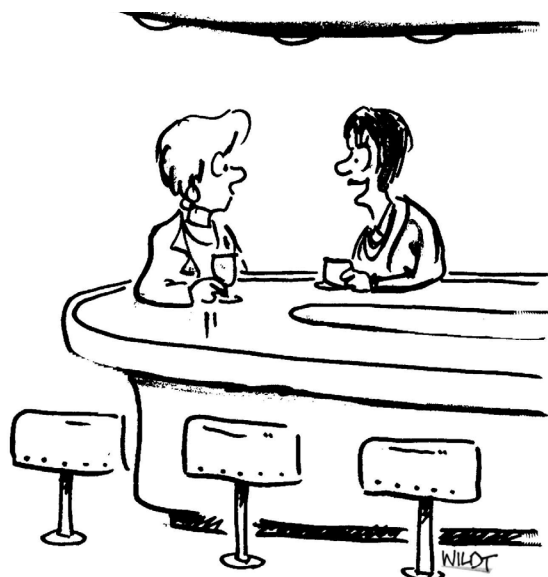
harder to recognize and have a deeper effect on overall behavior. Lessons learned can change people's attitudes, perspectives and beliefs. Lessons require thought, and thought can be employed to change maladaptive habits or any kind of behavior. Based on our observations, here are a few lessons we think have been absorbed by many individuals during the pandemic.

Eliminating habits and routines opens up possibilities – Habits and routines make life easier to manage...but, eventually, more boring. The brain seeks novelty; habits, while freeing the brain to do other things, are repetitive, which turns off the brain. Changing habits involves breaking the habit loop – trigger-behavior response-reward. The pandemic broke the tripartite trigger-behavior-reward loop, forcing individuals to find more meaningful behavioral responses and identify new kinds of rewards – rewards that relate more to personal growth and less to immediate gratification. Katy Milkman, professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, provided some context for changing habits. "One of the things I find really interesting about the pandemic is that it forced us to experiment in ways that we wouldn't usually.... I think everybody had their own discoveries through the forced experimentation the pandemic imposed. (*New York Times*, 6/1/21)

Time is more in one's hands than once thought – The pandemic helped individuals see that their time on Earth is not limitless and that life is not endless. The pandemic cut nearly two years off the average American's lifespan, the largest decline since

the Second World War, and millions of Americans watched as a loved one or close friend died. During the pandemic, full-time workers gained, on average, more than two hours of time from work per day thanks to remote work schedules, time that enabled them to rethink their life situation. For example, one writer did some elementary multiplication and discovered that the typical lifespan was roughly 4,000 weeks; the shock of that rather small number made him feel queasy. When he asked friends how many weeks they thought comprised the average life, they guessed in the six figures. They, too, were surprised. Such shock leads to rethinking that changes people's attitudes about how they spend their time. Control over one's time means lessening the amount of time for things outside one's control. "Life is short," as one woman who started a new business stated, "and there is nothing to lose or be afraid of" (see [IF 4209](#); *Economist*, 7/3/21; *Investor's Business Daily*, 7/26/21; *Guardian Weekly*, 8/13/21).

Security and safety are fragile – A major lesson from the pandemic is individual vulnerability. Hundreds of millions of people's personal and once private information has been stolen from corporate databases in the past year. Environmental risks and damages have reached new highs from floods and droughts and from extreme heat and wildfires. And physical security seems less and less real. Moreover, the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus also exacerbates stress, anxiety and depression among the populations affected. As vulnerability has become seen as part of life, anxiety has become part of a normal reaction to experiencing life today (see [IF 4208](#)).



"I'm attracted to vulnerable men...
especially if they're heavily insured."

Employment and careers are uncertain –

In a matter of months last year, more than 66 million workers lost their jobs, a psyche shock, for certain. Also, automation is threatening more and more jobs. Until the 1980s, industries deploying automation created new jobs faster than technology displaced them, but that reversed after the 1980s, with automation displacing workers faster than industries were creating jobs. Now, skills and abilities must change constantly. Last year when individuals suddenly lost their jobs or were stopped from entering their workplaces, they quickly realized that their job status was uncertain. On the other side of the issue, companies have come to realize that workers might not return to their jobs, which means job-market uncertainty (see [inThought 5/26/20](#)).

A good life can be lived less expensively than formerly thought –

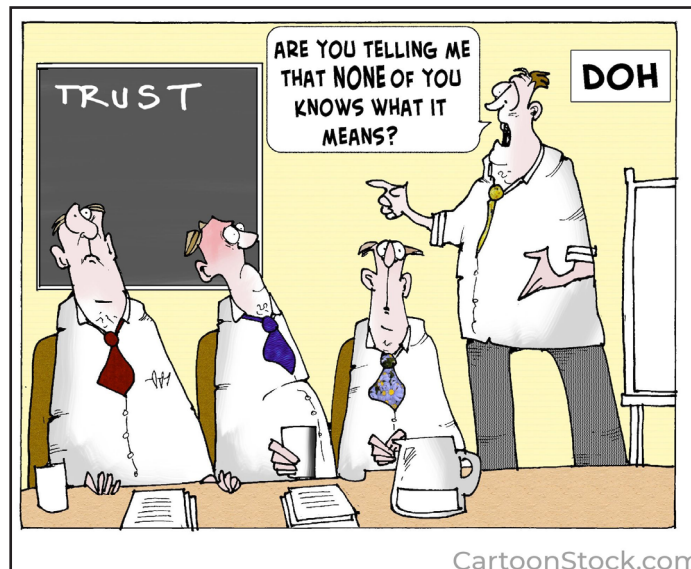
With so many businesses closed, thereby limiting the range of activities available during the pandemic, individuals learned that they can live a good life on much less money than they once thought. Being resourceful is one way forward, with companies such as The RealReal, a secondhand retailer, setting a company record for gross merchandise sales in the first quarter this year and increasing its first-time shoppers by 34 percent. Meanwhile, low-priced retailer Shein (pronounced "she-in") replaced Amazon as the most downloaded shopping app in the U.S., watching its sales double in 2019 over the prior year and then seeing a tripling over that doubling in 2020, all while selling mostly to Generation Z and younger Millennial shoppers seeking to stretch their budgets. Americans have even altered their definition of how much money one needs to be "wealthy," shifting from \$2.3 million in 2019 to \$1.9 million in 2020, and Millennials said "just" \$1.4 million would make one wealthy. In another study, the amount of money needed for "financial happiness" fell during the pandemic from \$1.75 million to \$1.1 million, while the amount of money needed to be "financially comfortable" declined from \$934,000 to \$624,000. Perspectives on the value of traditional rewards offered by employers were shifting. (CNBC, 7/27/21 and 5/12/21; *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, 6/21/21)

Alternatives are everywhere – Different ways to shop, work, travel and live became clearer during the pandemic. Many people used their time at home to start a hobby, which evolved into a product that they sold on eBay, Etsy or elsewhere – a side hustle. Old habits about work seemed to lose their hold on many individuals, as, for instance, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton

School delivered only 12 percent of its graduating MBA students to Wall Street banking firms this past year, down from 25 percent ten years earlier. Moreover, in a March survey, 67 percent of currently unemployed workers said they are considering not returning to the career they had before the pandemic (see [inF 1601](#); *New York Times*, 7/26/21; *Harper's*, 5/21).

Experts (CDC, Congress, doctors, police, corporate leaders, etc.) cannot always protect us – Many leaders' mistakes, errors, bad planning, poor execution, self-interest, ignorance, indifference and arrogance have over time lost them the trust they once enjoyed. That loss of trust in leaders of most kinds of institutions has left individuals feeling that they are on their own when it comes to confronting current conditions. After more than 620,000 deaths, nearly 40 million having tested positive for the virus, and tens of millions of people negatively affected by these numbers, all seemingly made worse by institutional and leadership failures, society now finds itself with another crisis that individuals seem to be facing almost alone: a mental health crisis. And individuals are not doing very well dealing with this latest crisis on their own. For instance, during the pandemic, one quarter of individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 seriously considered suicide (see [IF 4209](#)).

Without trust, society comes apart – In 2020, the Edelman Trust Index said that participants placed technology at the highest level of trust among all industries. One year later, in 2021, that trust had fallen to its historically lowest level among 17 of the 27 countries studied and had declined in 25 of those 27 countries. Roughly 25 percent of Americans say they are avoiding the vaccine because they do not trust science or the government. Overall, trust in doctors, government officials, neighbors, voters, colleagues, bosses, employers, business leaders, technologists, media celebrities, religious leaders and on and on all fell near to their lowest levels or to their lowest level, and societal cohesion started to unravel (see [inThought 4/23/20](#)).



The Lessons Learned Lead to New Priorities and New Values

"[The pandemic], weirdly, was an opportunity." That sentiment came from Mark Wray, who lost his \$17,000 job at a local movie house, found a program that offered him training and then landed a new \$55,000 job. This represents the dual effects of a crisis: risk and opportunity. Perhaps the pandemic crisis might prove to be an opportunity to change old habits of both individuals and institutions and to forge new ones that align better with current conditions. "The pandemic made you think about life differently, in a way, when our whole lives were flipped upside down," offered Deborah Gladney, who, with her sister, started a new business in Wichita (KS) that provides a career site for service workers. (*New York Times*, 8/20/21)

The lessons individuals have learned from the pandemic have affected the way they view the world, how they see themselves fitting into that world and what they can do to make that world more livable. That means they have a different way of addressing the world than they did before the pandemic. Their habits have changed, and in those changed habits, a new way of living is emerging. Here are several priorities and values they are developing from the lessons they have learned from the pandemic.

Pragmatism – Baseline practicality means a reduction in aspirational spending and fewer credit-leveraged purchases. Pragmatism, an American philosophy developed in the early twentieth century by John Dewey, William James and Charles Peirce, essentially revolves around finding practical things or plans or concepts that work in the real world. The pandemic has started returning Americans to that way of thinking. Excessive debt for aspirational buying

is evidently not workable to changed consumers. This past March, credit-card balances equaled just 18 percent of the spending limits on general-purpose cards, the lowest since 2009, and the overall balance on credit

cards as of March was \$140 billion lower than it was at the end of 2019. Also through the beginning of the pandemic to March of this year, consumers reduced their credit-card balances by 12 percent, a record (see **IF 4003**; *The Week*, 8/20/21).

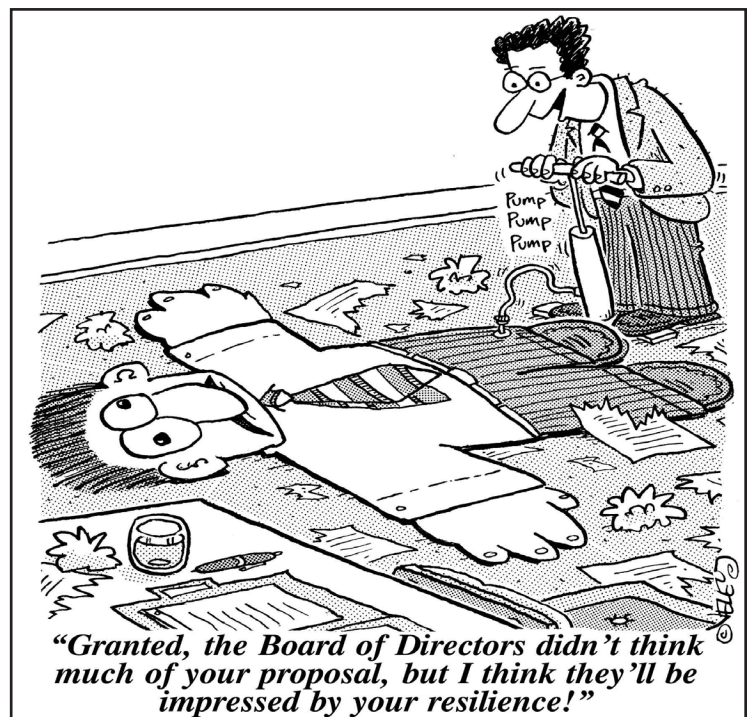
Social Engagement & Fairness – In the middle of a pandemic, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 26 million Americans took part in public demonstrations in more than 500 different locations to protest the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman and to voice support for the Black Lives Matter movement, the largest movement in U.S. history. “Really,” explained Deva Woodly, professor of politics at the New School, “it’s hard to overstate the scale of this movement.” Americans aware of the uneven way in which COVID-19 affected populations of color turned their attention to a renewed sense of fair play, accorded less approval to privilege, and sought society’s action to create more opportunities. A need to engage with society and a sense of fair play have been products of pandemic experiences for more and more Americans. (*New York Times*, 7/3/20)

Convenience & Comfort – In June of this year, e-commerce sales increased 8.3 percent from June 2020, an increase in online sales of 95 percent over June 2019. Online buying and delivery are convenient. Also, the need for personal space, in homes, offices or at the theater, is now more critical than prior to the pandemic. Comfort has entered people’s sense of personal importance. Nicholas Ghesquière, head designer at Louis Vuitton, recognized the change, and after his Paris spring show explained: “If there is a positive to come out of this year, it is that comfort is not a bad word.” Consumers have turned to buying “hybrid” clothes, outfits that can go from home to a social engagement, all with the necessary descriptor: comfortable. In design, this means softer, rounder and smoother. (*Yahoo*, 7/9/21; *Guardian*, 3/10/21)

Versatility & Resilience – A study by Blind, an anonymous social media site popular with tech workers, discovered that 49 percent of its users planned to change jobs in the coming year. Also, this past April, May and June, a total of 11.5 million Americans quit their jobs... in the middle of a pandemic. In one study, 40 percent of former workers in the hospitality industry – hotels, restaurants and bars – said they would not be returning to their former jobs, even if the jobs were offered to them. Being adaptable to the pace of change taking place in the economy has become critical, meaning lifelong learning, a willingness to develop new skills, an acceptance of the risks involved in changing careers, and the ability to

make significant change in one’s lifestyle to find a better personal fit. An example of adjusting to new opportunities came with the rapid rise in non-fungible tokens (NFTs). “I got involved in the NFT space,” explained one youthful adventurer, “because originally I thought it was cool as an online flex.” Another added, “I wanted to perfect my skills, knowing how to do a drop [of a new work]. You need to know how to set up your store. How to create a template.” That is versatility mixed with curiosity blended with persistence. (*The Week*, 7/2/21; *Inc.*, 8/26/21; *New York Times*, 8/16/21 and 8/20/21)

In May 2021, individuals filed more than 500,000 applications to launch new businesses, the second highest of any month on record, excepting only another COVID month, July 2020. Overall last year, Americans filed paperwork to start 4.3 million new businesses, up 24 percent from 2019 and the first uptick in such applications after four decades of declines. Professional skateboarders say the essence of their sport is falling, because that is the only way to get better. The pandemic was a big “fall” for many individuals; now, as a result, they are starting to piece together a new kind of life. During the pandemic, the jewelry brand Foundrae had one charm that outsold all others: one called Resilience. (*The Week*, 7/16/21; *SurferToday*, 10/15/20; *New York Times*, 8/20/21)



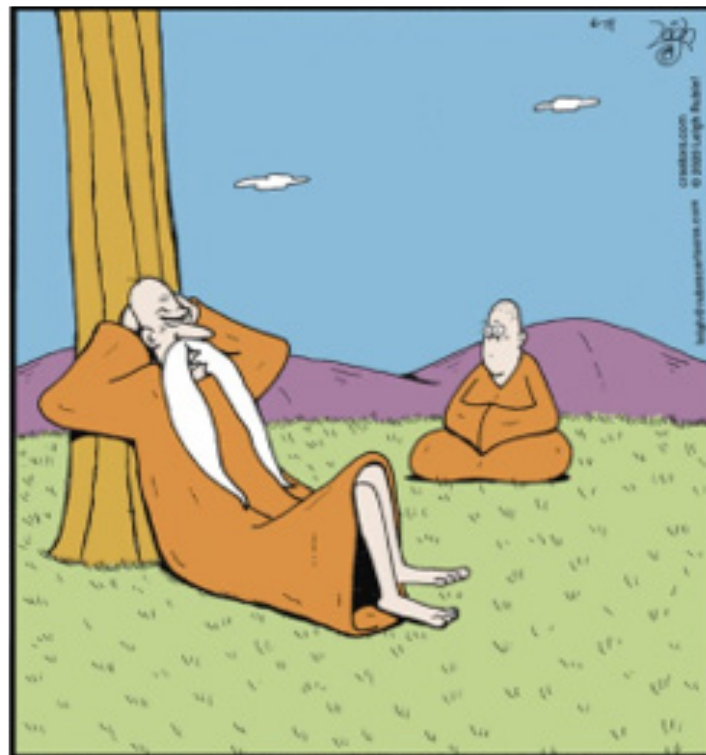
Balance & a Life of Richness – In a May survey of 16,000 workers from 16 different countries, more than half said they wanted “flexibility” in when they work, and 40 percent said they want choices in where to

work. Lazard and Google recently said every employee can have one month each year to work wherever they want, while British company Revolut said employees can work wherever they want for two months per year. The pandemic experience helped individuals see that work, leisure, personal relationships, community and other personal activities need to fit together in a balanced way to create a positive life – no burnout or overwork and no addictions. (*Pymnts*, 7/12/21; *Wall Street Journal*, 8/16/21)

Psychologists have historically identified two kinds of lives, one labeled a happy life, full of stability, pleasure, enjoyment and positive emotions, and the other called a meaningful life, loaded with purpose, virtue, devotion, service and sacrifice. Lately, psychologists have been exploring a third kind, called a psychologically rich life, which is full of complex mental engagement, a wide range of intense and deep emotions, and diverse, novel, surprising, challenging and interesting experiences. While the happy life is mostly positive and the meaningful life is mostly purposeful, the third kind of life can sometimes have strong negative experiences that encourage personal growth, intensely positive and negative emotions that deepen one's understanding of life and interesting experiences in which novelty and complexity come with significant changes in perspectives. The psychologically rich life can come with challenges and difficulties, such as living through unemployment, natural disasters or warfare, all leading to a deeper appreciation of being alive. Living through the viral pandemic as well as the economic pandemic that accompanied it seems to have pointed more and more individuals toward a psychologically rich life, which will create an individual not too interested in returning to the "normal" life that existed before the pandemic. (*Scientific American*, 8/20/21; *Quartz*, 8/18/20)

Time – For the reasons cited in the examples above, individuals have developed a different perspective on how they spend their time. The old phrase "Time is money" is getting replaced with something closer to "Time is personal." First, the way individuals spent time before the pandemic is not going to be the way they spend time after the pandemic. Time is too precious to waste doing things that do not enhance life at a personal level; distractions can use up many hours that could be spent in more rewarding endeavors. Company executives are saying business travel will be greatly reduced in the post-pandemic era. A Bloomberg survey of 45 large U.S. corporations discovered that 84 percent said they would be spending less on travel after the pandemic. Such a change in attitudes about how one spends time might still include a challenging job, and it might also include more traditional things such as family and more social

engagement. But wasting time to make more money in an otherwise unrewarding job or spending valuable time on little-valued activities will fall by the wayside (see [inThought 3/8/18](#); *Bloomberg*, 8/31/21).



"Yes, my son, time is an illusion, unlike leisure time, which is very real, very precious and never to be disturbed."

Where Does It Go From Here?

As individuals change, they alter the economy, politics and employment. With significant changes come a significant rethink of the role of consumers, citizens and employees and their relationship with society's institutions. Such a rethink could lead to the emergence of a new social contract, which will necessarily seek to answer questions such as the following:

- ◆ How will "followers" relate to their "leaders" under a new social contract?
- ◆ What amount of authority will need to be dispersed rather than remain concentrated?
- ◆ How much time will individuals have to develop their "better life"?
- ◆ Which businesses will be prepared to address the needs and wants of consumers and employees who have developed new habits and have different values and priorities?
- ◆ What will be the dynamic between institutions and individuals that will actualize new perspectives among employees and leaders?

Some of our previous looks at this topic:

- IF 4209** Agonizing Reappraisal In The Time Of COVID-19, Part I: Individuals Take A New Direction In Their Lives, 5/26/21
- IF 4208** Uncertainty, Instability, Confusion And “Noise”: Other Than That, Assessing Risk Is Easy, 5/17/21
- inThought 3/3/21** The Future Of Instability: Attention Battles And Jolting Transitions Make For Unpleasant Realities
- inF 1601** Hustling In The New Economy, 1/21/21
- IF 4117** Two Ways Of Thinking And One Reality: “We’re All In This Together” And So How Will Society Respond To The Psychological Strains Of The Pandemic?, 10/30/20
- inF 1516** Society’s Rethink: Work And Office Real Estate, 10/14/20
- inF 1506** On A Road To A Better Life, 6/25/20
- inThought 5/26/20** The Economic Pandemic, Part II: The Brain, The Virus And Making Bad Decisions
- inThought 4/23/20** Busted Trust: Undermining Trust And Finding A Way Back
- IF 4103** Giving Shape To The Next Narrative: Repair And Enhance Replaces Dispersed Wealth, 3/13/20
- IF 4009** Work And Happiness: Meaning Gets Drained From Work, And People Seek It Elsewhere, 4/29/19
- IF 4003** Less Of This And More Of That: Individuals Move Away From Consumerism And Toward Control, 2/27/19
- inThought 1/11/19** The Axis Of Anxiety And A Search For Solutions: The New Economy Drives A Quest For A Better Life
- inThought 12/7/18** Trust & Truth: Deception, Manipulation And The Allure Of Artificial Anything
- IF 3905** From Work To Post-Work: Jobs, Work And The Ongoing Restructuring Of Employment, 3/29/18
- inThought 3/8/18** The Attention-Industrial Complex And Its Discontents: Capabilities Of And Challenges For Those Seeking To Grab Others’ Attention
- IF 3901** Anxiety Becomes Normal: Anxiety Settles In To A Society In Transition, 1/29/18