

4-1-11 Understanding Backward, Living Forward

(Renaissance and Public Health)

Philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard said, “Life must be understood backwards; but... it must be lived forward.

I was thinking of this recently because I was wondering if we were on the right track with public health and wondered what we could learn from the past. The first idea that came to me was from an art class. I had asked the teacher how the renaissance came to be. How did all that talent surface at the same time? The professor smiled at my ignorance and patiently explained that there is always enough talent in the general society to follow instruction and to practice and, for many, even perfect a craft. The genius factor is always there, too, but in a lesser amount. Both the workers and the gifted needed to be supported in order to produce large amounts of quality art works.

While that model might still serve us well, the economics of that time period does not. Or, at least it should not and I hope it does not. But I do wonder where we are headed. It came in handy for the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries to have a social class system of millions of working class people who had little choice about what they did or what they were paid. That was improved upon, though, by organizing the trades and recognizing talent from any and all origins, allowing for the possibility that a poor child could become a rich adult.

Of course, there were other factors that assisted in the blooming success of the Renaissance. There was money, there was religion and there was patronage of certain family lines bordering on worship. A lot of that money and worship was given by frightened people who truly believed that they could ward off punishment by building the next greatest, highest, biggest and most adorned cathedral. Oh, how that sort of motivation can go wrong, we have seen all too well in past and recent times

While the economics may have changed since that time, (I say may) we can still learn from these organized and motivated people who responded well to the most feared public health threat of the time: the plague. You can read about their efforts in the fascinating writings by economic historian Carlo M. Cipolla, where the stories unfold like a Shakespearean play. Cipolla added tremendous wealth to our understanding of this time period by reading original Renaissance documents and translating them from his native tongue of Italian into English.

Cipolla explains that while the Italians had been learning how to organize their efforts against the plague since the time of the plague pandemic of 1348, it wasn’t until the plague of 1650 hit, that a few affected cities were motivated to improve upon the existing sparse and inconsistent public health response. To my surprise, the framework they formed is very much like today’s.

“Special Magistracies, combining legislative, judicial, and executive powers (hence the title Magistracies) comprised the public health system in a city/region, and exercised authority over all matters pertaining to public health”, Cipolla explained.

The Health Magistrates “progressively expanded the sphere of their controls to such matters as the recording of deaths, burials, the marketing of food, the sewage systems, the disposal of byproducts of various economic activities, the hospitals, the hostellries, prostitution, and so on,” explained Cipolla. They saw the wisdom of preventing all sorts of public health threats, despite the fact that their main purpose was to prevent and respond to epidemics, especially the plague.

The most prepared for epidemics and organized for public health at the time, were the cities of Venice, Milan, Genoa, and Florence. In June of 1652, they fell (or jumped) into a maelstrom of political and economic reactions and consequences, when word spread, (fairly quickly considering it was all by hand written letters shipped and ridden to other cities) of contagious diseases killing some people in Sardinia.

In response to the dreaded news, banishments, suspensions, and proclamations of closed harbors flew out to the surrounding areas. These knee jerk responses, albeit understandable considering the circumstances, created, in turn, more of the same, creating resentments, retaliation and a desire for consistency.

What happened next? How did they live up to the Renaissance definition of “re-born, or born-again”? They saw the wisdom of cooperating with a dose of skepticism and trusting with a measure of check points. It is really interesting and I’ll tell you next time! It even connects with the history of the United States and many immigrants entering here.

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You can read more about this fascinating and pertinent account of public health struggles in *Fighting the Plague in Seventeenth-Century Italy* by Carlo M. Cipolla, University of Wisconsin Press, 1981. See also Carlo M. Cipolla: *Public Health and the Medical Profession in the Renaissance*. Cambridge University Press, 1976.