

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

The Meaning of Global Health

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I drifted in and out of consciousness as men from Iceland, Canada, the United States and Germany took turns carrying me on their backs. I was a dead weight—struggling to stay alive as my body went into shock and my heart entered into a state of tachycardia. I was stranded in the foreign mountains of Iceland after having endured second and third degree burns on my legs. Stranded in an area with no cellphone reception to call emergency services, being carried through the challenging mountainous terrain was the only way I could stand a chance at survival.

Strangers from different parts of the world teamed up to carry me through the challenging terrain that is known for its volcanic quaking, and geothermal activity of mud pools and stream vents that boil right before your eyes. I was a victim that quickly succumbed to the acidic, boiling water that ripped the flesh right off of my feet and legs. The pools can reach temperatures of up to 220 degrees Fahrenheit—temperatures that tore through my skin and muscle.

The dramatic rescue was what saved my life—the power of individuals from all over the world working together regardless of linguistic or cultural barriers was beyond incredible. None of them knew me, but what they did know is that I wouldn't have survived had they not all helped.

Although the team made slow progress taking turns carrying me over the mountainous terrain, we were eventually met by the rescue team that used ATVs and a specialized basket to get me to an ambulance at the bottom of the trail. The picture below says it all (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Half way down the mountainous terrain in Reykjadalur Valley (south Iceland), the rescue team uses specialized equipment to bring me to safety. Other hikers are seen in the photo providing additional support—including a firefighter from California who is using the fireman's carry, while another is holding the IV bag.

Strangers had teamed up to save me—strangers who were not seeking a reward by engaging in this rescue mission. They simply wanted to help because they could. It was at this exact moment in time that I realized global health took on a completely new meaning for me. It was not just about achieving equity, prioritizing sustainability outcomes, or creating universal policies—I realized it was beyond that. It was about the heroic efforts of those from around the world that stepped up and worked together, regardless of cultural, linguistic and political barriers. These individuals were unconsciously able to put their differences aside and contributed to the heroic effort without asking for anything in return. This single incident can be

paralleled by the power countries can share when they join their efforts to overcome global challenges.

As I look back on this incident that took place nearly four years ago, I can't help but compare it to the biggest challenge we are currently faced with on a global scale—COVID-19. We all hold the same hope as we fight to achieve a single outcome—a single outcome of creating a robust international health framework that will serve to protect future generations and those more vulnerable. There is no single country, government agency, private company or individual that can address the pandemic alone. This can only be achieved through a partnership approach. The question isn't if these global partnerships can take place—the question is when. This pandemic has been a blunt and agonizing reminder that we cannot be safe individually until we are safe collectively.

COVID-19 has capitalized on our global weaknesses, which heightens the need to come together now more than ever. We must act globally and use this as an opportunity to create a unified plan that extends far beyond the pandemic we currently face. It is important to remember that we are all fighting to achieve the same outcome—yet why are so many working independently to achieve separate political agendas? Organizations, corporations and government sectors have to dedicate their efforts to increase collective efficiency and must leave their independent and bureaucratic agendas at the door.

How is it that this single virus has caused such devastation and pain in all parts of the world? Every household around the world has somehow been impacted by this tiny molecule that is no more than 10 nanometers in length [1]. This virus has kept us locked up in our homes, has prevented us from seeing the people we love and has taken away the joys that were once prevalent in our daily activities. It has forced us to adapt to new ways of living—new means of communicating, completing work, and understanding what our future might entail. As isolated as we all may be, we all share something in common: none of us know what the future of the pandemic will truly look like. Is this enough to unify us? That common thought of knowing we are alone

together? We can only be as strong as the weakest part in the world—and we must protect those who are unable to do so, and only then can we really protect ourselves.

The virus has no continental boundaries—it has shown us its powers by quantifying the number of people infected and deceased. Building health partnership is the only way we can cope with the precipitous increase of those infected. We must help those who cannot survive socioeconomically on their own—we will only burden ourselves if we do not take immediate action through bold policy. Our economies and societies depend on it more than ever. Our children and grandchildren depend on it. We must acknowledge how far we've come and deliver on our global promise to not leave anyone behind.

If those strangers that came together four years ago regardless of barriers could save my life, then it is possible that we can come together globally to protect future generations and minimize the detrimental impacts in the event future catastrophes unfold.

REFERENCES

1. Cuffari B. The Size of SARS-CoV-2 and its Implications [Internet]. 2021. Available from: <https://www.news-medical.net/health/The-Size-of-SARS-CoV-2-Compared-to-Other-Things.aspx>