number of years ago I was invited by a global corporation to participate in a daylong meeting. The subject was the future. It was attended by leading economists and futurists and a handful of corporate leaders. Candidly, I felt a little awkward even being there. The meeting was held on the top floor of a building overlooking New York Harbor. The Statue of Liberty was in the distance.
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The economics of goodness applies to individuals as well as nations. People who work hard, who are honest, and who are reliable have a better chance of success than those who don’t do those things.

The moderator started the meeting by describing a hypothetical scenario. “Pretend,” he said, “that the year is 2015.” (This was in 1999.) He said, “Think as though you are looking back over the last 15 years. What would the most surprising thing be that happened during that period of time?” One of the participants began to respond with some smart thoughts about the future. A banker spoke of the paperless currency systems that would begin to emerge. An oil executive talked about tensions in the Middle East. A technologist began to talk about faraway reaches of digitalization.

I was feeling this growing pressure that I needed something cogent to say. But in the final analysis, I remained convinced that the best strategy for me in that setting. So I said this: “Since we are all reflecting on the future, I am going to tell you who won the 2015 Nobel Prize in Economics. The big surprise is not who won. The big surprise is that the Nobel Prize in Economics was not won by an economist, it was won by a sociologist who advanced a new economic theory called the economics of goodness.

“It is a simple but a powerful idea. Every nation or state has economic assets that produce wealth. It may be minerals. It may be a seaport. It could be a favorable climate. But there is a universal asset according to this economics of goodness that has immense value, and it is inherent in any community that will use it. It is the power to simply do the right thing, voluntarily.

“Let me illustrate,” I said. “Imagine the economic heft of a nation or a state or a community free of drug or substance abuse. Healthcare costs would plummet, worker productivity would skyrocket, families that had been torn apart by abuse and financial hardship would remain together. Social welfare roles would fall, there would be fewer children who needed protective care, there would be less violence, and society would build and maintain fewer prisons. Imagine the power of a nation that was able to invest all of those resources in education or in investment or in research. Such a place would prosper.”

For a moment, there was silence. And then a surprise. One of the participants practically shouted at me, “What do you mean by ‘goodness’?” He said, “You’re turning this into some kind of religious discussion.”

Before I could respond, a very well-known economist beat me to it. “Not true,” he said. “I’m an atheist. And this isn’t about religion. It is about human behavior and the predictability of its consequences. People who work hard do better than slackers. Those who are honest get in less trouble than those who cheat. People who are kind have more friends than those who are cruel. Communities where people serve one another and care for each other are safer than those where that’s not true.” I have to say that may be the first time I ever said amen to an atheist.

But the economics of goodness applies to individuals as well as nations. People who work hard, who are honest, and who are reliable have a better chance of success than those who don’t do those things.

There is an interesting postscript to the story. As I said, that happened in 1999. It got to be 2015. I started thinking, I wonder who actually won the Nobel Prize in 2015? Well, it turns out it was not a sociologist—I got that wrong—nor was it awarded for the economics of goodness.

The prize was awarded to esteemed Princeton economist Angus Deaton. However, his contribution is certainly in the neighborhood. Dr. Deaton was recognized with the Nobel Prize for his analysis of consumption, poverty, and welfare. In essence, Dr. Deaton was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for demonstrating, empirically, that human behavior and economics are linked.

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Currently, communities throughout the world are struggling to prevail over COVID-19. We are all learning about pandemic disease and what a profound shaper of history it is. At that time, it was my job to assess the readiness of the United States in such a situation. It was clear to me that the United States was not prepared, nor were any other countries around the world. As this H1N1 virus continued to spread, our government appropriated billions of dollars. I spent much of the next three years leading a focused effort to develop a pandemic response plan. Fortunately, the H1N1 virus did not become a pandemic, but the experience caused me to study pandemics throughout history. I became intimately acquainted with the way pandemics unfold and the way they reshape the economics and the sociology and even the politics of the world—something that we are now all experiencing firsthand.

While there are many similarities between COVID-19 and other world-changing pandemics in the past, one difference that we should all recognize is the existence of the communication technology that we have today. In 1918, during the last global pandemic of this proportion, the world did not have the capacity to communicate instantly like we do today. Consequently, there has never been a civilization as capable of taking action during a pandemic as the one that we live in.

For all of the last century, the idea that we would practice what we now all know to be social distancing has been a well-established practice in preventing the spread of disease. But modern communication has allowed countries all over the world to deploy social distancing at a scale that has never been undertaken before. Across the world, communities have gone into conditions ranging from lockdown to simple isolation. Schools have been closed, churches, businesses, and governments have been shut down; travel has been stopped; traditions have been set aside—not just for a few days but for months. What has occurred is unprecedented in health history. Nations have done this because history has taught them that, if they allow the spread of this virus to happen in an unregulated way, the virus will take hundreds of millions of lives across the globe.

Facing Pandemic Disease
While there is hope and optimism that modern science will develop a vaccine or other medical solutions, right now social distancing—what we are all practicing by virtue of our holding this meeting the way we are today—is the only medical intervention that we have. The good news is that it appears our social distancing tactics are effective. While still devastating, millions of lives have likely been saved by this quite remarkable and unprecedented action. Businesses, schools, and churches, as I have said, have closed. Travel has been stopped. Events have been canceled. These are all group behaviors. We are moving rapidly now into a period in which these group behaviors are going to be less possible to sustain. A combination of economic limits and human impatience will begin to limit them. We are trying to learn what we can do safely and what we can’t. I have had the experience of walking across a frozen lake. I recall having stepped onto the ice not knowing how thin or thick it was, walking a few steps, and listening for cracking sounds. When I couldn’t hear cracking, I moved forward. We are all going through the health equivalent of that right now.

A political debate has emerged between those who support opening up and those who would be more restrained. It is happening in every jurisdiction and in every country throughout the world in one form or another. People see this differently. They have different priorities. They have different circumstances. They have different tolerances for risk. A person who is 90 and has a lung condition sees it much differently than a 25-year-old. This demonstrates why it is difficult in many jurisdictions for this to simply be a one-size-fits-all approach.

We are now beginning to rely on individual behaviors to combat this pandemic. I am talking about whether people are willing to comport to a handful of very simple behaviors that we have all learned before—behaviors like washing our hands. These are simple things that will create an ability for us to be safe, and we have the ability to communicate them widely and ubiquitously, a capacity that wasn’t there before. So will we wash our hands frequently? We now know much more about the way the virus is spread. Are we willing to wear a face covering in certain situations? Will we individually and collectively begin to govern our activities in ways that will produce good outcomes? That is the question—will we? It is clear that individuals, families, and entities in nations that succeed at these practices will have better outcomes than those that don’t. These outcomes will be reflected in their health, their happiness, and yes, their economic well-being. The economics of goodness will play out here too.

Dealing with Pandemic Side Effects

While COVID-19 is a chronic situation, social distancing is the equivalent of a medical intervention. And like other medical interventions, it has to come with a warning: You can only do this for so long or you can only use this so much because the side effects can be harmful, just like the virus, but in a different way. We are living with the side effects of social distancing now. Millions of jobs have been lost. Economies have plummeted. Months of isolation have started to take a psychological toll on people and their families. Food supplies in our just-in-time economy have begun to fray. And we all feel this. While we are grateful for the technology that allows us to come together like this, we are getting Zoom fatigue.

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Reshaping Character and Changing Hearts

This conference is a review of the status of religious freedom around the world. It would be important for me to provide a reminder that governments are designed in a way as to compel group behaviors. Whether in the case of a pandemic or any other human endeavor, the use of secular laws to change individual behaviors will always have side effects and unintended consequences. Governments change behavior by edict. Communities of faith, however, attempt to change behavior by changing hearts. When a heart changes, nations change. While a nation may be defined by geographic borders, it is measured by the aggregation of what is in people’s hearts.

The covid-19 pandemic, like other pandemics, has revealed some of our civilization’s greatest flaws. It has heightened awareness of social inequities that exist. The suffering and death that have disproportionately been present are based often on economic status or on race. This is not a physiological phenomenon; it is a sociological phenomenon. covid-19 is affecting these cohorts differently because they have less access to health care and nutrition.

In recent days we have seen sad examples in which the force of law has been used in ways that are simply wrong. Once again, there are evident racial minorities that are falling victim to vast disproportion. We see inequities and hardship inflicted upon LGBTQ communities. These are events that simply reflect on us as a society. We have to ask, Are these events simply a reflection of institutions that have gone wrong? Or do they reflect a flaw in our collective character?

These events have caused me to reflect on the status of my heart, and I suspect they have caused you to reflect on yours as well. How do we fix these things? Is there a need for government action? Yes, but governments have not proven to be particularly good at repairing character or changing individual behaviors. Reshaping character is about changing hearts. As a public official, it became very clear to me that people respond more rapidly to requests and suggestions from those to whom they pay devotion, tithes, and offerings than from entities that demand their taxes. Governments are increasingly willing to adopt laws that either deliberately limit religious freedom or create a side effect with the same outcome. The economics of goodness will exact a profound price when this occurs.

Those who are attending this meeting are guardians of religious freedom around the world. And I thank you for that. Let us all keep that stewardship. Our aspiration for a healthy and prosperous society depends on it.

Will we wash our hands frequently? Are we willing to stand at a distance and limit our interactions with others as much as possible? ... The economics of goodness will play out here too.

Abandoning the Art of War
Three Ways to Improve Political Discussions with Family, Friends, and Just About Anyone

Whenever my extended family planned to get together, my brother and I knew it was time to prepare for war. The enemies were my brother-in-law and my dad. The battlefield was politics. They were on one side of the ideological divide, and we were on the other. A few days before the family function, we would review casualties from the last discussion, formulate new war plans, gird up our loins like Book of Mormon warriors, and ready ourselves for battle. War was inevitable in those days.

While the dinner or event would start peacefully enough, conversations tended to veer into politics as if we were opposing magnets, helpless before some invisible, powerful pull. A light liberal jab here or a slight conservative uppercut there, and suddenly we would find ourselves, inescapably, brawling over some political issue like cowboys in a chaotic bar scene from an old Western.

As BENJAMIN J. COOK
Associate Teaching Professor of Law and Director of the BYU Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution

BY  BENJAMIN J. COOK
Associate Teaching Professor at BYU Law and Director of the BYU Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution

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While this truce of avoiding political discussions with my dad and my brother-in-law has enabled us to preserve our relationships, I am bothered that we weren’t able to engage productively on political issues. It strikes me as slightly depressing that we were so incapable of talking about difficult issues that we had to abandon discussing them completely. Even more disheartening is my sense that our failure in these efforts...