



by J.A.Ginsburg

# An Imaginal Moment

on  
crises,  
transformation

&  
regenerative  
design

## PREFACE

When I first began thinking about this essay, it was a different world. The Covid-19 lockdowns were still a few weeks away. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were alive. Unemployment was at historic lows. We worked in offices. Children went to school. Zoom had yet to become a lifeline.

As of this morning 120,000 people have died from Covid-19 in the US—a number that could easily double by the end of the year. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd have joined the ranks of Black Americans murdered by police or racist vigilantes. Unemployment is higher than it's been since the Great Depression, particularly among Black (16.8%) and Latino (nearly 19%) workers. The home office is the new corner office. The kitchen table is the new classroom. Zoom has fried our brains.

As the months rolled by in quarantine, I rewrote the essay many times trying to bring it in sync with what was happening in the world. Its core themes—the interconnection of crises, the potential for profound transformation and the principles of regenerative design—remained relevant, but the larger context kept shifting.

I am not a person of color, nor a designer, and I began to worry about what I didn't know I didn't know. I reached out to friends who could help me fill in the gaps. These included an historian who has written books on Black history, a doctor who has spent a career focused on global humanitarian crises, a veteran journalist who is also Black and a father, and several activists. Their insights were an education for which I am most grateful. A series of conversations with designer [Brian Collins](#) helped shape the section on regenerative design.

Their reaction, however, was split and passionate. To activists for whom #BLM is the last line in the sand—the one remaining chance for this country to live up to its founding promise—the essay wasn't nearly tough enough and little too sunny. For others it truly resonated and provided useful framing.

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It is a lengthy essay—more like a series of nested essays the touch on everything from racism to science, metaphors to marketing, and history to the future. It covers a lot of ground, which reflects its long, meandering genesis. Yet that, in part, is the point. It is all of a piece. It all connects.

I hope that even where the essay comes up short it will spark discussion.

It is not the last word that matters nearly as much as the next one.

— *J. A. Ginsburg, June 21, 2020*

## AN IMAGINAL MOMENT

We are at an imaginal moment: a time when profound transformation is inevitable.

The video of a policeman’s knee on George Floyd’s neck—and all the other videos documenting police brutality that followed—have forced us again and at last to confront the murderous, moral rot of institutionalized racism. A killer virus that spread across the world in a matter of months has revealed the fragility of our day-to-day lives. And rising seas, soaring temperatures and extreme weather have shown us what’s in store unless something is done soon to slow climate change.

These crises are tied together. But so, too, are their solutions.

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*To keep faith with Parks and King in this moment, we must disobey all calls to go back to a way of life in which the extreme inequality that this pandemic has exposed is considered normal.*

– [Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II](#) and [Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis](#), [The Nation](#)

Racism creates and amplifies vulnerability. Its takes many forms designed to systematically demean, de-humanize and defeat: Sub-standard housing. Chronically underfunded schools. Inadequate healthcare. Jobs that don’t pay a living wage. “Food deserts” with limited access to affordable, nutritious food. Neighborhoods downwind / downstream of polluting factories. [Mortgage lending practices that lock in poverty and reinforce racial disparities](#). Racial profiling. The trauma of living under constant threat of police violence.

Racism is an “underlying condition” —and why it should come as no surprise that communities of color have suffered disproportionately from the Covid-19 pandemic. [Data on the number of deaths in Black, Latino and Native American communities](#) reveal a mortality rate twice as high as what

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would be expected based on percentage of population—and in some communities an astonishing eight times as high. The economic hit has also been brutal with the loss of tens of millions of jobs and an [unemployment rate that spiked](#) to 16.8% for African-Americans and nearly 19% for Latinos in May while it fell for White workers.

The devastation was both predictable and predicted. For years, [many, including the US Military](#), have warned about the threat of a deadly, contagious virus roughly matching the general description of Covid-19 “jumping” from a wild animal host into the human population. In fact, there is a long list of emerging zoonotic diseases (these are diseases that affect several species, including humans): West Nile. Zika. Ebola. Nipah. SARS. MERS. Those last two are coronaviruses just like Covid-19, though without the contagious staying power required for a pandemic.

These pathogens may be new to humans, but they have been circulating within wildlife populations for thousands, possibly millions of years. In fact, they may not cause disease in their natural hosts. The origin of Covid-19, for example, has been linked to a bat virus that doesn’t appear to make bats sick. But when forests are cut down, cities sprawl and bushmeat is on the menu, wild animals and the viruses and bacteria they harbor are thrust into an unprecedented close proximity with humans: a new, immunologically defenseless host.

Trouble starts not when “patient zero” becomes infected with an animal virus—that happens all the time—but rather when it turns out that the disease can be spread from one person to another and cause significant illness. First it spreads to family, co-workers and friends and then they infect others. Since disease spreads at the speed of transport, if some of those people travel to other countries, the virus can go global within a matter of hours.

Within a few months a chance encounter between a human and a virus can turn into a global pandemic, which is exactly what happened with Covid-19.

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Less than a year after a chance encounter with a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 virus halfway around world in China, the death tally in the US is now well over 100,000 and will reach a half million worldwide within a few weeks. Millions more have become sick, with some [developing chronic illnesses](#), and [children and young adults](#) at risk for developing a rare, potentially fatal condition. Families have been ripped apart. Businesses have been devastated. Millions have lost their jobs. Communities have lost their tax base.

*In less than a year.*

It is not hard to connect the dots. When we kill nature, we point the gun at ourselves, too. Over the last century ecological destruction has accelerated: deforestation, chemical-dependent agriculture, the carbon pollution driving climate change. Mass loss of habitat has devastated wildlife, pushing an estimated [million species to the brink of extinction](#) and triggering an “[insect apocalypse](#).” The tragic loss of biodiversity can also be viewed as the loss of a critical, natural filter that keeps potential pathogens at bay. The more we destroy, the more we put ourselves at risk.

The danger isn’t limited to diseases—although a fast-warming climate also means more ticks that carry Lyme Disease and more mosquitoes that carry all sorts of viruses. Confoundingly, these species, along with [asthma-triggering cockroaches](#), manage to thrive even in the midst of an insect apocalypse.

Climate change also means more extreme weather: more floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts, heatwaves, wildfires, cold-snaps, hail storms and blizzards. We now live in world where [temperatures in the Arctic can reach 100°F](#). [The insurance industry is reeling](#) from an uptick in “billion dollar disasters.” But if you’re poor, under-insured or uninsured, the losses are that much more devastating. [Climate change is a form of racial injustice](#).

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Like racism, a trashed environment and a feverish climate amplify vulnerability. These crises also amplify each other in all sorts of insidious ways.

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As a direct result of Covid-19 [food prices in the US are at record highs](#), while household budgets struggle from pandemic-related lay-offs. [Food banks across the country can barely cope](#) with the surge in demand. A good diet is the cornerstone of health, so food insecurity presents a direct threat: hunger. It increases the risk of developing chronic illnesses (“underlying conditions”), which in turn make diseases such as Covid-19 more deadly. [Hungry children](#) also have a much harder time learning in school and bad gets worse.

This is a global catastrophe. According to the UN, in a matter of weeks the pandemic [more than doubled the number of people at risk of starvation to 265 million](#).

It isn't only that every tipping point is tipping. The tipping points are *colliding, merging and exploding*.

The status is quo is over. There is no “again.” What used to be normal or acceptable simply isn't any more.

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## A METAPHOR

*..Now, this country is going to be transformed. It will not be transformed by an act of God, but by all of us, by you and me. I don't believe any longer that we can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hands. We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over.*

— James Baldwin, [\*Nobody Knows My Name\*](#)

It seems frivolous to think about the life cycle of a butterfly in the midst of all these crises, but in nature radical transformation—metamorphosis—is the rule rather than the exception. So there is at least a symbolic relevance.

When a caterpillar is as big and fat and as stuffed as it can possibly be, it attaches itself to a branch, hangs upside down, forms a chrysalis and promptly dissolves into caterpillar goo.

That's when something remarkable happens: Special groups of cells—called “imaginal discs”—that formed when the caterpillar was still inside its egg, suddenly kick into gear, providing the instructions for how to build a butterfly. These discs had been inside the caterpillar all along. Yet only when the time is right do they activate to guide the transformation.

A caterpillar and a butterfly: two life forms crafted from the very same raw material. If you didn't know the two were one — more identical than identical twins — you would never guess. And what is business-as-usual for butterflies is also true for most insects and even a few amphibians. Not all devolve into goo, but they all transform. Since insects account for as much as [90% of all animal life forms on Earth](#) (including [180,000 kinds of butterflies and moths](#)), it seems we are the odd ones out.

But we have imagination—soaring, amazing, fantastic imagination—the defining feature of our humanity and our species' saving grace. Imaginal discs map out very specific destinies. Our imaginations allow us to explore a range of possibilities. We can take the raw materials at hand—the world as it is—and use them to create something very different.

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## SQUANDER

These are still the early days of what has quickly coalesced into a global movement to end systemic racism and police brutality. The protests have been empowering and inspiring: millions of people all over the world risking their own lives in the middle of a pandemic to stand together and say “This stops now!” Symbols of entrenched oppression—statues of slave-traders and slavery-defenders—have been toppled and trashed. People are talking about white privilege and publicly shaming the “Karens” of the world. Yet instead of having to “say their names” for an ever-growing list of victims—and spending billions of dollars on dysfunctional police departments and billions more to settle “police misconduct” lawsuits—we *could* have had genuine police reform and spent those tax dollars on better schools, better housing and other programs and policies to address racial injustice.

We are still in the first wave of what is expected to be many waves of the Covid-19 pandemic. Trillions of dollars have been spent trying to stem the carnage. Yet for a fraction of the cost we could have had a robust public health system, well-funded scientists, and universal healthcare. Our [federal stockpiles could have been better stocked](#). We *could* have been prepared.

And instead of [rolling back dozens of environmental regulations](#) and abandoning the Paris Accord, we *could* have been well on our way toward a cleaner, greener economy.

The legacy of this administration is one of lavish squander. It is an old story: How do you make a small fortune? Start with a big one.

Public health. Civil rights. Human rights. Climate health. Economic health. Global reputation. The Future.

All squandered.

So.

We start again.

But not from scratch. This is *not* the first imaginal moment.

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## LESSONS PAST

*The centre cannot hold...The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity... —[The Second Coming](#), W. B. Yeats, 1919*

Yeats wrote his poem in the aftermath of a world war and a global pandemic that infected a third of the population and killed an estimated 50 million people.

It took a massive economic depression and a second world war, but the best eventually re-found their conviction and the worst were vanquished. Programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, the G.I. Bill and Social Security helped build back the center (though it must be noted that these programs were also riddled with racial and gender bias).

Government-funded research critical to the war effort provided the technological foundation for a long-lasting, far-reaching “peace dividend.”

It also led to NASA, which pointed us toward the stars and, just as significantly, back to Earth. Thirty years ago, a photograph was taken from the vantage point of Voyager I, a small satellite poised at the edge of the solar system. For the first time we saw our “[pale blue dot](#)” of a planet in cosmic context.

*Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives... on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. —[Carl Sagan, astronomer](#)*

The civil rights, women’s rights and LGBTQ movements of the last half century fought to expand the center, while a science-driven environmental movement led to a series of legislative acts to protect air, water and endangered species.

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All of it had roots in the imaginal moment that led to the founding of the United States 244 years ago—a little more than a dozen generations. For the colonists, “essential workers” badly treated by the British Empire, the center had been lost. But they didn’t simply rebel. They dared to put forth an entirely new paradigm: “*We the People*.”

For the first time in history *some* of the citizens of a nation (those fortunate enough to be born White, male and who owned land) had a Bill of Rights, with Freedom of Speech—the freedom to criticize and question—at the top of the list.

The establishment of the Library of Congress, the largest library in the world, was also part of this extraordinary, transformation. It was founded on the premise that legislation should not be based on mysticism or the divine right of kings, but on knowledge. Curiosity, the elusive quicksilver of innovation, was valued—as was learning from the mistakes of the past.

The press became the unofficial fourth branch of government tasked with keeping the other three—legislative, judicial and executive—accountable and true to the *People’s* mission. In a system built on “checks and balances,” a free press is the last defense against tyranny.

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A Black man can die on a city street in broad daylight, yet another victim of police brutality. Peaceful protesters can be tear-gassed to clear a path so a president can walk to a church, hold up a bible upside down and have a photo op. Police can aggressively attack those who object—and also those whose job it is to report the news. But a free press still has a right to cover the story. The public still has the right to protest. And despite [outrageous efforts at voter suppression](#), [citizens can still vote](#) to change the system.

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That same president can deny climate change. Congress can defund scientific research. The Supreme Court can rule in favor of environmental rollbacks. But a free press can still ask questions, amass evidence and provide citizens with information that climate change is real, dangerous and accelerating.

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*We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future. —Frederick Douglass, “[What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?](#)” (1852)*

The ideals put forth in the nation’s founding documents articulated what everyone—*All the People*—want and deserve. The narrowness of the original *We* has been a fault-line threatening to tear apart this country from the very start. Two hundred and forty-four years on, some are still fighting to keep the *We* as limited as possible. But only when it becomes *All*—when words and deeds align—is there hope for a peaceful, equitable and just future.

## DESIGN, INNOVATION AND BUSINESS

So how did we get to this imaginal moment when so much hangs in the balance? How did we end up on the wrong end of an Aesop’s fable where the rich get richer and more powerful at the expense of the greater good? [According to Oxfam](#), the world’s billionaires have amassed so much wealth, they’re collectively worth more than 60% of the global population. That’s about 2,153 people versus 4.6 billion.

How did we lose the center?

How did we lose sight of the future?

How could so much have gone so profoundly wrong?

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And how can we even think of talking about consumer experience and design when people are in the streets fighting for basic human rights?

The answer to that last question could point to answers for the others. How we make, sell, distribute and buy goods and services has everything to do with what has gone wrong, so it is important to understand the substance beneath the surface.

Human-centered. Customer-focused. User-centric. For the last half century “consumer experience” has defined design. Entrepreneurs have been trained to look for customer “pain points,” then slap together bare-bones “minimum viable products” (MVPs) around which businesses and sometimes even entire sectors have been built. This tight focus has led to an explosion of new, tech-enabled businesses: media-streaming, ride-sharing, crowdfunding. Every sector has been transformed: retail, banking, insurance, education, construction, logistics, manufacturing, transportation, agriculture.

But placing human experience (typically an affluent consumer’s experience) at the center of the design process can have a dark side. We often become so enamored of a product or service, we are blind to its consequences. A plastic bottle offers plenty of consumer convenience, but if the design process stops there, it also guarantees that our oceans will soon have more plastic than fish. And since plastic is mostly made from fossil fuel feedstocks, it guarantees a warmer planet, too.

Likewise, social media networks have connected us in countless useful and delightful ways, but can be easily taken over by trolling, manipulative, bullying bots, or worse, and used to create division.

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The human-centered focus unwittingly put us at odds with everything else: people apart from nature rather than a part of nature. It promoted a kind of hyper-selfishness and a throw-away culture where true costs (or “externalities” as economists call them) were routinely, artfully, conveniently hidden.

It also put people at odds with each other. What is the true cost of a cheap chicken if the workers in a poultry processing facility have to risk exposure to a killer virus in order to keep their jobs? What is the true cost if these workers aren’t paid a living wage? Or if they have to live in fear that they, or someone in their family, could be deported at any time?

Covid-19 exposed all sorts of fault lines. Any illusion that we were “all in this together”—meaning everyone was affected equally—was shattered by body counts proving otherwise.

The murder of George Floyd ripped everything open.

The days of “Think different,” full of daring, disruptive, consumer-centric swagger, are over.

Now we need to do different, to be different, to reclaim and strengthen the center, to chart a path that in hindsight will seem at once world-changing and inevitable:

*[We hold these truths to be self-evident...](#)*

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Design—and designers—have an important role to play, broadening the paradigm to one that embraces the greater whole and the greater good.

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The metrics are simple. If a product or service:

- Generates prosperity for the many instead of the few, do it. If it doesn't, don't.
- Fosters human rights—dismantles racism—do it. If it doesn't, don't.
- Improves the quality of the air, the water and the land, do it. If it doesn't, don't.
- Supports health—personal, public, animal, plant, planet—do it. If it doesn't, don't.
- Supports science, education and the arts, do it. If it doesn't, don't.
- Invests in both the short term and long term Future, do it. If it doesn't, don't.

Build bridges, not walls.

## REGENERATIVE DESIGN

*You never change things by fighting existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete. — [Buckminster Fuller](#)*

The path forward requires a different, more ambitious and aggressive approach: How do we create enduring abundance? How do we restore all that has been squandered?

Regenerative Design is a term that has gained traction over the last few years in architecture and agriculture, but the ideas transcend discipline and sector. In architecture, it means building in a way that helps restore the eco-functionality of a landscape. In agriculture the focus is on restoring the microbiome—the micro-biodiversity—of the soil. When soil is alive and healthy, it stores more

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carbon, which is good for the climate, and also more water and nutrients. Healthier soil means healthier food and healthier people.

Regenerative Design is about igniting virtuous cycles of goodness. It is expansive, comprehensive, generous and dynamic. It is driven by a deep understanding of systems, networks, patterns, processes and potential.

To be regenerative is to embrace diversity and understand not only that the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts, but also that each part can have many functions (e.g., healthy soil sequesters carbon, stores water and generates micronutrients). It is about building systems that grow more robust over time.

Regenerative Design principles can be used to:

- Shape policies and programs that “bake in” social justice
- Guide the transition from a take-make-waste consumer economy to one where waste and supply chains dovetail, and environmental health has economic value
- Redesign energy systems to be clean and efficient
- Reconfigure supply chains for resilience
- Revamp healthcare to provide affordable, universal coverage

What does a regenerative city look like? Or a regenerative educational system? Or a regenerative transportation network?

## THE IMAGINAL NOW

The lies will continue. The craziness will only get crazier. The pandemic will ebb, flow and rage on. And the planet will continue to burn.

The caterpillar—the world we have known—is coming apart, dissolving, poised for all-encompassing, transformational change.

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The Black Lives Matter protests have turned division into a powerful new unity. The Covid quarantine has sparked all sorts of new ways to work, learn, create and collaborate. The environmental crisis has been a constant reminder of how little time is left to make a difference.

We can look for inspiration to the imaginal moments of the past when the future looked just as bleak, beleaguered and uncertain. We can draw on our extraordinary imagination to envision a better world. We can use regenerative design principles to create abundance for all.

But there are no guarantees. Systemic racism isn't a design flaw, but a feature. Efforts to undermine science and discredit journalists are strategic. Rolling back environmental protections is intentional.

The tipping points are colliding. Time is running out. Everything is at stake.

We *have* to get this right.

*—J. A. Ginsburg*

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