

The Mayflower, Pandemics and Us.

Ann Chester King

As I write ten weeks into Lockdown the world is reeling from the effects of a small bunch of RNA that is impacting on almost everyone in some way or other throughout the world. For many of us it is simple frustration that our normal lifestyle has been significantly disrupted, or great sadness as to not being able to see and visit those we love, for others financial hardship and for far too many the grief at losing family members and friends

In Devon, like other towns and cities taking part in the Mayflower 400 celebrations intense disappointment as we have watched our plans that have often taken intense preparation over many years in some cases begin to unravel. Having to make painful decisions as time moves on that particular events and activities are just not sustainable during a pandemic requiring 'social distancing'.

A small virus has managed to disrupt every aspect of our lives and made a mockery of much of our preparations and future plans-things we took for granted that would happen. Life as we have known it has changed and everything seems more precarious. In a strange way we have more in common with those passengers who stepped aboard the Mayflower (and the Speedwell) than we might have imagined.

The Mayflower passengers and in particular the 'Pilgrims' plans were also at the mercy of restrictions imposed on them by others financial restraints, the weather and as we now experience ourselves, diseases that can wreak havoc. The Mayflower had a significantly delayed departure and the consequences of that were profound of the health and well-being of her passengers. Miraculously they survived the hardship and no doubt horror of the Atlantic gales, the threat of disease spreading among those on board in such cold, damp and cramped circumstances only to arrive as winter took hold in which 42 of the 102 passengers dying of exposure, malnutrition and exhaustion in the winter of 1620-21.

Viruses (and bacterial infections) had a major consequence for those arriving in the New World to the new settler's unforeseen benefit. The native populations of Wampanoag Indians had experienced a catastrophic plague epidemic prior to the arrival of the Mayflower. This plague epidemic referred to as The Great Epidemic 1616-1619 arose from a shipwreck of a French trading vessel. Four passengers, one at least contagious with the plague were captured and kept as slaves. The plague in question is now considered to be the disease leptospirosis. The Wampanoag Indians similar to the world population and Covid-19, had no natural immunity and it is now believed to have caused the deaths of up to 90% of the native population.

Leptospirosis was not the only disease brought over with Europeans with devastating consequences: cholera, typhus, smallpox and plague. When the settlers arrived, there was a very much reduced Wampanoag population ravaged by disease and fearful of

Europeans. The native population despite its reduced numbers still greatly exceeded the numbers of settlers and could have readily overcome and destroyed them. Wampanoag's experience of having been infected by Europeans produced a fear of reprisals of the European gods and led to the establishing of an alliance which facilitated the settler's survival. Wampanoag's taught the s Mayflower survivors how to fish, hunt and plant food without who's teaching they would surely have perished. One can imagine that the Mayflower passengers had to adapt to the challenging circumstances and work with and be taught by those who they could previously never have thought they would be so dependent on.

The Mayflower passengers knew all too well just how precarious life was and each and every person was susceptible to succumbing to illness and often an early death (by today's standard). Most of us our not accustomed to having to cope with a potentially life-threatening disease which we initially had very little knowledge about and no ready means to prevent or treat. We too struggle for explanations, many today seeking the answer in science and even conspiracy theories. Fewer of us today turn to a religion or a God to provide an answer as the Pilgrims themselves would have done. But what we do share is the very unsettling experience of uncertainty and frustration and the need to respond positively and hopefully to circumstances we do not have the control over in the way we have envisaged previously.

Our Mayflower 400 celebrations are not going to be what we had initially planned or envisaged but what they will still be is the recognition of the ties that link us with those passengers of 400 years ago the spirit of human endeavour and achievement.