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Coronavirus & Quarantine: Lament, Hope, and Creativity Edition

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The Veritas Forum

In this Virtual Veritas Forum we discuss the impact of the novel coronavirus in the context of creativity with a panel that includes contemporary artist and activist Mako Fujimura, film critic and associate professor Alissa Wilkinson, and hip-hop recording artist Lecrae. Together they explore how unexpected events have reshaped humanity's creative spirit throughout history and how this moment is doing the same. Moderated by the Executive Director of the Veritas Forum, Andrew Schuman. • Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. In today's Virtual Veritas Forum, we hear from a panel that includes Mako Fujimura, contemporary artist, writer, and catalyst, as well as Alyssa Wilkinson, journalist, film critic, and associate professor at King's College, and Lecrae, hip-hop recording artist, songwriter, and record producer.

Moderated by the Executive Director of the Veritas Forum, Andrew Schuman. In the discussion titled "Coronavirus and Quarantine, Moment, Hope, and Creativity." • Andy Crouch made this comment that lament is the seed of creativity. So we're going to unpack that this evening and really explore what does proximity, awareness with the brokenness of the world do, and how does that help us actually unlock creative potential for what could be a reset, what could be possibility in the years ahead.

As we thought about this forum, three people came immediately to our minds if we

thought, "If we could get these three people in a webinar, in a Zoom platform, and talk about this for an hour and a half, it would be awesome." And just so thrilled that all three of them could make this time, and we're eager to jump in, and so let me just introduce our panelists, our guests here at this time. So first I'd like to welcome Mako Fujimura. Mako is a leading contemporary artist, author, speaker, founder of the International Arts Movement.

It's written widely about a whole range of things, but certainly including confronting grief and trauma in art, and how to connect that defining hope and mending. And so Mako, thank you for joining us. We're so excited.

Great to be here. Second, I'd like to welcome Alyssa Wilkinson. Alyssa is an author and a film critic at Vox, also associate professor at King's College in New York, and has thought also about a wide range of topics relative to our theme, but interestingly also has engaged with apocalyptic literature and themes, and I think that'll be a fun to dig into.

So Alyssa, thanks so much for joining us. Yeah, thanks for having me. And then thirdly, I would love to welcome LaCray.

LaCray is a Grammy award-winning hip hop artist, recording artist, founder of Reach Records, and LaCray whenever we do a veritas of the dental with you, it's always such a privilege, so thanks for joining us this evening. I'd like to be here. Thank you.

So let's dive in. What I'd love to do, just kind of as a way of icebreaker warming up to the conversation, is we've done this last few forms as well, is get a little glimpse of your lives. And so all of our lives have been disrupted and all been changed in pretty big ways, at least most of us.

And so Alyssa, why don't we start with you? You're a film critic. There are no more movie theaters that are open. So Alyssa, I would just love to know how has your life changed? Yeah, it's been interesting.

I mean, like you said, there's no more movie theaters open right now. I think the biggest change from that has been that I've pivoted from covering blockbusters, which I would normally be doing right now, to covering almost entirely the art house and independent cinema, because they're the ones releasing to virtual platforms. So that's been pretty exciting.

And then as my students can attest, I've been lecturing at a webcam for three hour stretches for the past few weeks, while they chat at me, which has been not too bad. I think it's been pretty fun. But because one of the subjects I teach is postmodern theory, it's sort of felt like we're doing like live immersive version of the class through our screens.

It's been, it's been weird. Well, glad we could provide you with another opportunity to

jump on. Yeah.

So, let's go to you. I mean, you're recording artist. You do a lot of things that have been following.

You're engaged with the homeless community. So a lot you're doing. How is your life changed.

Oh my goodness. How hasn't it changed? You know, I think the biggest, most dramatic aspect of my life is running out of toilet paper. That's just horrific.

But no, you know what, I think everything has changed. I mean, the patterns of life, the normalcy, I travel, I tour, I speak at colleges and places all over the world. And now it's been, you know, regulated to home and just learning how to do it virtually.

So it is as, as Alyssa's saying, it's weird. Definitely the like online performances. That's weird.

It's just weird. Like performing, you know, to my computer screen. So, yeah.

Well, Marco, why don't we go to you. Yeah. How has, how has your life changed? Well, I'm usually traveling in this period.

I had several lectures I would cancel. And I split my time between Princeton, my Princeton studio and Pasadena studio. So I end up going back and forth.

Since I came back from California, three weeks ago, I've been staying put. So that's definitely changed. On the other hand, well, not is where I am always social distancing from the world.

Kind of very high introvert. I love to stay my studio and work. So I've been getting a lot of writing down and painting, obviously, behind me.

They're all been pre productive. But at the same time, to my surprise, I've been as busy as ever doing these things, you know, tonight with you. But I've been saying yes to almost every podcast because I think it's important.

I've also started a YouTube session, sometimes live sessions right out of the studio. So people who subscribe to my YouTube recognize this setup. I set up the studio inside the studio and have been talking about generative way that we can use our time, even through our traumas.

So this has been, that's a new thing I would never have done that apart from this crisis. And this way of communicating so zoom and other means is fantastic. It has given us, I think, a new way to communicate.

So I'm grateful for that. I'd love to just kind of dive into our topic and Maka that's actually a great kind of preamble to what we're going to talk about. So why don't we actually start with you on this.

You know, a theme for us that we've been wrestling with over the series is this sort of connection between lament and creativity. And, you know, the Surgeon General started off our week by saying this could be one of the saddest weeks in American history, right, comparing to 9/11, comparing to Pearl Harbor. Maka, I know that you were like three blocks away back in 9/11.

And you talked a lot about the impact that had on you and the connection between trauma and beauty. So I wonder if you could just maybe start us off here thinking about specifically lament and creativity. How do you see these two things working together? Right.

First of all, I live three blocks away from towers with my small children and they grew up as ground ground zero children. And I'm happy to say they're doing all well today. The oldest is married has two children so.

And fortunately none of us have been directly impacted by this coronavirus but I do. I have fall in love with New York City and it is just painful time to watch my beloved city go through this time. After 9/11, I would offer me under to my studio only about 10 blocks north and it was all sequestered area, a bit of chemistry, nobody could get in unless you can show proof that you live the work there.

And I spent many months just kind of trying to figure out what the future would hold for an artist and I really didn't know the answer. I still don't feel like I know the answer. But I knew I had to work through through my own process of my own art, how at least to ask the question well and to enlarge the question.

I'm not trying to find answers but to probe into my own trauma which I would say honestly I'm still dealing with it comes through in certain times and certain moments. And so this is, I would also say is far bigger than 9/11 in one sense that it is a global reality that everything is on pause. And the entire world had to shut down because of this virus, and it has such huge impact not just economically but culturally and other means and I think this is going to have ensuing and during impact in the world.

And I will say though, we should remember that the most indelible marks made in cultural history has been done during trauma, black plague, flange, electrical Shakespeare. People were making their work right as one third of the population perished. You know, all the writers that we love from Gerald Tolkien to CS Lewis to Hemingway to Jersey, Sanjour, they all wrote out of traumas directly out of traumas.

So this is time for artists to harness their creative energies and I mean we're doing it

anyway so we don't have to even try because that we intuit all of this. But I think it's a very important time for us to focus on our inner voices and let that speak into the world. And my work for the past 20, 30 years have been in response to what I call ground zero conditions of the world.

And it has continued that journey ever since I'm trying, I was trying to get out of it, you know, I was trying to get into celebrating the feast, you know, at the end of new creation, rather than trying to just, you know, respond to traumas. But again, I find myself thinking about lament and certainly Andy is right. I think I think that's the condition of our world and especially today.

And it's important for artists to process that. Yeah, maybe just look, Ray, just ask you to kind of reflect on that as well and maybe add anything to kind of what Marco is sort of teed up there, possibly just in your own experience how you've experienced sort of this connection between the importance of grieving or beholding brokenness and creativity. What might you add to that.

Yeah, Michael said some, some incredible things there that trigger, you know, a lot of places and circumstances that I've experienced. One of the things that I believe is that, you know, writing out of trauma and writing out of these places of pain. What you do for others is that you show them that they're not alone.

And so I think that that art that's created by wounded people helps other wounded people understand that they're not experiencing this alone, the art in many ways becomes the expression of their reality. And, and so I think there, there's an element of that that I know I've written out of woundedness and it's connected with people in a very profound way but, but then I also think that wounds help other people know they're not alone. I think scars help people know that wounds can heal.

And so writing from a place of, of yes I've experienced trauma, but at the same time I'm in a process or I've gone through the process of healing in the midst of it. I think that kind of art is, is a very special and effective as well it helps people know that these scars, these wounds that we're going through that we're experiencing are healable and so, for me I think this has been a great time to revisit as as Marco, said, of some of the artists that wrote as they were navigating terrible things or from the other side of something horrific and painful, because it helps us get a perspective of how someone overcame something that we feel is just incredibly traumatic. Yeah, I mean, you know, you, you know, engage with a lot of like a wide breadth of sort of artistic expression certainly in film.

I mean, do you see this going out as well the sort of connection between, you know, lament and creativity and sort of where does your mind go on that. Yeah, one thing I've been thinking a lot about I think is that art. So for artists, art making is like a language that they're speaking, it's how artists process and understand the world and then they

invite us into that experience.

So I've been thinking about how art can help us translate our experience that we can't put words around. Like I can, I'm a writer, so I can write all day about the experiences that I'm having but even then I can't always capture it. And so writers do this painters do this musicians do this in all of these different ways of, I guess, apprehending the world or sort of an epistemological thing where we're trying to make sense of what it is that we're experiencing together.

That's something that artists do for, for people who maybe aren't artists or who are creative in other ways or who are just trying to find language to figure out what it is that they're experiencing. And I mean the Bible models that for us in the poetry of the Psalms and of other kinds of, you know, books of poetry, prophecy, things like that, but then, you know, musicians, artists, painters, filmmakers. People who make TV, all of these people have done this and given us, even you can think about it as a metaphor, like it's something that we can wrap our heads around.

So I've been writing about this a little bit recently because as soon as this happened, I found myself, like the night we quarantined, we sat down and started watching "Share Noble" the HBO show, which is just phenomenal art. It's some of the best TV I've ever seen. It's deeply sad.

It's not about what's going on right now, but it also gave me something to work with, I think, inside of myself, like to start to process what I was experiencing and realizing that what I was experiencing was not just like being bummed out because I had some trips that I had canceled and being kind of vaguely worried about getting sick, but actually grieving something and feeling like this isn't how it should be. It's not even the way it had to be, but it is what it is. And so now we're going to have to go through it.

And I found that to be really, I can't say uplifting or inspiring at all because it left me sad, but it also helped me move through something that I wasn't expecting at all to have to move through even the week before. I was at a film festival the weekend before this, so I had come home from a festival and basically just haven't gone out since. And it was a nonfiction film festival, so it's all documentaries.

So it's people working with reality. And one thing that was significant to me even then, I was watching people take reality artists take reality and shape it into something that brought meaning into our reality. And I think that's what artists really are well equipped to do.

And it's pretty harsh, I think, to think about crisis or tragedy bringing forth good art because it sounds like we're trying to be opportunistic about it or something, but that's not really what's happening. It's just saying that artists give us language that politicians aren't going to give us and economists aren't going to give us and teachers aren't going

to be able to give us. And we're not going to be able to give ourselves.

So it's like it's a different language like translation almost of what we're experiencing. And I think we're helpful and I think we'll dive even more into that in a little bit. I want to spend just a little more time on the kind of lament piece and then we'll move to sort of more hope creativity.

I got a question in from Katie Farrick kind of popped up to the top here. And like read, I think I like to direct it to you. It's kind of like, I think in a way connected to the scars idea.

And she asked, how do you distinguish grief or lament in your work from despair. Can you maybe reflect on that for us. Yeah, I think, I think of grief as, you know, acknowledging something grievous acknowledging loss or pain or something that has been a little bit more difficult.

And I think that has, you know, deeply affected me in a sad way. And I think of despair as almost perplexed without hope without solution. And in at a place where, yeah, I'm ultimately hopelessness.

And I think, you know, for me, I always want to challenge myself in my darkest moments that I am not grieved to the point of despair that I'm not grieved to the point of hopelessness that I do have hope. And I believe in the words of Jesus, I believe in the eternal hope that he does offer. But even outside of that I have hope that my life and every moment that I live, even going through trauma, becomes the my ceiling becomes someone else's floor.

And so I'm able to articulate and express the pain and the grief that I'm going through so that someone else can start there and have that as a foundation that they can walk upon and move forward. And now that's greatly helped me historically. I think of just being a child and not really understanding why I gravitated to the lyrics of Tupac.

I didn't understand it, but there was so much pain and so much trauma that my own childhood was able to connect with. And what he did for me was he created a floor that I could begin to walk on. And it was his ceiling, of course, but he created a floor for me and I think that's what what grief, what it can allow is it can allow some pain.

Another quick example I use is kind of funny, but I remember being a teenager at work at a grocery store, and I was riding a shopping cart. And I shouldn't have been, but it flipped over. It flipped over and it ripped my fingernail out of my finger.

And I didn't know what happened. I just knew there was a lot of blood. So I covered it up.

I went inside the store. I was kind of like screaming, wincing and pain. And I remember the butcher looking at me and he said, hey, calm down, you're going to be okay, you're going to be okay.

And I was like, how can this man assure me I'm going to be okay. And he held up his hand and he was missing some fingers. And I can't explain to you, but it calmed me because it helped me understand someone had been through this or even worse, and that all hope was not lost.

Marco, I'd love to ask you to kind of continue with that thread. I mean, you've written a lot about, you know, how specifically even the suffering of Christ and sort of anchoring there provides this kind of approach that you can take to embracing the full range of grief to hope and create out of that. I wonder if you could just sort of run with that.

Yeah, first of all, that's a great question. What's the difference between lament and grief? And I have to really just think about it while the craver is answering the eloquently. I really, you know, when when C.S. Lewis wrote grief observed.

I think he had that approach right because grief is something that you have to observe from almost like you have to step out of yourself and look at yourself And I lost both my parents in past two years and, and, you know, that's an experience that as an artist, personally that brings brings you to a certain point, you know, and a new, maybe a reality that you haven't experienced before. And, and you almost have to step out of yourself and look at yourself differently that way and accept that things are different, you know. And lament, it seems to me is a disciplined practice that we all have to learn to do.

You know, grief kind of comes to you because of your loved one passing away or something that happens to you. But lament is a universal condition. You know, one of the possibilities that say that this crisis presents itself is the universality of the trauma.

There's no one on the surface is not affected by this. And, and that seems to me is an amazing opportunity for a new opportunity that we never had before. Everybody stopped right now and everybody knows somebody who's been affected.

And if they haven't yet they will. And, and so, so this, this moment has a universal connect connective tissue as it were because of the, even though we may be separated by geography and cultures and language. And so, in the universal we can share, you know, after 9/11 what I, what I observed was that downtown Manhattan became a true community that never was really, you know, Tribeca.

And then, you know, when you were walking around in Tribeca it was sequestered from rest of New York. So you knew that total stranger walking her dog. And, and this is going to be like that, you know, across the world.

And, and so this is, you know, in a way, amazing phenomenon. But, so there will be people grieving. But what is the lament that we are called into, you know, university.

And how can artists help that. And because whatever we do right now is going to be

lament. So we can assume that what we do, what we paint, what we write, what we sing.

Even how we see a movie that was done before the crisis is going to be affected by how we respond. And so this in a sense that that's the seed of, I believe, generating something new, even though it may not be again, it may not be solutions to the problem, but it opens up the question in a deeper way. And I'd like to just actually ask you a follow up.

You know, you've, you've commented in different settings before about how art can be healing and art can mend. Yeah. Yeah.

So I was, I was thinking about when, look, I was speaking, just before the crisis happened, we launched what's called the Kintigi Academy. And here's a sample of a Kintigi. This, this bowl was fractured.

And in one of our academies, a designer, mended it with Japan lacquer and filled it with gold. And this is a venerable teacher edition, talking back to 16th century Japan. I'd be friend of the Kintigi master, who was willing to come to us so we've been touring him doing this art form, but he developed the technique where anybody can do this.

So, Japan lacquer is notoriously difficult. And actually, one third of the population is allergic to it. So he discovered another form of Japan lacquer that is easier to use.

So we have been doing these workshops where people bring in broken balls and or anything toys or anything. And we're in two and a half hours you, you, you, you got to go through the process. And we found it so effective as a way of not, you know, people come in thinking, Oh, we're going to learn how to do fixing craft.

This is the first thing that not coming to us on the Kintigi master says is, you came in to fix whatever you brought in, but we're not fixing anything. We're going to be hold the brokenness. We're going to look at the fishers, and we're going to hold the fragments for file and look at it until it is beautiful.

And then we can think about mending and to make new. And that, that says it all right there. And I think that's a proper way of lament.

It might even be a way to grieve. Many participants who participated in Kintigi works job told us that it was, it was absolutely healing for them, because they began on the journey of healing, not trying to fix it. But trying to mend to make new.

So that, that, you know, is something that I've been thinking about a lot. Thanks. I'm seeing another question here kind of pop up to the top.

It's been up here for a little while. And a list I think this would be a great question for you. The question is about, for those of us who are not artists, so not, how can lament

hope and creativity be relevant to us.

So, you know, those in our audience who, you know, appreciate art, looking for meaning and purpose like all of us are relative to this crisis widespread crisis. You know, for those of us who are not artists, how can lament hope and creativity be relevant to us. What would you say to that? I mean, I think one of the first steps is to remember that what artists create is meant to be shared.

That artists do create as a way of working out the world, but I've always said to my students anyhow that are, I think of as a, as a collaborative product between the artist and the audience. And so what the audience is bringing to the thing that the artist has made is what creates art. So like, MOCO makes a painting and it's stunning.

But what really makes it a work of art is that I then come to it and I experience it with bringing my whole self to the experience. And we keep talking about C.S. Lewis, but his book and experiment and criticism has kind of a really great understanding of how this works. And so I think for a lot of us, what's important is that we don't go to our necessary looking for it to answer things or bring us a message, but more that we go to it, looking for the hospitality that the artist has created and accepting it and bringing ourselves into it as well and kind of both trying to get ourselves out of the way, but also being our full human self.

So that's really abstract, but I think of it in terms of like, it's actually natural, national poetry month, which seems to have landed at the right time and poetry is something that a lot of people feel like they don't understand or they don't, or it's like they're supposed to, Billy Collins has this poem about how his students always want to tie a poem to a chair and beat it with rubber hoses to get it to tell them what it means but actually the way you're supposed to approach a poem is to sort of feel it and understand what it is and not what it means, not the way we were taught to approach poetry in the third grade. And so I guess what I think of is like when artists are creating these works of lament or that are born out of crisis or all these different things, that we're coming to it with the openness to take whatever it is that they have put into it and also to put ourselves into it to have that space. And then there's another step, and this has been an interesting one to see it develop over the past few weeks is being willing to share it with one another and use it as a grounds for us to access things that might be hard to talk about just with one another.

So I've been watching people host like movie watch parties, or I was really enjoying this piece from the New Yorker radio hour about I'm blanking on the DJ name but he hosted like a nine hour dance party on Instagram live and people came and they loved it. And it was a way of them to like kind of escape their experience while also being very much grounded in their experience. And it's giving us a place again that we can do this I mean we're stuck behind these screens right now.

It's not easy I don't like it at all but it is important for us to remember that we're still humans we're not just like beings without bodies, or you know emotions or anything like that we're not just productivity machines. And so for those of us who don't make art and I don't really think myself as an art maker. Art is the place that has been created for us to come in and like join in the process together.

So I'm looking at a few questions that are coming up there fairly like practical. And we'll get to it here in a minute I would love to actually each of you to kind of give some advice to students as they're thinking about making, making culture in various ways. But first one is kind of more personal applicable, maybe mock or like a look right whichever one of you guys wants to take it.

I'd love to hear how each of you faithfully foster creativity and everyday life in moments that feel so discombobulating. And I don't want to even assume that like maybe creativity is going on pause right now I don't know what it actually looks like in your lives but can you give us kind of a little bit of a sense of like daily daily like you know what what are you doing to foster a creative response. I'm going to say maybe Marco's going to have an answer.

I'm going to be late. Very heavily it's funny I was just, I'm working on an album called Restoration and there's a documentary that accompanies it. And it's funny because in the documentary you're literally watching me go through this period of time where I knew myself once as a creative trying to maintain the balance of family and life and work.

And now I feel like a family man trying to maintain the balance of create like what I cannot escape the Nerf Gun Wars going on around me. I can't I'm the homeschooling and all the different. There's no escaping the four walls of my home to seek that out and I'm very much I breathe in the energy of the city I breathe in the energy of people and I love getting on a subway or getting on a train or and just being with everyday people and seeing their experiences that brings me inspiration and so not being around that is makes it a lot harder for me to find the inspiration creatively but I do realize creativity is also a discipline so a lot of us are waiting for inspiration to just drop on our heads instead of working and creating and and hopefully out of the quantity will get some quality.

Mark I'll have it yeah. Yeah so us introverts. I have a good friend Amanda Lindsey cook who is a, you know, amazing worship leader and she is now going independent and she texted me and she said I'm loving the style I hate to say that but it allows me to explore my interior landscape, which is a beautiful way of saying what I have been feeling and now that slow down I don't have to travel.

I'm stuck, you know, doing what I love doing. I am most alive here in my studio. I feel God's presence and God's pleasure when I am painting.

And to be able to have access to both the exterior reality happens to be beautiful spring in Princeton area. And because of everything slowing down even when I was in California. The sky was so stunning.

I'd never seen those hands just sky like that. And when, you know, artists observe those things and they are inspired by that and they are fueled by that. And so every day I'm like a little child walking around my God and noticing little things and and how that I've been kept my regular schedule I probably missed most of that.

So, I think at such a time as this. When I remember I do remember after 9/11 I couldn't paint. That's that was true.

And, and I meandered into my studio just to as a discipline I would go just to go and I would just sit there and read or basically not able to paint for a while. Slowly as I did that. I noticed that I have stretched this beautiful paper onto canvas.

Before 9/11 happened. And so, I just go went through the motion, just showing up and then mixing materials and then doing what I do. And the resulting painting I have kept I never made it available because it's a very special painting that I gave to my children.

And it literally captures intuitive reality of what I was sensing the both the darkness lament grief everything was in this painting and I'm so grateful that I had that no non utilitarian purposeless art that doesn't really have any other purpose than than its own presence in my life, you know, kind of kind of speaking back into my my heart traumatized heart. And in this crisis, you know, I I'm fortunate to say I don't have family members afflicted by this or friends feel my friends seem to have had it but they they recovered good well before the crisis said so I think, you know, I don't have that immediate trauma in me. So I'm trying to.

So God has given me an opportunity to reflect on this time. And I think that I'm very proud of the way that I'm being able to do this as a soldier to people who are suffering and being able to capture some of their carry on some of their trauma and some of their tears and I speak a lot about that. And I think that's the way that I'm being able to do this.

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And I think that's the way that I'm being able to do that. And Mary understood intuitively

what that meant for her. So she goes and her response was to get her wedding card to annoying Jesus before he enters Jerusalem.

And I think that's the way that I'm being able to do this. And I think that's the way that I'm being able to do this. And I think that's the way that I'm being able to do this.

And because of the gratuity and extravagance of Christ's tears, we can today would know that Christ here is with us today. And so that that's the kind of the base from which I even pretend. And by faith I can claim that I am painting with Christ's tears.

And because that's, you know, the profound reality of creation gratuitous nature creation that cannot be accounted for by the industrial pragmatism or Darwinian reality. So to me that that's like the central part of the gospel, and it's where I drew all my energies from. That was beautiful.

Thanks. I was thinking about this a lot. This is tears now.

That's beautiful. Well, wow, I'm just observing that as well. I would love to take things in a little bit of a practical direction.

If we can, it's not too jarring. And Alyssa, maybe it's kind of start off, you know, with you on this one. I'm aware that a lot of our students who are kind of tuning in and have over the last two forms have really been in a season of people.

So there have been internships that have been cancelled jobs that have been cancelled. You know, question mark, fairly legitimate question mark, I think, about what school is going to look like in fall. There's a lot of uncertainty.

And for a lot of students we work with, whether or not these are students that aspire to be sort of artists in a traditional sense. So many want to be culture makers and want to be contributing and producing and making good of the world. And now we're in this isolated, you know, disrupted moment and, you know, kind of looking for, you know, what to do with that energy that wants to make and contribute and meaningful contribution.

So, Alyssa, maybe start with you. What advice would you give to a student? Let's say that, you know, let's say they're graduating, you know, job just got cancelled on them, like sitting at home. What do you say to.

So I'm going to come at this from a weird direction, which is to say that while Mako was talking, I was thinking about the part of the Bible that I've been thinking about a lot. And this is because a weird effect of being in this lockdown has been that my husband and I were invited to a number of zoom from our leaders from our Jewish friends this week. And I think we're going to tend to, which might mean we're doing more Jewish religious observances whole week than Christian but we'll see.

But in any case, I, it struck me today how interesting that's going to be because satyrs are remembering a time of play in crisis and hardship right for for the Jewish people. They're apocalyptic. I have to bring it around to this because I did write a book about this but apocalypse and apocalyptic moments aren't about the end of the world they're just kind of about the end of all worlds.

And the purpose. Historically of apocalypse what that it means is it's actually a time of revealing so like the book of revelations is called that because it's revealing something where the apocalypse is pull back the curtain on reality and they show it's what's really been going on. Underneath what we thought was our reality.

And this is one of those times there's no way there's not this is something everyone acknowledges so I say this because I think for students who are grads so I started college three weeks before 911. I graduated four years later and got a job in the financial services industry and two years after that the recession started because of the housing crisis so I've been through this myself. And I think that something that's important to remember is moments of apocalypse are moments of clarification.

Sometimes they're like places where we can stop and say hang on is the trajectory I'm on actually what I think is going is where I'm supposed to be like is the thing I've been driving at the place I actually want to be driving at is the point that I've been seeing as my future flourishing actually where flourishing is going to be. And that's sometimes the answer is yes and that's good and then you're frustrated because you feel called into something that doesn't really exist so like I work in media. I have no idea what the future of media is it's always scary it's especially scary right now.

But moments of apocalypse are really good time to sit down and take stock of what you think is real and make sure that it actually is real like what is it. Is it that you want to be a journalist or is it that you want to communicate with people or you want to tell truth or what are those different things that that are actually driving what you've been driving yourself at. And I also just remember that this is going to be hard and difficult and it's it's not going to probably look anything like you thought it would have two months ago, but that doesn't mean it's the end of the story like you're not doomed to some kind of.

I don't know whatever it is that is coming up in your nightmares right now. I'm not a surprise, certainly to God, but also people have been figuring out how to live through crisis for all of human history. And we are it does feel like certainly for millennials like we've been through this before pretty recently and we're going to probably go through it again.

Okay, what what actually are my priorities here, what do I actually think is important what is real reality. And for people who are really thinking about creativity, justice, all those things. This is a real moment of clarification about places that our culture has been deficient in creativity in solving problems been deficient in justice for people who need it.

So how can you be part of the solution is a really big question I think, and maybe that's what you're going to do for a while and then you're going to go on and do something else but this is a real moment of, I don't want to say opportunity because that sounds like finding silver linings but it certainly is a moment where creativity is vital, we need creative ways to solve these problems not the old ways they're not working and we know that now. So helpful and I'm just going to put a pin in the comment about injustices and things that are beginning revealed because I want to make sure we come back to that. I want to go to LaCray what advice would you give to a student who kind of like I described and you know launching out in the world wants to make be a culture maker and in this context what advice would you give.

Yeah, I think, you know, first and foremost, I would say, you know, if you are indeed a student. The best way to become an authority on anything is to submit to authorities. And so submitting to some authoritative views on what has happened historically in this circumstance that we're in reading about the Great Depression reading about plagues of old, and how people navigated.

The principles that you can extract from that in order to move forward and help in this particular season and this time that we're in. I found it interesting to look at people who survived, you know, world wars when the world was turned upside down and talking to my friends in the Middle East where, you know, refugees whole entire lives have been disrupted. And they're having to reprocess and rethink everything about what they're doing.

And I found that there are just some incredible principles that can be extracted from these scenarios that we can apply here and now. Obviously, as, as Alyssa said, these are not instances where God is caught off guard. As a matter of fact, throughout a biblical narrative, you see tons of plagues and famines and wars and captivities and people being stripped from their land and having to figure out what to do.

And, you know, and I think of, you know, Israel being in captivity and being told, you're going to be here for 70 years. What I need you to do now is, you know, raise families and plant gardens and build homes and cities. And so there's a, there's a sense, a call for us to engage and get our hands wrapped up in this new normal and this new reality.

And obviously there's got to be a moment of grief. We've got to acknowledge where we are. I think what I, what I kind of like give a snapshot answer for people to think through.

I tell people to digest, digest the reality of where we are right now, because it's going to take you time to just understand what in the world is going on. Then, then assess, assess, you know, where needs need to be met and where things need to be reshaped and regrouped and where you can do, do away with some things that were excess. And after assess, invest, find ways to invest in society yourself, your community, your, your, your, your relationships.

I've had an incredible time investing in my relationship with my family being here in isolation. And there's been some incredible moments that have just sprung up where we, there are going to be things that after this quarantine has lifted that I'm going to miss. As grievous as this is, there'll be moments that I'm going to miss because I was quarantined in, in having to do it.

But that's what I would say to a student is, you know, digest the reality of what's happening, assess where needs can be met and how you can help shape the culture and invest into, into the culture. And that's done through becoming an authority on, on where we are and what we're sitting in right now. Maka, how about you? Yeah, I know that's, that's really well said, Jeremiah 29 is, you know, what the grid is talking about.

And, and, you know, profit profit Jeremiah in exile in Babylon and God tells Jeremiah to settle down and, and plant trees and get married and all the activities that we're supposed to be doing will continue in exile. And this line of see, see the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have called you. And right now the city is, is shut down, but the command still stands.

So, what does that mean to seek the peace and prosperity of this land, regardless of whether we have jobs or not now. Obviously, economy is important and, you know, we don't want to neglect the necessary work to rejuvenate that into the world. But as like Ray said, I don't want to go back to the world in which before this crisis, because just by doing the same thing, we're going to be exiled once again from what really the re humanized capitals that we found during this time.

And I talk about this in my culture care book, but you know, let's say there's three, let's say there's triangle of capitals. At the bottom base is the financial material capital that, you know, we, we often think about when we talk about capital. But the other two sides, one is social capital and the other is creative capital.

And I always tell artists that the only thing that's limited in the triangle is the material capital, because the social capital and creative capital there infinite. And so, while you need a little bit of material capital to pay rent and so forth. And what we really need is to cultivate the creative and the social capitals, because those those are the ones that can amplify the very little that you have into something more substantial.

And, and we can begin to understand our lives as limited as they may be right now. And we can be invested in social capital, you know, by calling up your grandmother. What if we invested in your creative capital by writing that song that we were meaning to write.

That is going to do more with the limited capital, even if that base narrows down, hopefully not to zero, but just enough so, so we can keep going. And what we invested in these two infinite capitals are going to be multiplied in the days to come. So, so to me, you know, this time of recalibration is almost like a necessary one for me, because, you

know, I have been running around during this and doing that.

And I pull back and think, this, this, you know, these two weeks. What am I really about and what am I reading best thing. I'm I seeking the peace and prosperity of the city that I am called to the I'm exiled to.

And, you know, and this, this is a moment when all of us can do that together. And, and this is this is a time to where we recalibrate all of us. Now I remember when I graduated way back in 1983.

The employment rate rate was very low and unemployment was very high and and people were asking like, I don't have a job, you know, I don't have. And yet, you know, I just found a part time job teaching at a special ed school and I spent the afternoon painting. Morning and afternoon, I learned a lot, right.

And, and we just had a lot of tuna. And I was like, I don't care to eat. But, but that was, that was okay.

You know, I look back in that time and the time invested in my art. I intentionally decided that this is my life. You know, I have freedom to do this right now, even though we may, you know, be low on our bank account.

I'm going to invest in my art and I wouldn't be who I am without that. So we're going to move now just completely to student questions. We've worked in a number of them already, but we'll go kind of full in that direction.

A couple of notes, just as we do that. One is to reminder how the Q&A works. So again, put your questions in the Q&A window, up voting brings them up to the top.

So we can kind of curate among the more popular ones. And the other just thing to note is it made a huge part of our value here at Veritas is interact interaction. Questions kind of, you know, that engagement and dialogue that we stand for.

And one of the things we've been doing throughout the week to kind of cultivate these sort of questions and this seeking together has been Instagram profiles of search is what we call them. And so we've been profiling students throughout the week. And, you know, as you all navigate these transitions and what kind of fundamental questions this is raising about direction, purpose, identity, what kind of a reset.

We could be imagining four parts of our society. And so I would encourage you to tune into that too. It's really fun to follow.

But why don't we go kind of completely into student questions. And I'm getting one here. We've got a couple coming in that are sort of around this theme, Maka, you were talking about a kind of a reset or a moment to kind of take stock, unless they use it, or the same

thing.

This one's a little more for like, cray. And sort of with the context, look, right, you know, you've in your music and you've spoken about themes and justice and inequality and concerned about how to be thinking about and engaging that. So the question is, what sort of injustices or things that just are broken in our society would you be hoping we could take kind of stock of again as a part of this kind of collective moment of unveiling I think I listen to said.

Yeah, I think, you know, to, obviously there's various philosophical perspectives on societies and how societies are best run. I do think that ultimately, there is no perfect system, you know, that has sprung from the mind of humanity in terms of how to run a society. We function as best as we possibly can, but we see through a dim lens we don't see as clearly as we should.

And so, I think what is being revealed are what I would like to see revealed, or how there was so much vanity that we were consumed with so much vanity that we overlooked the most vulnerable, we overlooked the most susceptible to, you know, disease and death and opportunity. And in a time like this I remember when I, when when I first began to take this pandemic seriously. I thought about myself naturally, you know, human condition I thought about me and how this affects my life and my circumstances and my surroundings.

And, and then I, I realized, or I had the thought that oh my goodness, I have the ability to process this I have the ability to think through these things and the ability to self isolate and to run to the grocery store to buy the things that I need. And I thought about all the people who don't have that luxury, that ability to merely survive what it's necessary, what it's needed to survive and, and how many vanities that we take part in so I guess all that to say, I would hope that this is revealed to us how how we have left a vast majority of society vulnerable. And, and how as a, as a society as a, as a world.

These gaping holes that we were blind to because of our own vanity and our own self pursuit come to fruition or help us to realize we didn't need so many of these things that we thought we needed. And there are people who need the simplest things on that, that, you know, we are, we take for granted every day. And so an organization that I've gotten to partner with is an organization based in Atlanta called Love Beyond Walls.

And, and I call my friend Terrence who runs that organization and I said, you know, they specifically help people who are experiencing homelessness. And I said, what are people doing? And he said, they're just scared. They have no outlets, no opportunities, and, and he said, I just want to simply provide them the option to clean their hands.

And, and so something as simple as that resonated with me deeply and I, and I said, and how can I partner with you on that. But, but that's what opened up my eyes to there are

so, so many simple things that we take for granted that, that are now the difference between life and death. Yeah, one of the things that I just want to flag what Alyssa said and, and, and, and a great comment reminded me that one of the invisible capitals that we have to work on is, is the mercy capital.

Mercy and beauty are two elements of new creation that the old cannot account for. It is not a Darwinian, you know, advantage to be merciful to the poor to, to love your enemies to, and also to create beauty. But, but at the same time we need to recognize those two elements usher in the new in, in a way that Jesus accentuated that, you know, blessed all the poor.

And it's, it's somehow the calculation of the kingdom is upside down from the reality of, you know, our, how we view a success model. And, and so this is a talk about recalibration we can really think about how we would invest our lives into creating beauty or providing mercy. It's great.

Alyssa, would you have anything to add to that? I think, I mean, I think that says a lot of it. I think I also have been thinking about how assumptions we've made about the way the world should work, like who's on what team or where the borders between people are are challenged by this. And one thing I keep thinking about so much is how viruses and the way they spread prove that borders and between states and countries and groups of people are completely fictitious.

They're just invented by people in order to keep some people in and some people out. And viruses don't, they don't bend to like our big bravado or our rhetoric or any of those things. It's, it's, that's, and so I don't think it's like I'm, I'm, I'm sad and horrified that this is having that effect, but I think it also has a way of putting us in our place and reminding us that like we're all humans, we're all affected by the same thing.

It's not really anyone's fault that the virus exists, right, that we have to together find solutions to this and that's something I've been thinking about a lot and that the lines we draw between us and them, whatever that us and them is are just, they're just inventions, right? They're not real. And they don't have to always be drawn the way they are that they can change. And this is something that that's reminded me of.

Okay, awesome. So we're actually starting to come up on time. Would love to ask maybe just one more question here and one of them that's come up a lot is this question of how do we create art that really serves others.

And especially in one of the questions provides this context that says, in an age of sort of hyper aware identity appropriation where everyone's speaking from a, you know, whether it's a gender or, you know, racial identity, or, you know, you can imagine that, you know, age or social, social, economic status. What does it look like to actually create art that serves sort of more than just that identity appropriation that really like serves

more broadly and could actually potentially bring us together. So, I think I would want to say just right off the bat is that the answer isn't to try to make universal art.

The answer is to try and make very specific art because as a critic, one thing I noticed is that whenever people try to speak universally what they often wind up doing is watering down who they are, and what is unique about them and their position and who they are and what their circumstances and what their cultural background is what their races what their genders all those things. But when you can really speak authentically out of your place that's something that people seem to be able to connect with and so just from a critical perspective this is something I think about all the time and the art that I really respect. This is stuff that's speaking with an authentic voice from the person who made it.

That would be my answer. Yeah, and, and that authentic voice often will not be anything that is serviceable often times. It doesn't frame itself at least in the beginning when it's made because it's so authentic and it is not just self expression people mistake that you know part of the identity politics is that this is myself expression, but art is not about self expression.

It can be part of that, obviously, you know we find that whatever our pen holders and we express that. But when you really delve down when you have the discipline to push into it. You find yourself losing yourself at the end it becomes kind of a weird paradox.

The more you understand how unique you are the more universal it becomes, you know, and you have to lose yourself and to find you find yourself. But but at the same time, you know, a lot of the language of what I call a territory and pragmatism that is pervasive in the church is not helpful for artists. It's actually detrimental to their growth.

You know, for instance, or it's people say, well, it's wonderful that you're Christian artist. And I say, well, I'm not a Christian artist. And they say what, you know, you know, you do all these things.

And I say, I am a photo of Christ, and I don't use the term Christian as an adjective. To me, Christ is at the center of my heart, and he is a noun, you know, he's a person. I don't dare, you know, push him aside to put art at the center.

So, so many times I'm willing to church will force an artist to be an adjective existence, you know, Christian worship leader Christian whatever plumber. And that doesn't help the practice. It doesn't help the authenticity, finding that voice.

And I want, you know, to be just as authentic myself. You know, so, so therefore it may not look like it. If you're really authentic, you may not serve anybody.

You know, Emily Dickinson writing and Sam in her little cherry with desk in Amherst. She doesn't, she wasn't thinking about this, this useful. She was thinking about is this needed

for me at this moment and for the world that she ambitiously thought will have some, some day read her points.

You know, it's amazing that we look at her work of Vincent Van Gogh's work that nobody cared about. It wasn't serviceable at all to society, and they have become this essence, the essential, the most essential part of our culture. So, so these are some of the things we have to navigate through to address that question.

Listen, I mean, that's exactly what I was going to say. Almost to the T. But yeah, I would have to totally agree. Again, I think that, I mean, to reiterate what what what Michael, Michael said.

The pragmatism that oftentimes is forced upon us, even societal pragmatism, where you're constantly battling art versus commerce, art versus commerce, art versus commerce instead of focusing on creating authentic art and authentic expression. I think the pragmatism of it, it's not good if it's not sold to the highest bidder. It's not good if it's not a blockbuster hit it creeps into our creative process.

And we began to sell ourselves short as artists and as creatives in terms of how to make something that is truly needed and truly a reflection of the creativity, the creativity, the creator that has put this creativity within us. I think we sell ourselves short when we allow that to be in conflict and so, yeah, Michael said it all I mean that was excellent. I love your stuff you always give me in trouble when I say that type of stuff that I just want you to know that whenever I say I'm not a Christian artist, I get in trouble but this has been fantastic, truly fantastic.

Thank you guys so much for joining us. We hope you know for everybody tuning in like this this is just the beginning of a conversation we're going to be talking about this for a very, very long time and look forward to profiting from Michael listen LaCray not only your wisdom but what you produce what you go and create and just looking forward to thankful for you and your voice in this time so I just want to thank you all for joining us please just join me in thanking Michael and Elissa and LaCray. If you like this and you want to hear more like share review and subscribe to this podcast and from all of us here at the Veritas Forum thank you.

(gentle music)

(buzzing)