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A Conversation with Aaron Renn, Alastair Roberts, & C.R. Wiley

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Alastair Roberts

I joined my friends Aaron Renn (of the superb Masculinist newsletter) and C.R. Wiley (author of 'Man of the House' and 'The Household and the War for the Cosmos') for a webinar in which we discussed the wisdom and skills by which we can respond well to crisis.

Transcript

Thank you everyone and welcome to our event. I'm Aaron Renn, a publisher of the Masculinist newsletter and I'm pleased to be joined in conversation today by two men that I have come to greatly admire over the course of the last couple years, Alastair Roberts and C.R. Wiley. So gents, thanks for joining me for this.

Thank you. Great to be with you. And I also want to acknowledge Caleb Wiley, Chris's son, who's running our technology today and also is going to be helping to manage our Q&A.

So Caleb, thank you very much for that. Absolutely. As people join in, I'll just say thank you very much for signing up for this event.

When I decided that we would do this live webinar, I wasn't sure how many people might be interested in an event, but it turned out that we actually filled up the room within one day. So we were able to figure out how to increase that and get a lot more of you on. This event is being recorded and we'll distribute a replay link later so that you will be able to share it with friends who may or may not have been able to attend today.

So look for that. The topic of our discussion is Christian living in a coronavirus age. So myself and I guess many of you, late last year, early this year, we're making our New Year's resolutions.

We've got big plans and goals for what we're trying to get accomplished in 2020. We're

making our move. There's things we don't know, can't control, but we're thinking we're moving in the right direction and that we kind of got a handle on things.

And then bam, like a meteor from outer space, this coronavirus came in and turned our world basically upside down. And those of you who know me know I've done a lot of reading on Nassim Taleb, who's most famous for his concept of the black swan, the seemingly impossible events, rare events that come in out of nowhere and have just massive, massive impacts. Now coronavirus is not technically a black swan event because we knew that plagues and pandemics could occur, so we didn't, we knew it was possible, but it's black swan-like in that these have been rare events that we've never experienced and they have overwhelming impact.

Some of you may very well have yourselves personally contracted this illness. You may have had family members or friends who've died of it. Tens of millions of people have lost their jobs in the United States.

You may be one of them. Many businesses have already failed. And regardless of how affected by this we are, all of us are living under a sort of a cloud of uncertainty and risk in a way that we have not before.

And so the real question before us is how do we live as Christians, respond as Christians, and maybe change what we're doing and the way that we're living our lives as Christians in light of what is happening in the world today? And to help share some perspectives on that, we have our panel. And so I first want to just introduce our speakers. Alastair Roberts is a British theologian, just one of the most thoughtful people out there on scripture today and Christian life in the modern world.

He's the co-author of the book *Echoes of Exodus* and the author of the forthcoming book *Heirs Together*, which is a theology of the sexes that, you know, I think you won't want to miss. It'll be, it'll be a must read. All of his writings appear at his website, Alastair's *Adversaria*, and then his videos and podcasts, which he does quite a few, are *Adversaria* podcasts.

And Caleb is putting the links to all the sites I'm mentioning in the chat window, so don't try to transcribe or Google anything. We'll get it to you there and we'll also send it out after the call. And Chris Wiley is a Presbyterian minister in Connecticut.

He's also one of the leading thinkers on the household in the modern age, and he's written two books on the topic under the name C.R. Wiley, which you can find at bookstores near you or online at Amazon. One is *Man of the House* and the other is *The Household and the War for the Cosmos*, both of which I recommend. And for those of you who don't know me, my name is Aaron Wren.

I'm the publisher of the *Masculinist Newsletter*. It is a monthly newsletter about

Christianity, masculinity, and the 21st century world in which we find ourselves. So gentlemen, thank you again for joining.

Thank you. So here's a little bit of logistically how this is going to work. Alastair and Chris are each going to speak on their respective topics for about 15 minutes, and then we're going to convene for a discussion and for a Q&A.

At any point, if you have a question about anything that's going on, there should be a Q&A window at the bottom of your screen, Q&A button. Just click that button, enter your questions, and we'll try to get to as many as we can. So first I want to turn it over to Alastair, and we're just under this, again, a cloud of uncertainty.

How do we make sense of this, and how does Christian wisdom, if you will, apply in the circumstances in which we find ourselves? Thank you, Aaron. One of the areas that each of us as three writers in areas of Christianity, in cultural issues, we've all focused upon the area of masculinity in different ways and from different angles. And one of the things I want to focus upon right now is the way that as men we can respond in a wise way to the crisis.

Now this is something that will be relevant beyond men, I think it will be relevant to women too, I hope. But what I want us to think about are the virtues that we take to dealing with situations of uncertainty, of great risk, and of situations where we need to collaborate in a wise and prudent way. To do this, I think we need a rich account of the virtues, especially those that pertain to manliness in this situation.

These traits and characteristics of a man are those things that represent maturity and roundedness. Now one of the things I have seen in many of the responses to the crisis is what I think is a weak account of manliness, a weak account that has limited men's capacity to respond to crisis. Now these traits of manliness can distinguish the man from the boy.

We can often see traits of manliness and womanliness as over against each other primarily. But the virtues are primarily those of maturity, things that set apart the boy and his state of childishness from the grown man. And that mature manhood will often have many things in common with womanhood.

These things are expressed in gendered forms. However, in most cases, there are features of maturity that will be common to both sexes. What I want us to look at then are these traits that will assist us in any situation of crisis.

These are not just things that we need for this specific situation. When we respond simply to the situations that come up as crises upon our path, often we can be in danger of taking a sort of medicinal approach. Whereas what we need is to develop the strength that would face any single crisis.

And you do that by solid food, not by subsisting on medicine. The danger then of a limited understanding of the virtues is that you will end up leaning upon quite inappropriate stock responses or feeling and being emasculated by crisis. What do you do in a situation when you feel that your typical responses, those things that you do that make you feel like a man in the face of crisis, those things are not open to you, or you find yourself pushed in a direction that you know is inappropriate or that will be inappropriate whether you know it or not.

A few weeks ago, I heard a man commenting upon this on the struggle to feel manly in the current crisis. Stuck at home, not on the front line, in many quarters of the front line at the moment, women will outnumber men. The traits of masculinity tend to be things that are associated with agency, strength, competence, mastery, honor, courage, these sorts of traits.

And yet we feel that those things can often be constrained within the current context. And so thinking about how do we express those traits in a good way, traits of agency, in a way that does not limit us to a few stock responses that may be inappropriate, but which enable us to express what is a true manliness in the situation, that I think is a good task to give our minds to. The prescribed responses that we face are often things that make us feel passive, fearful, and maybe dependent as well.

That's one of the reasons many people have pushed back against it, to be stuck at home, to have to wear a mask when you go outside, and to find that you can't do your job, you can't do the things that you find a sense of agency in. When that's denied you, how do you feel like a man? How do you act like a man in that sort of situation when all the different forms of action that you would hitherto have thrown yourself into are denied to you? And many men feel a distinct sapping of their agency at this time. Their jobs may no longer be open to them, they may have lost their employment, they may be in a situation where they still have their job in principle, but they can't do it.

In other situations they may feel that although they prided themselves upon their competence and their ability to depend upon their own resourcefulness, they're now dependent upon government, and they feel they're stuck indoors, they're restricted to passivity. These things are not good, and we all feel that constraint upon us in various quarters of our lives right now, and so we need to be very clear about the not goodness of the situation that we are within. Response to this however can be to double down on the stock responses, to focus upon the small range of behaviours that make us feel manly.

So you show your courage against the virus, you don't wear a mask of fear upon your face in the form of a mask, that's been some people's responses. Others insist upon getting back to regular action in whatever form is found, not wanting this to prevent them from throwing themselves into the agency that's typical of masculinity. And the

danger of a limited range of stock responses is that they greatly limit your capacity to respond to situations, and especially novel ones.

Male strengths in these sorts of situations can easily become liabilities. So for instance, the strength of will that enables you to drive a project through from start to finish, the determination to make a mark upon the world can become a stubborn inability to change, to grow, to learn, to be directed in helpful directions. A desire for independence can leave men much weaker than they would be in situations where strong mutual dependence would really give them the resources to pull through a crisis.

Men of thought can often find themselves at odds with men of action and vice versa. And those sorts of tensions between types of men can end up hobbling what has often been the greatest strength of men, their collaboration and their ability to get together in groups where different strengths are pooled for a common goal. What we really want is a rich repertoire of responses, not just a few responses to which we're limited.

And one of the characteristics of mature men is their ability to express their strength and their masculinity in many different forms. They have a rich repertoire and a well-tempered manliness. The manliness is this wide repertoire of strengths, not a constricting and constraining prison to a certain sort of responses.

Much of this maturity will be learned from spending time with people who express different strengths from us, who push us in the direction of developing strengths that we may not have for ourselves. Much of it will come from depending upon other people to act alongside us. This is one of the areas where wisdom is so clearly seen.

Wisdom is not between our ears, it's what's found in our own head. It's our ability to collaborate, to look to counsellors and depend upon their wise counsel in a great many different areas, and to pool that into prudent and responsible courses of action. Now that requires, in a situation like this, drawing upon a great many different areas of expertise and taking the skills of wise judgment to synthesize those into a well-deliberated course of action.

No one's a universal expert in this crisis, and this is one of the things that we've been seeing all the way through our responses to this crisis, that no one has all the answers. And indeed, the directions that different people are pushing us in are mutually in tension, and the challenge of the wise person is to bring those things into a sort of harmonious and well-deliberated course of action that moves us forward. Much of the wisdom will also be learned from women and children.

When you spend your time constantly exercising manliness in this more overt, explicit, strong way, you can lose sense of the importance of being able to temper your strengths, of being able to hold back, of being able to be someone who's gentle with a strength. Now that's a form of strength itself, it's the ability to use your strength, not be

drawn by your strength to constantly follow that course of action when sometimes it's not the most helpful. At the beginning of this crisis, one of the things we did on our family WhatsApp thread was to play what we call Top Trumps in the UK.

It's a game that we had since our childhood, I'm not sure if you have it in the US, but the idea is you have a pack of cards, and usually it's vehicles or sports stars or some other weapons or something like that, and they all have different statistics and they're compared next to each other and you call out a specific statistic and if your statistic beats that of your opponent, you get their card and you put it into your pack and keep on going like that. Now we decided we'd do this, my brothers and I, I have three younger brothers, that we'd do this for different traits that would help us in a crisis. So we talked range and versatility of different responses or preparedness, skill, foresight, endurance, resources, resilience, all these sorts of things that would help us in a crisis.

And it was interesting because it gave us a different way of looking at the situation. No longer were we seeing the ways in which it constrained us, we're seeing those constraints as means to limit us in a way that sparked creativity. It's one of the features of creativity that creativity often expresses itself most effectively when it has constraints, and when there are a particular set of constraints, it can be a spur to think about the creative and effective ways that we can produce something good within that situation.

And the importance of wisdom in a crisis is in part to discover the range of responses that are open to us, the ways in which those things that would not seem to be within our reach currently can be made to be within our reach, the ways in which we can explore the area of agency that is open to us and to extend that realm of agency. So some of the traits that we can think about here are things like self-mastery. This is one of the areas where wisdom is particularly characterized.

Wisdom is the ability to differentiate ourselves from others. So in a crisis, one of the things you'll see almost all the time is a stampede, people moving with the herd, something happens and everyone jumps and moves in the same sort of direction. But to be self-mastered is to be able to stand back, to be able to create a realm of calm within yourself when others around you are acting on instinct or with the herd.

And that area of calm gives you the ability to respond to a crisis, not just to react. And if you have this self-mastery, one of the things that you can do with that is to give it to others. You'll find when people are in a crisis, they'll often be drawn to the person who's able to keep their head, the person who's able to see a crisis and not panic.

And one of the callings I think that we have as men that want to grow to maturity is to develop that capacity to be people who have the ability to keep our heads and then give that calm and the ability to reflect and deliberate within that realm of calm to others around us. Another thing to see there is that we can become our own worst enemies if

we're not careful. If we're just depending upon our instinct to get out there and do something, that instant reaction, we can end up being hobbled in our ability to exercise responsible and effective action.

Because effective action takes time. It takes that intermission of space and reflection, the ability to distinguish ourselves from the emotions, the drives of others, and be able to make an action that is truly our own, that emerges from a reflection and the consideration of the factors at play in a situation. Other features of a maturity in this area are competence and resourcefulness.

These give you the ability to depend upon your own strengths and to be a source of strength and security to others around you. Now competence and resourcefulness don't necessarily depend upon you knowing what's coming. Often these are things that you'll find yourself drawing upon in situations of crisis you could never have foreseen.

And you see the difference between societies and contexts where people have competence and contexts where they lack competence. Where they lack competence, they can often be flailing around for responses, merely reacting in order to be seen to be doing something. Whereas in situations of competence, you can have measured, focused, directed, and effective action.

And that's what we're looking for. And so developing our competence at a time like this is incredibly important. Another feature is preparedness.

Being prepared is one of those mottos that the Scouts have that really emphasizes your ability to draw upon a wide range of different responses in a situation of crisis. Now the prepared person is someone who has a great scope for agency when crisis hits. It helps them, among other things, to keep their head because when the crisis hits, it's not as if they don't know how to respond to it.

Preparedness can also be something that prevents you from falling into the trap of panic. Many people see preparedness as being driven by fear. Why are you gathering things now when all seems well, Joseph? Why are you someone who's taking in all these things in a time of plenty? It all seems very good, but yet when the famine hits, someone like Joseph is well prepared for that.

And so prudence in a situation when we have the ability to build up resources, to build up strengths and skills and abilities, will be something we can draw upon when the time hits. The spur to preparedness need not be pessimism and fear. The prepared person need not be someone who expects worst-case scenarios, but when the turn out, they're prepared.

This requires foresight, but it's not something that is dependent upon being able to see everything that's coming. You can be someone who's prepared even for the unexpected.

Skill and judgment.

We should not be those who mindlessly subject ourselves to experts. Rather, we can be those who surround ourselves with many wise counsellors, not people who are just flattering us, but people who are resourcing us in how to respond to a situation. And we're taking counsel from many different sources, people who might disagree, but who might push us together in a helpful direction.

And finally, our ability to collaborate and overcome our resistance to learning from and being led by others. This is one area in which we can be most effective when we draw upon the different strengths, the different instincts, the different capabilities, the different resources that people have within a group. And we find that the things that we lacked within ourselves are provided for by other people around us.

With these areas of strength that we can build up, I believe that we can, in a crisis like this, have a stronger sense of masculinity and also be able to respond effectively to unforeseen situations that we may not otherwise have been prepared for. Thank you. Alistair, thanks a lot.

I mean, I really appreciated your point about how autonomy and agency often are best expressed within a realm of constraints. Jamie Lerner, the former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, who was the global innovator of bus rapid transit, had this quip, if you want creativity, cut one zero from your budget. And the architect, Renzo Piano, had something similar when he talked about doing work in historically protected city centers.

He's like, creativity doesn't need freedom, it needs rules. Then you can be creative within the rules. So that's great.

Thank you. And again, if people, we have a couple questions have come in. If people have questions, drop them in the Q&A window.

But I want to turn it over to Chris. Chris, we are finding ourselves spending a lot more time at home than perhaps we used to. And we're getting disrupted at every day.

Maybe we're being forced to do things we've never done at home before, like educate our children, you know, for those who didn't have school or maybe just cook meals. So can you help us shed some light on how we should maybe think and rethink about the household as we're experiencing it in a new and a different way? Yeah, I'm glad to do that. And just in case there are some folks out there who have read my stuff, I hope this doesn't sound too redundant.

But I thought it'd be good to just sort of define a couple of things before we kind of dive into some of the specifics. One of those things is what is a household? I mean, I think that for most folks, a household is a place where you go at the end of the day, they sort of relax after you've done important things when you've been out in public in the market

or what have you. And certainly, that's always been the case.

A household is a place where you should be able to feel secure and you should be able to enjoy yourself. But a dimension of the household that has been lost in the last 150, 200 years is the part of the household that I think we're in the process of rediscovering the hard way. And it's the productive side of the household.

So to kind of get a window into what was once the case, just take a look at the word economy. The word economy, when it's used today on Fox News or CNN or wherever you hear it employed by some talking head like us, you've got somebody who's referring to, I don't know, trade or GDP or things of that nature, stuff that's really important and really big and happening someplace outside your house. But in pre-modern times, before the Industrial Age, every household was productive in a very fundamental way.

There was a kind of subsistence economy that existed in every household. Now, there was always a market as well. So it's not as though these things are entirely excluded each other.

But what we've seen in the modern age is a sort of an eating away at the subsistence economy of the household so that more and more things have been outsourced. One of those things has been food preparation. I saw something here recently that just startled me, but I thought, of course, it's true in my own life.

2010 was the first year in which most food produced in the United States by farmers, dairy industry, so on and forth, most of it, over 50 percent, went to restaurants. That obviously means that fewer people are making their own food. You know, they're not, you know, so what, so the outlet wasn't the grocery store or the farmer's market for the farmer.

50 percent of the time, it was the restaurant. And then, of course, when the restaurants all shut down with, you know, social distancing and quarantine and so forth, one of the reasons why there was kind of an alarm that began to ring with regard to, you know, food shortages is because it's not really easy, it's not quick, it's not an easy thing to do to switch markets just overnight. Stop producing for restaurants to start producing for grocery stores.

And so, that's one of the reasons why we saw a lot of waste. But getting back to my main point, you just noted, Aaron, that we're kind of rediscovering that there are things that we can do at home, we can actually make our own food. Hopefully, some folks are taking the opportunity to learn how to cook.

Although I have heard that things like Grubhub and stuff like that, there's just a lot of takeout right now. So, if there is a growing market where you can find work, you can actually deliver food to people who can't cook. So, anyway, so there's that.

But sort of the heart of what I'm getting at is that a household, when it's been understood historically, has been a place where, you know, people do a lot of things for themselves. I'm currently reading a book right now by Brendan Nagel. It's a study of Aristotle's politics.

And the title of the book is *The Household*. And actually, I've got it right here. *The Household is the Foundation of Aristotle's Polis*.

What he's getting at with that book and that title is that the household was a kind of building block for public life. And households understood themselves in the ancient world, not just within Athens, but throughout the ancient world, saw themselves as places where citizens were being formed. And so, citizen formation was sort of integral to a household and its functions.

But part of that was that the household was a place that strove to be as sufficient or as possible within reason and work with other households on common concerns or on the common life, common good. So, today, we don't think in those terms, as I've noted. Today, we more or less think of the workplace as someplace outside the home, a place we go to to work.

And the property often is owned by some corporate entity that is sometimes very large and has thousands of people who own shares in it. But another aspect to the household in the ancient world is the possession of productive property. So, productive property could be land, it could be a business, it could be a trade, it could be something that helped that household to sustain itself, but also to play a role in the larger society.

So, anyway, that's the introduction to the household as I understand it. And my work has been in the area of trying to adapt our households and recover some of the things that have been lost over the course of the last couple of hundred years to make them productive again, places where we don't just get away from work, but where we actually do productive work. And the ownership of productive property is at the heart of that.

Now, I'd like to get into this particular crisis that we're in the midst of right now. One of the things I've, one of the images I use to help people understand what I'm trying to accomplish is I say I'm a kind of a prepper in a way, but I don't encourage people to build bunkers in Montana or something like that, or get a lifetime supply of spam or, you know, things of that nature. What I'm more interested in is helping people prepare for the vicissitudes of life by investing themselves in people, in skills, and in property.

And as Alistair noted, I think that the best way to prep is to acquire the virtues that make it possible for you to work cooperatively with other people and bring something to, you know, a cooperative endeavor that's valuable, that's valued by other people. And so, you know, what that would sort of look like is bringing into your own household and into the conduct of your ongoing life, you know, these skills and these people and the productive

property that would make it possible for you to not only, you know, be more self-sufficient in a positive way within the framework of your own immediate household, but also relate to an extended household and even to the larger community. So one of the things I did when this whole thing was sort of, you know, unfolding, I'm like you, Aaron and Alistair, you know, all my, suddenly my calendar was wide open.

All my speaking engagements were canceled. You know, I had nothing to do for months, nowhere to travel. So I thought, okay, well, it gives me some time to maybe work on some things here.

But I did a kind of inventory. I think anytime you have a crisis, you more or less, you know, think, okay, what resources can I tap into or avail myself of? You know, you think about your bank account, maybe you think about your job. But what I did is I thought about my household, our household here and our extended household and began to sort of assess what our assets were.

And the more I thought about those, the calmer I got because I realized that I was actually in a pretty good spot with our extended household to weather the storm. So let me give you an example of what I mean. So, you know, if we think about my household and by the way, my oldest son is right there on a screen.

He doesn't live in the immediate area. He's down in Nashville. So he's actually not in these numbers because he's too far away.

But he is in a sort of different set of numbers. But in terms of our immediate household and extended household, there are four, you know, physical locations where the extended family lives. And in those, that's within about a five mile radius.

So we're a short trip to connect with each other. There are seven adults, one senior citizen and three children. And between us, I estimated we had 13 sources of income.

So as a result of that, you know, we were pretty diversified, you could say. We also have tenants. I mentioned that there were four locations, but we own eight total buildings.

We have 15 total units and 11 tenants. So with those eight buildings, we only have two mortgages. So I thought, oh, okay, well, worst case scenario, you know, somebody can't pay their mortgage and in the process loses the house, which is unlikely because we'd probably all pitch in and help them make it through.

But let's say things got really bad. We have other units, you know, in our rental properties that we could go and use and live in. And then beyond that, there is extended family networks.

And you can see one of the people in that extended family network, my son Caleb. But within our immediate vicinity, the members of our household are participating in five

different churches. And we have numerous building our business and community contacts we've developed over the years.

And we actually know our neighbors. We actually have. So just for example, within the past couple of days, there was a murder within the vicinity and there was a man on the being pursued by the FBI, by the police and so forth.

And my wife and the other women in the community were on, you know, connecting with each other with regard to, you know, how things were going for each household was everybody accounted for and safe and so forth. And as a result, you know, the network that my wife had developed over the years was something that was a resource that we could draw on and depend on. So, you know, what that means is that literally, we have hundreds of people that we know in our community.

And those are not just people we know, like friends on Facebook, they're people that we know we can turn to. We have friends who are farmers, dairy farmers, we've got a range of people. And then within our household, the four adult or the three adult males are all competent in multiple things and have and possess a range of skills.

So because of these, these connections, there's a sense in which our risk tolerance or ability to deal with the challenge is pretty high. But it required, and this is kind of the rest of the story, in order to have this kind of resiliency, I suppose, or anti-fragility, I'm not sure what the best term would be, perhaps anti-fragility is not the appropriate one, knowing Taleb and how he uses that term. But it required about 40 to 50 years of being in the same place.

So we know, you know, community leaders, we know people in the banking world, we just, and this is something that is the result of a sort of organic process. I mean, obviously, we went out and we worked and we did things and we tried things and hired people and got to know people and things like that. But it wasn't an overnight thing.

Now, what I think this requires is a willingness to throw in your lot with a local community. And that's kind of risky, because what you lose is the opportunity costs of being able to pull up your roots quickly or move quickly to take advantage of an opportunity someplace else. But in terms of what you get out of that, I think there's a non-fungibility.

I think that there are certain things you just cannot reduce to a monetary value. If you try, it'd be an interesting experiment. What kind of price tag would you put on the fact that you know literally hundreds, perhaps a thousand, you know, have a thousand contacts that could help you with everything from, you know, maybe a minor or major repair in your home for gratis to access to food, you know, those sorts of things, you know.

That's the kind of network that we have. Anyway, so those are some things that as, you know, as I reflected upon our household and sort of our ability to respond to this crisis, we were able to actually feel very manly, you know, as Alistair was describing it, because I was able to feel very manly, because I was able to think about my competencies, the resources that we have, the connections that we've got, and our ability to respond effectively and help in a helpful way with regard to different needs. So anyway, I'm rambling a bit now, but I think I got my point across.

Well, thanks Chris. That was great. Again, some questions have come in.

If you do have a question, you can put it into the Q&A window. One of the ones that came in, I think is a very good one, I think the very first came in is we're looking to establish networks of wise counselors, we're looking to build collaborative relationships, and yet it seems to be more difficult to do today, be we're a much lower society. The trust that would have enabled us to trust an expert or to, you know, trust other people to collaborate seems to be dissolved.

Not only do we not have trust, the mechanisms for developing that trust have kind of gone away. I think this is totally new in the sense that, you know, I think about the documentary about Enron, the smartest guys in the room, right? They weren't so smart, but you could go back to the kids like Robert McNamara who got us in the Vietnam War with some of the smartest people who got us into that. But I think today, many of those previous failings did not essentially drain the general trust out of the system.

It seems like there's been this reservoir of trust that has gotten much lower. And so how do we operate both in terms of establishing, you know, establishing counselors and other people to collaborate with, maybe some of the people, Chris, you were just talking about this network, how do we build our networks of collaborators and counselors in a low trust world? In response to that, I think one of the first things is there's a benefit in having a wide trust network. It's like a tree.

If you're depending just upon one single root, then you're not going to be very strong. But if you have a wide root network, you don't have to rest everything upon any single root. Rather, you can distribute the weight of a very heavy object across many different persons and institutions and networks.

And I think one of the difficulties we have is the need to place a great deal of weight upon a single network or person or institution that just is not sufficient to bear it. If you have a wider network, in the way that Chris has been describing, I think that is less of a problem. A particular root can fail, and yet you have a lot more to fall back on.

If we're thinking about trust, I think this is one of the areas where we've seen our weakness in the past few months. The lack of trust within society has made society very difficult to function as a collaborative unit. We end up falling back also upon conspiracy

theories and other things to make sense of a situation that is not operative in terms of healthy information networks.

A conspiracy theory can give a narrative shape to a situation. You have someone to put into the villain category, and you have a great story or narrative to order everything, but it's not a very effective way of relating to reality and the problem and the crisis. So I think trust networks, make them broad, have trust networks that are varied, where there are things that push against each other.

It's a strength of a group of experts. They're not unanimous. They need to push against each other a bit and stress test each other's opinions.

When we've depended just upon one particular group of experts from a particular institution who all hold the same view and put that forward, often we've been weaker for it. And so you need a variety of different viewpoints, experts pushing against each other, not just taking the expert opinion that most flatters your opinion or that makes you most confirmed in your existing way. Rather, we're looking for challenge to us.

We're looking to stress test. And that's one of the ways you build up strength by facing contrary strength, something that pushes against you and you have to develop in response to that. And a network of and society of trust allows for such strengthening engagement to take place.

And I think there is a movement on both sides there. The more that you have trust, the stronger you'll become. And the stronger you become, the more that you'll be able to exercise trust in others without having to depend everything upon them.

And the betrayal of trust, looking at this from the other side, the betrayal of trust is a huge issue within society where people do not feel that their leaders are trustworthy. They will not be led by them. Even if they have nominal authority, that authority won't be effective.

So if we're in a position of leadership, it is absolutely important that we project trustworthiness and transparency and taking care of the people who are around us. If people don't trust you, they won't be taught by you, for instance. And so we need to assure people of our goodwill.

We need to be transparent. We need to have a record of action that manifests competence. All these sorts of things will enable a healthier trust network to be developed.

Yeah, to build on Alistair's comments, I think that there's a kind of a human scale to trust. And when I describe the network that we're part of, I'm literally one person away from the mayor. I know the person who can get me in touch with the mayor.

Now, when I'm dealing with, say, the CDC or the WHO, we're talking about orders of magnitude that are astronomical. Now, I know that there are six degrees of separation, but I have no clue how to get to that point and whether or not anything I would learn in the process would be helpful. But I do think, though, that Alistair's point is really important, and that is, if all you have is the CDC, and you're banking everything on their trustworthiness, you're in a spot where you're very vulnerable, and you could find yourself deeply disappointed.

And I think that's the thing that Aaron was bringing out a moment ago, is that we keep having these sort of revelations that, ah, what was going on behind the curtain was what we feared most, and it keeps occurring. But in terms of, like, I've said this to Caleb, my son, many times, in terms of, like, my personal world, it's great. It's only when I look further out that I get concerned.

The farther away I get from home, the more alarmed I am by what I witness. So, now, is that media? I don't know. Is it the fact that our experts rely too much on mathematical models? I don't know.

But I think that at least our level of a sense of personal security would grow in order to make the sort of the anxieties that we feel with those distant authorities tolerable. Anyway, some thoughts. Yeah.

Well, thanks. Well, speaking of being prepared, I knew I was having internet problems today, so I had my phone here on hot standby for me to get in, in the event that it crashed, which it did. You know, I draw some of the trust back to this extended family networks.

You know, David Brooks has written about the extended family, what we lost with extended family. And essentially, the Western way of having a high trust society, where we engage primarily with distant relations, or people who are kind of not in our immediate circle, we rely on the marketplace to supply us with what we want, is fragile to a decline in trust. In non-Western cultures, we often see much higher reliance on family networks, because your extended family is almost inherently more trustworthy than someone you don't know.

There are mechanisms within families to enforce violations of trust, discipline violations of trust that don't exist elsewhere. And I think we oftentimes, it's like times like these, when we find ourselves maybe cut off from some of the marketplace things, or as the trust drains, that we start realizing, oh, we need to be focused, we need to have these extended family networks. And that's challenging in our society, because it's very corrosive to these kinds of relationships.

Another person put a question in, like, you know, immigrant churches, for example, immigrant communities tend to have high levels of social cohesion, then the kids get

Americanized, and it kind of dissolves. So I guess, the question I might, that this person had, and I think is relevant as a follow on to this is, you know, Chris, you've had 40 years of building all these relationships. You know, I'm sort of embarking on that path much earlier, but a lot of people don't have this rootedness, don't have these extended families, don't have these communities.

If we're starting from scratch today, how should we think, perhaps, about how to, where do we start? What's the first step we could take? I think the first step will require courage, and a level of commitment to an ideal that perhaps is difficult to, you know, stay true to. You know, in our situation, I became a landlord. And it was a very easy thing for me to do, because my wife comes from a family that owns properties.

And so for her, it was sort of like, of course, this is what we do. This is a natural thing. But I've come across many situations where, you know, getting into that particular field, or even starting a business or what have you, requires a level of risk that, say, the husband or wife is just unprepared to shoulder, because they've grown up in an environment where everything has been sort of less, more or less, catered to them.

You know, they've never really had to think for themselves. And that's a little harsh. But what I'm getting at is that, you know, if you spend, you know, eight hours a day in a cubicle, and then you go home to a house that's almost a cubicle in the sense that it's in this sort of environment where no one knows each other, and you just kind of are being shepherded along by these large institutions and just expected to perform a very limited range of tasks, the idea that you would take on responsibility at the level of starting a business or becoming a landlady or a landlord, just is just, it just shut people to shut down.

I've seen that deer in the headlights look with this kind of stuff. But it's by investing yourself in those kinds of things that really root you in a place. It's when you have a business in a community, and it doesn't have to be your full-time thing, but when you have a business in a community, you've got this non-portable thing, your clients, your customers.

Like my wife. My wife is a piano teacher. She's got at any given time between 30 and 40 students.

So she knows a lot of people, and she can't just take that with her. Now what's been marvelous about the technology, she's been able to keep all of her students, and she teaches them all online right now, but they're literally just blocks away in some cases. But anyway, I think that's kind of the heart of what I'm getting at is investing yourself in a little more risky.

It sounds odd, but this is paradoxical kind of thing. The more risk that you are able to sort of successfully manage, the less risky you actually are, you know, your situation

actually is. It's when everything has been provided for you, and everything is supposedly secure because somebody else is doing everything for you, that you are very, very fragile.

Anyway, so stay in one place, start stuff. Yeah, that's very good. I don't have anything to add to that.

Another question that I thought was another very good one is, and I think relevant to both of you and what you had to say, use the illustration of this British politician Dominic Cummings, who was caught traveling when he shouldn't have been traveling, and sort of said, I was just doing what any father would do, and some of this conflict between essentially the competency of the household and the competency of the state, and how those overlap, and how in that overlap we essentially establish kind of the civic rules of behavior and morality. How should we think about the domains, you know, the competency of those, you know, particularly in the overlap area, right, where we know that these domains of competency don't just have hard and fast boundaries. That seems to be one of the big sources of debate today, is like, who's really in charge, and is one group or another, you know, overstepping their bounds? How should we think about that? You want to start, Chris? You can go ahead, Alistair.

Well, one of the difficulties that we have in a society where people are not taking responsibility is that security and provision has to come from another source, and that will have to be the state. There are times when we are faced with a crisis that is beyond the power of lower institutions to deal with. You think maybe of the famine in Egypt in the time of Joseph, that he has to provide for something to enable Egypt to avoid just being completely devastated by this famine, and that is not an ideal situation.

We don't want to see a situation where people are reduced to dependence upon the state, but to avoid reduction to dependence upon the state, there is the need for competence and providence that is invested within other institutions, the family in particular, and the household. So, for instance, we could think about this in the context of mask wearing, which has often been seen or experienced by people as an imposition upon their freedom, but yet it can be a form of competence and a form of providence exercised by people to ensure that they can get back to their own work. There's some sort of limit upon the spread of the disease that enables people to continue to some degree according to a pattern of normality, whereas otherwise the government would have to intervene to establish a security and safety that people don't feel is there in a crisis.

And so providing those means for ourselves, thinking about the ways that we can make our situations effective in a crisis, I do not think it's healthy if we depend upon the state for all of these things. There's also the question of expertise as it relates to the state and as it relates to people in society more broadly. The British government, with its

dependence upon what are called SPADs, the special advisors like Dominic Cummings and others like that, often ended up depending upon a small group of experts that did not stress test their opinions enough.

There was not the sort of testing that you would have within the broader scientific conversation and the initial advice that was given is something that everyone would distance themselves from now and that is obviously something that went seriously wrong. It seems to me that there are other levels at which society can make these sorts of judgments and perhaps one of the striking things about the situation that we're facing is that society has done that. In many situations, long before there's been an official lockdown, people have been changing their patterns of life.

They've been taking safety precautions, they've been introducing measures within their communities, they've been taking care of their elderly people and those who are vulnerable and at risk. So if we're depending just upon the state to do all these things, I think we'll find ourselves often insufficiently prepared for the crises that hit us. Certainly that would have been the situation in the UK had people not had other resources to draw upon.

So the state is there as a resource, it's very helpful and its authority I think is important to help collaborative and effectively coordinated action. But if that's all that we have, I think we'll be found flat-footed a lot of the time. So we need other structures and the household is a great place and churches as well and other communities, academic institutions, things like that.

They're institutions from which we can develop resources that are not those of the state and enable us to depend upon more than just state instruction and advice. You know what, yeah, and in my work, you know, what I've tried to show is that, you know, this is not a, I'm not promoting a complete withdrawal from society and it's more moving sort of the fulcrum a little bit, you know, in the direction that it's been moving away from, you know, kind of back, getting more resources back closer to home. But there are certain things where, you know, I am just as dependent as anybody else for things to work well.

You know, we've been thinking about the government and its work, but there are a host of things like electricity, you know, sewage systems, all these different resources, paved roads that my household relies on and really in fairness need to help support and maintain. And, you know, when you think about the ancient polis and you think about the ancient huicost, the ancient house, the household, that was there too. Now there were certain things that were givens, you know, fertile soil, rain, these different things.

In our society today, because it's industrialized, there are certain things that have become so essential, they're utilities, and we rely upon them in order to work and to cooperate with each other. So when it comes to health, you know, I'm not a doctor, I don't play one on television. You know, I more or less take the advice I'm given.

I might have some qualms about it. It's not as though I believe that these people have godlike powers of knowledge or omniscience. I know that they can get things wrong.

So I don't know how helpful that is, but I try to take the advice I'm given if it seems to be reasonable. And I think, you know, Alastair's point is a valuable one, that public figures, civic leaders, can become too focused on a particular thing and lose sight of other things, maybe have a particular set of experts who advise them when they should also be listening to some other experts. Anyway, those are my thoughts.

Well, thank you very much. If I could just add one thing. There are ways of seeing the government as a constraint upon our agency, but at its best, government can be a means of extending our agency but not substituting for it.

And so if you know how to approach government well, I think it enables... I mean, one of the reasons why we have this crisis, whatever the cause was, was in part a lack of health and safety requirements in China. And those sorts of things we can often feel that we chafe at, but they can be things that give us ways that we would not otherwise. And so seeing government as an extension of, and a supporting of, and a provisioning of our agency, not just as an obstacle to it, I think can be helpful.

But then also recognizing that if it's to do that, we need to be developing our agency in whatever ways we can, using the resources that government gives us, but not just falling into a dependency upon government. Well, thank you guys very much. Unfortunately, we don't have time to take any more questions.

There were several others. What I'm going to do, I think Caleb has hopefully been able to capture the questions, and we'll give them to all the panelists. And hopefully we will be able to potentially respond to some of them in other forums in other ways.

And again, this webinar is being recorded, and we will hopefully be distributing to all of you, again, the links and a link to the replay when it's available. So I want to say thank you all very much for coming. Thank you all to Alistair, to Chris, and to Caleb.

Really appreciate you guys joining, and I thought it was really fantastic stuff. I learned some things. Well, thanks for taking the leadership on this, Aaron, and I'm glad to be part of it.

Thank you both. Thank you both. Thank you both.