

0. Pre-read for context.

1. Close read the text for understanding.

2. Perform one of the five analytical reading tasks.

3. Write a one-page reflection, connecting this article to your own experiences, reading, or observations.

Would it Be Better to Know Nothing about Coronavirus?

by Bonnie Kristian, TheWeek.com, April 10, 2020

The Black Death is our cultural model for all things pandemic, and I find myself talking about it often as the novel coronavirus spreads. The contrast between our world and the medieval world of the plague can raise curious questions — such as, wouldn't ignorance about the virus and its effects confer a certain bliss?

After all, if you didn't know a threat was coming, and you didn't know how to stop it when it arrived, you wouldn't have the same moral responsibility to act. If it were the old days, perhaps we'd hear vague rumors of a spreading sickness. We'd pray it wouldn't come for us, but it would, and without an understanding of viral transmission, there'd be nothing we could do to prevent it. COVID-19 would arrive and claim its victims fairly quickly, and then we'd get back to normal life. No months-long shutdown. No social distancing. No 10-person attendee caps at our loved ones' funerals. We could salve our grief with the comforts of community — and we could do it all without a whit of ethical dilemma.

I've heard versions of this olden days story more than once in conversation. But for all its attraction, it has one key disadvantage: It isn't true.

When the Black Death spread through Europe, people knew it was coming. "Since the 11th century, when the village became the seat of the English Crown, Westminster has witnessed many dramatic moments, but none of equal gravity to that of September 1348, when the pestilence was rushing toward London inland from Bristol and Oxford and along the coast from Wiltshire and Hampshire," writes narrative historian John Kelly in *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. "That September, one imagines scenes of high drama at Westminster Palace," Kelly continues, "Edward III and his ministers anxiously studying maps; clerks furiously scribbling orders; messengers scurrying from office to office; and arriving horsemen shouting out the latest news from the fronts at Hampshire and Bath and Winchester."

Cambridge University medievalist John Hatcher likewise speaks in *The Black Death: A Personal History* of medieval people's "vast appetite for news," even in rural areas, which they obtained via the travels of monks, merchants, and nobles. And plague historian Ole J. Benedictow of the University of Oslo, in his *Complete History* of the 1346-1353 outbreak, includes accounts of church leaders issuing orders anticipating imminent pestilence.

In short, people knew about plagues before they arrived. News of great illness and death *will* spread, whatever the technology available. Lords would send riders to inform

their allies; traders would share reports of being turned away by quarantines; clergy would learn of mass burials. Our ancestors felt the same sense of impending helplessness as we do.

Also inaccurate is the notion that simply suffering through the pandemic would more rapidly return us to normalcy. The economic effects of the 1918 flu pandemic were dire, but research from MIT suggests places with stronger public health responses — shutdowns that started sooner and lasted longer — had better economic recoveries. In the Twin Cities, where I live, Minneapolis ordered closures three weeks before Saint Paul and came away with both a lower mortality rate (388 deaths per 100,000 vs. 481) and a stronger economy (30 percent employment gains between 1914 and 1919 vs. 15 percent). The economic analogy between that pandemic and ours can only go so far, but this history at least casts real doubt on the economic preferability of ignorantly letting the disease run wild.

Of course, there is a pointlessness to this whole topic. The reality, whatever we wish, is that we *do* know the novel coronavirus is spreading, and we *do* know (generally, at least) how to lower its death toll.

That gives us a moral responsibility whether we like it or not, for knowledge creates ethical constraints: "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin." Imagining what we could do if we didn't know about the virus might make for an entertaining conversation, but we can't unknow what we know. A little imaginative longing doesn't hurt, but neither does it lift our obligations.