
Q&A with Holmes Rolston: Life persists in the midst of its perpetual perishing

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By Jeff Dodge



We asked philosopher Holmes Rolston III, CSU's longest-serving University Distinguished Professor, about his thoughts on the coronavirus pandemic. He has been called the "Father of Environmental Ethics," and has made significant contributions to the interaction of modern science and religion. Rolston, who has served in CSU's Department of Philosophy for 50 years, says that the global pandemic is scary in unprecedented ways.

SOURCE: Professor Rolston, these are strange times. Have you mostly just hunkered down at home and avoided people? Or have you had some experience of staying apart and pulling together?



Rolston: My personal symbol of life persisting has been the pasqueflower, flowering about Easter, pushing up each spring through the snow. On the Saturday before Easter, I went up into Lory State Park and found a couple dozen. Coming down, I met others coming up — couples, individuals, once a mom and dad each carrying a small child in a daypack. Seeing that I was a senior citizen, they would step 12 or 15 feet off the trail, usually masked or restoring their masks as they passed. That seemed social distance aplenty, but they politely said, “Hello, have a good day,” and I replied “Happy Easter.” Yes, there was distance, but we were concerned for each other’s well-being, in ways I never recall in previous years. We experienced keeping life safe together.



That was local. The crisis is global, and we have locked up nations. No international air travel. We canceled transnational togetherness. That used to be the way we got to know each other, but now we don’t travel — for the same reasons. We are concerned for our own and for each other’s well-being — again, in ways we never before recall.

SOURCE: Some people may wonder how this could have happened, even though scientists have been studying pandemics and diseases that transfer from animals to humans for years. Your opinion?

Rolston: This could be the largest and most threatening pandemic in human history. The virus in a couple months has stymied human achievements, aspirations and freedoms all over the globe. Those of us who live in developed nations are startled by how much science doesn't know and how much our political leaders failed to listen to warnings. "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again."

For most of our ancestors disease was a mystery. They knew nothing of germs or our microscopic anatomy. Rapid advances in scientific medicine led us to think we had solved these epidemic health problems. The last serious pandemic was the Spanish flu (caused by a virus) after World War I, a century ago, killing more than those who died in the war. Never again. Now we've discovered antibiotics. We can make vaccines. We know about coronaviruses – even though COVID-19 looks a little different. So we thought. But this minute critter has played havoc with us mighty humans.

SOURCE: The minute and the mighty. Bet you have been puzzling over that contrast.

Rolston: That a virus could jeopardize global health has been an alarmist wake-up call. A virus is the lowest on the ladder of life, really in the gray area between nonlife and life. These mischief-makers have to be parasites. They can't earn their own daily bread. We humans are, we suppose, the highest species evolved on the ladder of life. We alone can go to the moon, study dark matter, or send probes to asteroids. We can analyze the Big Bang 13 billion years ago. But back on Earth, we are unsure what the future holds, near or far. The complacent were arrogant. The proud have been humbled. Nature is still there, wild nature, both predictable and chaotic. Have we learned any lessons?

SOURCE: That's your question, but we will throw it back to you. Have we learned any lessons?

Rolston: The virus results in health disparities. Francis Collins is director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and led the decoding of the human genome. I heard him interviewed recently. He is running NIH from his home, trying to bring the brightest brains together to find a vaccine and better tests. This is proving especially challenging with COVID-19. He was impressed how hundreds of researchers had said, "It's not the credit or the pay; it's our moral obligation to do the job and do it together." One drug company said to a former competitor, "Look, if you are onto something and need more lab space, come use ours." We had such togetherness in the 9/11 tragedy.

Collins was asked his biggest worry about the pandemic. He replied that the poor have been hardest hit – loss of jobs, can't pay their rent, can't buy food, more of them sick with the virus, since they live in crowded conditions and can't self-isolate. This especially hits people of color and mothers. We have an opportunity to face up to this injustice, short term, and also to cure these inequities in the long term. Collins' biggest worry is that in our national policy we will miss this opportunity for more caring, love and solidarity in our human communities.

We are already witnessing examples of Collins' anxious hope. We express our gratitude for those first responders and hospital and nursing home caregivers, who today risk their health, even their lives, to attend to those who are ill with the virus. I have such a daughter, at Poudre Valley Hospital, and a son-in-law, a firefighter and rescue EMT. Almost all who read these words will know such people, among their families or friends. Rams take care of Rams, and more – they serve wherever they can, and sacrificially, if need be.

SOURCE: The pandemic has been growing full force during April and May, which included the Passover season in the Jewish tradition, the Christian Easter and the Muslim Ramadan. That has left many wondering about the role of religion during the pandemic.

Rolston: Keeping faith during a global pandemic can prove a considerable psychological and spiritual challenge. Maybe we are just lost in the dark. Maybe we are like those who put too much faith in modern scientific medicine, when we think that as philosophers, ethicists, or saints, we are in over our heads. That is the agony forever remembered in the book of Job. Humility becomes theologians quite as much as it does physicians.



SOURCE: The answer we're getting is what we have titled this interview: "Life persists in the midst of its perpetual perishing."

Rolston: Life is ever "conserved," as biologists might say; life is ever "redeemed," as theologians might say. In this generating of new life, nature is dialectical; it helps and hurts in dialogue. Maybe we discover that life is cruciform, or requires bearing a cross. Such processes, set in their ecological settings, perennially transform disvalues in nature into prolific values, generating the evolutionary natural history and its exuberance of life. The root idea in the English word "nature," going back to Latin and Greek origins, is that of "giving birth." Without struggle, neither biodiversity nor biocomplexity would have evolved. Most of the somber beauty of life comes out of such conflict and resolution.

SOURCE: We are indeed in deep waters. Do you think that there is any beauty in life that comes out of this pandemic?

Rolston: Humans are realizing in the strong and good life something of the strength and goodness that nature has disciplined into its creatures and is bequeathing to us.

To be alive is to have problems. Renewed life comes by blasting the old. Life is gathered up in the midst of its throes, a blessed tragedy, through a besetting storm.

In the classical wisdom, "God gives where God finds empty hands." (Augustine)
"Thou preparest a table before me in the midst of mine enemies."

Death is not the last word – at least it has never yet been across 3.5 billion years. We face previously unknown possibilities in justice, in caring, loving, sympathy and solidarity in an ambiguous and challenging world.