

Wilhelm Schmid¹

The art of living in times of crisis²

Umetnost življenja v kriznih časih

Crises are piling up, uncertainty is growing, restlessness is increasing and, yes, so is fear. Corona, war, climate change, how are we to cope with it all? What is always important for wise care in times of crisis is the willingness to adapt quickly to the new situation and not to spend a long time mourning the previous old life. The art of living now means first of all: *concentrating* on what can be done. And *accepting* what I cannot change. Not to complain endlessly about what is missing now, but to look at what is possible. Not a defensive, but an *offensive* orientation. Whether this is easy or difficult has to do with the fundamental view of what life is.

A widespread view before the current times of crisis was that it should be a "good life", a "successful life" in which everything is "positive" and goes as desired. This is understandable, but it leads to excessively high expectations of life and at some point to bitter disappointment. For a long time, the only thing that seemed to matter was the increase of *happiness*, and this was understood to mean the perpetual feeling of well-being. More and more people believed in it with fervour and invoked it as if they could force it. The bar of happiness expectations was set so high that a deep fall had long been feared. The fact that many people suffer terribly even under simple restrictions also has to do with the fact that the dictatorship of happiness had become total.

Excessive claims to happiness have the consequence of no longer being able to accept an unhappy situation. Such a situation can be brought about by *chance*, which is not always a happy one, but also sometimes an unhappy one, as was probably the case at the beginning of the Corona pandemic. For people who know the experience of a disease, it has no news value that suddenly

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- 2 This text represents the plenary lecture that Wilhelm Schmid had on the 11th Conference of the European Family Therapy Association (EFTA) on 7th of September 2022 in Ljubljana.
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everything can be completely different. That something bad can happen that is no longer revisable. That life can be "fated", as this was once called. That events cannot be changed even by positive thinking, no matter how hard you try. That it would be a good alternative *to think realistically* and also to take note of negative news in order to draw conclusions from it early on and to respond to it pragmatically.

What do the crises teach us? We can bring our ideas about life more in line with reality again and lower our demands and expectations of life somewhat. Crises are the times when some things are painfully missing. This is exactly what leads to the realisation of what is really important in life. Not because a philosopher says so, but because it can be experienced in one's own life. Experience helps better than any theory to recognise what was previously hidden in the self-evident, but now proves to be essential. Now it is possible to get to know the value of the *basic conditions of life*: the security of supply. The reliability of state institutions. The importance of a flourishing economy. And of hairdressers. The importance of open, public spaces that are accessible at all times, cafés, restaurants, libraries, museums, concert halls, clubs.

The crisis is a school of life. In the crisis, what is more important than the happiness of feeling good proves itself better in problematic situations: *Meaning*, and at all levels at which it is available when people strive for it. Meaning can survive difficult times, happiness cannot. Sense is first and foremost *sensual sense*. How much sensuality contributes to the experience of meaning is evident in scarcity. In the Corona Lockdown, the sense of *touch* had to be paused, and thus touch had to be dispensed with. But it was precisely this that made us aware of the importance of touch in life, even if it is only the hand of another person that I can take in my hand. Everyone knows the effect of a hug that is welcome, not only between lovers, but also between friends, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren. Touch soothes and makes one calm. Much of the meaning of life is due to it.

Apart from touch, *movement* also brings a lot of meaning. The importance of this was shown by the restrictions on freedom of movement initially hoped for by many during the Corona crisis, but feared by others. In countries like Germany, Austria or Switzerland, the restrictions were much more modest than in other countries such as Spain, Italy, France, not to mention China. But everywhere, the restrictions made a longing for the possibility of free movement. Sick people and people with disabilities know this, everyone else will not forget it for a long time: What a pleasure to be able to go anywhere at any time!

Besides touch and movement, *relationships* proved their importance for life and the experience of meaning. In the great uncertainty, it became apparent how

much *mental meaning* in life we owe to family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. It is the reliable relationships with others that ensure we are not lonely when life gets difficult. And relationships cannot be digitised at will. Many people first realised in their home office how important it is for them to have a real exchange in the *presence* of others, to chat with them face to face. The *atmosphere* at conferences, concerts and exhibitions, for example, is obviously not digitalisable either. It owes itself to the energies that can be experienced. The potentiated energies of many people create "atmosphere". Physical presence is necessary for this, I didn't know that before either. The fact that analogue encounters are so indispensable sets limits to digitalisation.

Through all the irritations, it also becomes clear in crises how decisive it is for the soul's sense of meaning to have something *beautiful* in life with which to balance out unpleasant experiences. What is beautiful is what is worthy of *affirmation*, regardless of whether others also consider it beautiful. Beauty does not have to be something demanding, even small things can give meaning to life and do good to the soul, especially in difficult times: Music, an invigorating walk through nature, energetic rays of sunshine, a fifteen-minute time-out just for yourself, a coffee, an intimate conversation with a friend, at least on the phone. For what used to be the purest matter of course, a new gratitude is now felt. All of a sudden, even the ordinary life seems beautiful, the *daily routine* that is otherwise often annoying. "Normality" becomes a magic word in the crisis. The realisation of how much support and security is owed to the usual routines in life is still useful even when, in retrospect, the seemingly endless crises are only episodes.

Finally, the *spiritual sense*. Many are now thinking about life. The impulse to do so is due to the crises. It's as if we needed it: a breathing space. An opportunity to rethink some things. The sense to be gained from a crisis is to enable and even force *reflection*. The senselessness had become too great. Everything seemed controllable, everything went its fast course. Onwards, always onwards. Speed limit? Not on the roads and not in life. Racing was important, no matter in which direction. With a *reflection on myself*, it becomes clearer what gives my life meaning: The relationships in which I live. The work I hope to find meaning in. The job I enjoy going to. The journeys I dream of. Values like reliability, justice, solidarity that I want to realise myself.

And I increasingly think about the *bigger picture*, which always has an effect on me. What does globalisation mean now? What is geopolitics? What is becoming of society and world society? As a result of the war, trade routes are being readjusted and we should arm ourselves against cyber wars. As a result of Corona, apart from digitalisation, the value of *analogisation* has become clearer. Without

analogue backing, it would be foreseeable that after the Corona virus, *digital viruses* would eventually cripple all life. Everything that could be controlled digitally during the Corona crisis would then be eliminated without replacement: internet orders, digitally controlled food supply chains, electricity, traffic lights, cashless payment, ATMs. There is no absolute protection against infection, even with digital viruses. Will we be smart enough to keep enough things and systems in *analogue* form just in case?

Crises are a maximum-scale, albeit involuntary stress test for people and systems, in the current case around the world. Crises bring the world up to speed, a *dynamisation*. What was pending anyway is now happening with turbo acceleration. In the current crisis, this concerns *greening*. The far greater challenge of the climate crisis has not taken a breather. In fact, it is easier to deal with than the Corona crisis, because all the solutions have been ready for a long time, they just need to finally be deployed on a large scale. More fundamental than state, economy and society is the ecology of the planet, which is threatened by obsolete technologies. Now, as a result of the war, the old fossil world is being rapidly abandoned. Every crisis creates innovations.

So there is meaning to be gained from crises in various respects. And crises create the occasion for changes that not only affect "the world", but that we ourselves can tackle offensively. The art of living is the question: Can I understand what I am facing now as an opportunity for some *exercises* to improve my own competences or to gain new ones? Exercise means repeating a behaviour in order to strengthen a skill and make processes a habit, so that it no longer needs to be thought about. In music and sport, the importance of exercises is well known, also called training. It is the persistent exercise that counts, from which a skill grows. The multiple repetitions add up to a change. For example, exercising to cope with less, less energy, less abundance. That was on the agenda anyway, only the decisive push was missing. It's about not getting *fatter* and fatter, but finally getting *fitter* again. Less can actually be more, more resilience for example, also more pleasure. Enjoying a great meal less often increases appetite. Being together less often is good for more pleasure. Less sex intensifies desire.

Under new auspices, an old concept returns. High time to dust off *asceticism* and take a closer look. What helps us now is asceticism. According to the ancient Greek term *askesis*, asceticism is actually exercise. Contrary to what many believe, asceticism is not hostile to pleasure; quite the opposite: those who know asceticism get more out of life. This also applies to exercises of restraint and temporary renunciation, which are not just motivated by moral or political reasons, nor by mere necessity, but by curiosity to discover new pleasures. It is an *ascetic hedonism*. For example, in renouncing meat. I have

done it. It opened up new sources of pleasure for me, with new dishes I didn't even know existed.

Ascetic skills make it easier to still gain from the sabbaticals from pleasures. Pleasures of love can be maintained and enhanced if one succeeds in practising a full measure of touch and sensuality, even without sex. Pleasures of spiritual exchange blossom all the more in times of restraint or abstinence. What is called sublimation is an *ascetic ecstasy*, a rehearsal of the ability to direct all one's energies to selected objects, projects, works and tasks. The pleasures of sinking into an activity, of being there for a task, of concentrating on a subject, of reading in depth, of animated conversation may only now be experienced. Being intoxicated without intoxicants is drunkenness without side effects.

In any case, the asceticism of *partial renunciation* is indispensable in order to cope with the excess of possibilities in the world of modernity. Being able to do without is the best antidote to the so-called "Fomo", *Fear of missing out*. Not only young people suffer from it. If you do not choose, you drive yourself crazy. This concerns big questions like deciding on a relationship so as not to dance at too many weddings without really experiencing even one. But above all it concerns small questions in everyday life like: What am I doing tonight? I can go out for a quick bite to eat, meet my friend for half an hour, *post* a few things in between, drop by that party, and finally doze off at home in front of the Netflix series. Then I did all sorts of things, but what remains is a feeling of emptiness, because I wasn't really anywhere. Better to choose one thing and do without everything else, with no regrets.

Throughout, asceticism is the exercise of *right measure*. It should not be confused with mediocrity, which is at best a statistical value, not a measure actually observed. Whoever falls into the ditch once on the left and once on the right of the road due to drunkenness has statistically hit exactly the middle. The right measure, however, settles in the back and forth between the ditches. The path is to be found between too much and too little. The right measure could be *sufficiency*, that is, what is enough, sufficient (*sufficit* in Latin) to be fulfilled. It is not the maximum that is in question here, which as excess overburdens the person, but the *optimum* that optimally suits him or her. This can be tested ascetically. The measure should not be suboptimal, otherwise there is a lack of joy. Nor should it be completely excessive, otherwise weariness grows with excess. The right measure has only partly to do with *quantity*. It owes much more to *quality*, which can be too little but hardly too much, be it in food, wine, coffee, chocolate or sex. In good doses, pleasure brings a welcome change to everyday life. Overdosed, the search for pleasure can become an *addiction* that has a destructive effect.

For all these reasons, the art of living includes the honouring of the dusty concept of asceticism. It is the exercise that helps us to become more resilient, to be able to enjoy at the same time and to develop this ability further. It is the exercise of restraint and abstinence, also of renunciation, in order to give pleasures a rest, to increase them with newly won sensitivity and to switch to other kinds of pleasures. But now asceticism is above all the exercise of coming down from too much of too many things and trying out anew what is the right measure. After decades of too much, years of too little are possible. It will settle down. As after an illness, it may become apparent that the crises have led to a regeneration and reorientation of life. In retrospect, we will still be grateful for this correction.