

Privilege or Solidarity? A story of a twisted world

By Belinda Hertlein

“We’re in World War III“, my friend Kwaku¹ from rural Ghana says laughingly on the phone. But really, he is at the brink of his tears. He is trying to hide it, yet I can hear his voice breaking over the phone. He is broken. The situation has broken him, so he tells me. It is shocking to me; my friend whom I have looked up to for years. A person so strong, it always seemed to me like nothing and no one can throw him off track. Kwaku is not only referring to this pandemic, but especially what this pandemic of COVID-19 (or: Corona) has brought with it. It seems like he is choosing his words carelessly, but really, he is correct; at least partly. I am not saying that we are, indeed, in times of World War III, but simply that there are people out there, in this very moment, who feel like we are. It may not be described in future history books as World War III because – technically – countries are not fighting against each other as seen in the first two World Wars. Nevertheless, the situation certainly feels similar to many people – I as a Millennial must assume. We are in some kind of exceptional situation. Yes, one could call it a state of emergency. There seems to be a strong correlation in between a World War and this state of emergency: hopelessness and famine; at least for many people across the globe which do not own much privilege in nowadays society. For some reason, it does not surprise me that Kwaku made this comparison. I can only imagine what it must be like for an individual and a community that relies on you in times like these, in a place where people do not have nearly as much privilege as in my hometown, for instance; a rural place in Germany. While my friend has to deal with pressing issues like famine and hopelessness, people like me have more – one might call them – ‘trivial’ issues. Yes, I have lost my job, lost my freedom of leaving the house at any time, lost the chance to meet friends and have (accordingly) fallen into a depressive phase; with friends you cannot visit and phone calls with them you do not want to make due to anxiety and fear. It has been a dark time for me, and I have only slowly managed to recover from it. All those things are true for me and many of my friends here in Europe. However, so they are for Kwaku. 1 Name changed to an alias due to anonymity. Belinda Hertlein (pmc970) · Essay Competition (COVID-19) 2 I am sitting here, in my shared apartment with two balconies, writing this essay. Privilege. That’s what it is! This is privilege, when you do not have to worry about waking up tomorrow and not knowing when you are getting a meal that day. Or being physically and verbally abused by local authorities such as the police when trying to take a ferry to be able to get home. Yes, privilege indeed. Compared to many others, I have people to fall back on if the need arises. My parents, my sister, my friends. Yes, none of us is rich or has a lot of savings, but we are financially alright. Something that comes with privilege; something that not everyone in the West, let alone the world, has. But looking again at my friend: what privilege does he have in rural Ghana where famine is slowly but surely approaching? People are relying on him, both financially as well as socially. He is the stronghold of the family and extended family members. Many things have changed during this pandemic, with many challenges along the way. Life as we have known it just a few months ago will never be the same and return to normal. But what is ‘normal’ anyway? Is it normal that no one is looking out for each other? Is it normal that we do not care about other people in other countries? Is it normal that we, Westerners, are sitting on our privilege with the majority of us not doing a thing to support people with less privilege? Is it normal that we see ourselves separate in one world, always looking out for the differences in peoples rather than the similarities? Is it normal to act solely narcissistically and ignore the needs of others? Has solidarity died? This, so I feel, has been the situation just some little time ago. And yes, there are many examples to look at the world negatively in times of COVID-19. Human rights are violated by ‘locking people in’, people are losing jobs, home abuse is increasing, just to name a few. Even though the world is basically a shit show, there is hope. This situation of COVID-19 has the potential of awakening the world as few other situations have yet

had. A situation, that has arisen out of nowhere, no warning, no sign, no nothing. It could not have been predicted. This has the potential for a change. But is the world ready for that? Let us look at few examples of events that have occurred within the last few weeks and months, or, within the time of COVID-19: 1) Italy: young and old generations come together to prove an act of solidarity and community by singing together on their respective balconies and windows; 2) globally: individuals, companies and NGOs fundraise money for both, local as well as international recipients affected by this pandemic; 3) Ireland: people collect money to give financial support to Native Americans affected by COVID-19 to return historic act of solidarity² ; 4) Germany: a song that goes viral is being released in order to fundraise money for people affected of COVID-19. Four examples. Four examples of global solidarity. So, has solidarity really died? Has it not, indeed, been thriving? It seems 2 Thanks to a kind Sir, I am aware of this and have gathered new knowledge. Belinda Hertlein (pmc970) · Essay Competition (COVID-19) 3 that we have started to re-focus on what is one of the most important characteristics in life, or at least should be (maybe even will be in a future past-COVID-19-world?): solidarity. So, to answer the question “Is the world ready for a change?”: yes! The world is ready for a change, a change that is necessary. This should be the message in all this. Am I trying to see things positively? Yes. Am I being naïve about the current situation? I hope not. But there is only one way to find out, and that is by waiting. However, even though the world is ready for a change, does not mean we can simply ‘let it happen’. We need to actively work on the change. We cannot let the chance pass by and hope for a new one. This is a straw, and we need to grab it. We are one world. And it seems that this unprecedented almost absurd situation of COVID-19 has the potential to coming one step closer in achieving this. This may not be a war, as my friend Kwaku has described it, but war time hope moves through the streets, and potentially through us all. Now, we need to ask ourselves: What are we choosing to sit on? Privilege for ourselves? Or using that privilege to support people in a more vulnerable state (aka solidarity)?