

Renewal in a Post-COVID World

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Although it is too soon to announce the end of COVID-19 we can discuss the ways we want to live and organize once this pandemic has passed. The commentariat divides into several options: return to the past by reviving familiar processes and structures; or constructing new ways of organizing that reject the rigorous application of neo-liberal ideologies with which we have become all too familiar. The disruptions we have all experienced offer the opportunity for renewal but in the absence of precedents, where might we find guidance for how to proceed?

A source of inspiration is in cricket. Yes, that obscure game that draws on ancient rituals and practices which dare calls itself an international sport. For many, including in my country (Aotearoa New Zealand), cricket is equated to watching grass grow or paint dry. Yet for aficionados, cricket is the ultimate in entertainment. Outside official games, it is played at the beach, local parks, office corridors, and back yards: anywhere there is space. All you need is something that resembles a bat (preferably wood), a ball (not too hard lest windows get smashed), something to stand in as stumps (a rubbish bin will do), and at least 2 people (one to bat and the other to bowl).

Cricket is one of the most baffling sports that humans have invented. It has a long history going back to 16th century England and comprises two teams. The batting side has two players defending wickets at either ends of a 22-yard pitch, while the fielding side of 11 has a wicket keeper who wears gloves and stops the ball after it has passed the batter; and a bowler, who may deliver a googly, doosra, flipper or the infamous yorker. The remaining 9 are dotted around the ground in positions such as slip, gully, long-on, third man, point and silly mid-on. Judging by terminologies alone, you can see that cricket is weird. Life has moved on, but the language and traditions of the game have remained static.

And yet cricket has renewed itself along several dimensions to achieve relevance for contemporary fans while holding onto elements that have remained unchanged for generations. For example, Australia and England played to a crowd of over 70,000 in the 2021 Boxing Day Test on Day 1 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. That's a lot of people willing to devote 5 days to watch one game, absorbed by the emotional rollercoaster that is cricket.

But the 5-day Test is not the only version. In the early 1970s a one-day version was launched, backed by wealthy Australian media tycoon, Kerry Packer. New rules limiting each side to 50 overs and swapping white for coloured uniforms brought a different ethos. A less-patient public could take a day off work or holiday time to watch a game either at the ground or on TV; and limiting the number of balls meant a draw was unlikely. The team batting first could set a high-enough target for the chasing team to either flounder or through extraordinary skill meet the goal with balls to spare.

The entrepreneurial spirit that created the one-day version was behind the invention of a 3rd even shorter game: Twenty20. In this case matches are played within about 3 hours, with teams allowed only 20 overs to bat and then bowl. Now the nay-sayers who preferred watching their grass grow could enjoy fast-paced slogging fests in an early evening, leaving time for "a cold one" on the way home.

Herein lies the burden of my essay: if cricket, stuck as it was in its traditional formats undergirded by a peculiar "Englishness" can adapt while holding onto its essence, there is hope that we can renew our world. This is no easy task, and we will need courage and a collective will to embark on this re-creation. There are multiple lessons we can co-opt from cricket to guide us, and here I take just 3 exemplary issues which I describe as adaptability, failure, and partnership.

Adaptability

Like many organisations, cricket is led by people vested in maintaining the game's purity. Each adaptation has been met with resistance by both governors and supporters, but faced with threats of declining into obscurity, they have met their existential crises with entrepreneurial flair.

Breaking the game into 3 different formats (Tests, One Day and Twenty20) caters for different audiences, while increasing the game's exposure on the international stage. Accompanying these structural changes are experiments with the ball (constructed of a hard, seamed leather outer, with a cork core) where the traditional red ball for the Test is replaced by white for One Day games. Recent experiments with a pink ball have allowed for day-night Tests, again, making it easier for punters to attend on the way home from the office.

The ball's colour is crucial but is a discussion beyond the scope of this essay. It illustrates, though, that governors are willing to examine all elements to ensure the game's relevance.

And there are the adaptations well beyond the purview of game's elites, like the Pacific Island version of kilikiti. Here families gather in a local park with two teams of any size and composition (old, young, men, women) to battle it out to the sounds of drums, guitars, loud singing and plenty of laughter. Before exclaiming *quelle horreur*, dismissing it as an intolerable aberration, the festival atmosphere that is kilikiti is so lively and entertaining it makes you want to be Pasifika!

Adaptation is essential if we are going to renew our world. This new world will not be organised with familiar unifying constructs except for the fundamentals of decency, fair play, and a willingness to be vulnerable to each other. Communities will develop culturally appropriate and workable expressions, and as we collaborate across national boundaries sharing our insights, we will adopt workable solutions. We can no longer rely on the certainties that have underpinned our organising to date, and we can change.

Failure

In cricket, batters experience a failure rate of about 70%. This is an astonishing statistic given the time investment required to prepare for and play matches. For example, a batter may score a century in one innings and yet suffer the ignominy of a "duck" (zero) in the next.

Why would someone (player or punter) devote so much to a match where the team is likely to fail? There are several possible answers to this puzzle. First, where failure is probable, success is sweet. Second, failure allows for an examination of the variables necessary for success.

Success is a poor tutor. The problem with it is that we tend to attribute our successes to notional abilities and become blind to other contributing factors. On the other hand, failure is an excellent educator because it forces a careful examination of behaviours and attitudes.

As we seek renewal, we need leadership constructs that welcome failure, both in politics and in business. Acknowledging failure is not a sign of weakness, rather, it demonstrates wisdom and welcomes curiosity. For, if we are going to achieve renewed societies, we must have the courage to examine all factors, especially those that flag failure, because those are the areas we need to invest effort in changing.

Partnership

A cricketer's life is a paradox. Each player must commit to honing their skills whether that is batting or bowling if they are specialists, or both if an all-rounder. This requires a single-minded, selfish determination in a quest for excellence.

Once on the field, however, that selfishness must transmogrify into selflessness. For example, the batting side has two players on the field, one at either end of the wicket. A bowler delivers 6 balls (an "over") from one end to a field set for that bowler's style, be it fast, medium, or spin. The batter both defends their stumps and attempts to hit the ball so they can run to the other end. Once the over is complete, another bowler takes up the challenge from their end. And so, the game proceeds.

Batters must work together to score runs, for, although the facing batter receives the credit, his or her partner must also cooperate by calling for the run ensuring that they can reach the other end before the ball is returned. Thus, batting partnerships drive the game, with each observing the other's style, and developing an intuitive understanding of their play in the moment. Batters learn each other's strengths and weaknesses over time and while opponents seek to exploit flaws, partners seek to protect their colleague, allowing them to flourish.

The single leader atop an enterprise is a modality that is no longer fit for purpose. Yes, a few elites have benefited from this selfish accumulation of power and wealth, and we have been beguiled into imagining that their supposed superior insights have led to their successes.

If humans are to have a future, it is imperative that we work in partnership with each other. No individual, company or country can tackle alone the existential threats we face today.

The warming of the planet, the consequent rising of sea levels, and the accompanying loss of natural habitats cannot be mitigated by hubris. Further, totalitarianism with its concomitant powerful individual at the helm cannot create healthy societies or companies.

Although these natural and political trends appear unstoppable, we can embrace each other as partners, finding ways together to turn back the tide and enrich the parts of our world in which we live and work.

Afterword

As with all analogies, my foray into cricket has its limitations. My agenda has been to offer prompts rather than a prescription, while exploring a game from which I gain considerable pleasure. Readers may consider that my story is but an idealistic pipedream in the face of an acceleration of conditions that are bound to end in the destruction of human life, at least as we know it. We are all MAD; engaged in irreversible Mutually Assured Destruction.

I would bow to the overwhelming evidence if it were not for one further insight from the cricketing world. Between 18–23 June 2021 the International Cricket Conference ran the

inaugural World Test Championship Final at the Rose Bowl, Southampton, England. Of the 12 accredited Test-playing nations 9 participated, including the favorites Australia, India, Pakistan, and South Africa. The winner of that competition, which began a year earlier on 1 August 2019, was the New Zealand Black Caps.

I mention this not out of chauvinistic nationalism but in defense of my analogy. As a New Zealander I support the Black Caps. But they are a team that over many years has mastered the art of the collapse, often snapping defeat from the jaws of victory. For sure they have been finalists in the other forms in recent times, falling short of claiming a title, but as a Test side they have not been considered superior to other teams ahead of them on the league table. Yet they are the first in history to claim the status of World Test Champions.

If the Black Caps, through years of failure and disappointment can turn their fortunes around to achieve success, then by attending to the fundamentals of adaptability, failure, and partnership, we too can achieve the impossible and participate in renewal.

There will be setbacks. For example, the Black Caps went from victory in South Hampton to lose their 2-match series in India November–December 2021, and to losing their first home test against Bangladesh in January 2022. Superior performance one day does not guarantee the same the next.

We too can expect a rollercoaster ride in our quest for renewal. There will be resistance and attempts at sabotage, yet by attending to the basics, we can turn around our fortunes and create a world guided by caring and compassion.

Readers may ask why I would write about sport in a journal that explores art and aesthetics. This is a fair question to which I respond by reinforcing that adaptability, failure, and partnership are familiar qualities in our community. These are the lifeblood of our work and as we reach out to fields other than ours, we will find companions who will be with us in our quest for renewal.