# **~~10~~  5 Good Things We Owe To The Black Death**

LARRY JIMENEZ JANUARY 28, 2015

Yersinia pestis. Who would think that such a microscopic organism in the gut of an infected flea could create an upheaval in human society?

The most terrible pestilence humanity has witnessed, the Black Death of the 1340s killed an estimated 75–200 million people. To many, it seemed that the end of the world had come. In a sense, they were right. The “Great Mortality” ended one world and ushered in a new, better one. Despite the horrors of bubonic plague, Europe showed remarkable resilience in its survival.

The Black Death, tragic though it was, may have made the world a brighter place. The following improvements to society would no doubt have inevitably evolved gradually, but the Black Death was a catalyst. In spearheading change it allowed humanity to benefit from the new circumstances sooner than later.

## **5Healthier People**

Human populations evolve when confronted with disease. Gene variants help certain people fight infection better than those who do not have those variants. People with these beneficial genes tend to bear more children than those who don’t. This process, known as positive selection, results in favored genes persisting over time while inferior genes die out.

Recent studies have found that descendants of Europeans who survived the plague had their genes altered to make them more resistant to disease. It may explain why Europeans respond differently from other people to certain illnesses and autoimmune disorders. More specifically, a cluster of three immune system genes code proteins that latch onto harmful bacteria, triggering a defensive response. People living in places the Black Death did not ravage lack these toll-like receptor genes.

The Black Death may have been a gigantic laboratory for natural selection to weed out the weak and frail from the population. An analysis of skeletal remains in a London churchyard revealed that people after the plague had a much lower risk of dying at any age than those who lived before. Before the plague, only 10 percent of the population could expect to live past 70; post-plague, that figure had risen to 20 percent. This reshaping of human biology, coupled with the better diets available after the pestilence, allowed post-plague Europeans to be more resilient and thus live longer. As the adage goes, “What doesn’t kill you will make you stronger.”

## **4Hospitals**

Before the Black Death, hospitals were simply places where the sick were isolated so they would not infect others. A critically ill person entering a medieval hospital was a hopeless case. All that the hospital could do was dispose of whatever property the unfortunate wretch had and say a Mass for his soul. In fact, these hospitals took more care of one’s soul than one’s body, since disease and sickness were regarded as punishments for sin. Indeed, hospitals were religious institutions where the patient’s treatment regimen were confession and prayer. The Mass was the central aspect of hospital life.

Medieval hospitals had no professional doctors or nurses and were staffed by monks and nuns. Curing the sick physically, though practiced, was not high on the agenda and largely consisted of herbal concoctions. Hospitals also functioned as almshouses and pensionaries, taking in widows, orphans, guests, and travelers. The word “hospitality” shares the same Latin root as “hospital.”

The great pestilence jump-started the transformation of the hospital from a charity endeavor to a place where the sick go for treatment. With so many stricken by the disease, hospitals were forced to give up their multiple functions as way stations and hospices so that they could concentrate on the sick and dying.

Simultaneously, there were important changes in medical practice. The failure of traditional medicine to arrest the plague was analyzed and discussed, and new ideas were put forward. Medicine ceased to be theoretical and text-bound and became more observational and practical. Anatomy and surgery became parts of the medical program in universities. From being a quaint philosophy, medicine evolved into a practical physical science.

With professional doctors becoming more central to a hospital’s operations, medical services were specialized, and there arose hospitals or wards devoted to different categories of illnesses.

## **3Predominance Of English**

You’re reading this article in English rather than in Latin because of the Black Death.

Literacy made a tremendous jump after the plague. With the deaths of almost all the literate monks who copied manuscripts by hand, Europeans felt the need for a better way to copy books. This provided an incentive for the invention of the printing press. Soon, Europe was awash with books. The Renaissance equivalent of the Information Age had arrived, leading to the Scientific Age in the next centuries.

Among those seeking higher education, the fear of long journeys and being exposed to plague provided a reason for establishing local universities. The number of universities saw a marked increase after the plague. Many professors who spoke Latin had been wiped out, so teachers fluent in this language of higher education were brought up from lower schools to staff these new universities. Consequently, the lower school vacancies were filled up by teachers who had little or no working knowledge of Latin. Instead, they used the vernacular, and the years after the Black Death saw greater use of the vernacular languages. Boccaccio wrote the Decameron in his native Italian, allowing more people to appreciate his prose. Medical and other practical texts were now accessible to many.

The formerly servile middle class, now in power, also knew no Latin. The decline of Latin in England climaxed in 1362, when English was declared the official language of the courts. By 1385, English was the language of instruction in schools. When Britain girdled the world with her empire, English followed and is now the lingua franca of modern society.

## **2The Middle Class**

Freedom from feudal obligations gave many peasants a glimpse of wider horizons beyond their village. More ambitious peasants were lit with a sense of purpose and flocked into cities to engage in crafts and trades. The more successful ones became wealthy. They became a new middle class. Cities became a hive of activity as the economy, now firmly on a cash basis, took off. Competition among individual manufacturers slowly replaced the guilds, which hitherto dictated rules of production and the cost of goods. The roots of the capitalist system had emerged.

With more disposable income, the new rich could afford more of the luxuries that could be obtained in the East. The traffic between East and West stimulated trade and an increase in merchants and traders. Eastern ideas, especially from the Muslim world, flowed into Europe, stimulating a rise in learning. Townspeople became so affluent that they rivaled the old landowning nobility. The gentry didn’t like the competition, and in a Sumptuary Law passed in 1363, they forbade merchants and their families from wearing cloths of gold, silver, or silk and from adorning themselves with jewels or fur.

Aside from investing in personal luxuries, the middle class used their wealth to become patrons of the arts, science, literature, and philosophy. The result was an explosion of cultural and intellectual creativity we now call the Renaissance.

## **1Freedom Of Thought**

The Christian faith ruled all aspects of medieval life, from womb to tomb. But the stranglehold the Catholic Church exercised over people’s lives and ways of thinking was broken by the Black Death.

Whatever rudimentary knowledge of medicine existed had been employed in the context of theology and spirituality. But with clergy and monks dying with the common folk, and with no answers as to why the horror was happening, the Church revealed itself clueless in the face of catastrophe and thereby lost credibility as an exclusive pipeline to God. Many people lost faith or turned to other paths of spirituality. Dogma was increasingly questioned, and people began to think for themselves.

The first manifestation of common people bypassing the priesthood to search for their own path to God was the phenomenon of the Flagellants. These people roamed Europe flogging themselves in the belief that personal physical suffering could atone for their sins. The alienation from the Church also affected the more intellectual, and in England, John Wycliffe began to express the dissent and rebellion against Church dogma and abuses. This would lead, 200 years later, to Martin Luther’s eventual break with Rome and the start of the Reformation. The floodgates of freethinking opened, and in the next centuries, even the existence of God began to be doubted, leading to the Enlightenment.