

How the show goes on in time of injustice, violence, and pandemic



We need to repair our sense of global fragmentation and feel our way to collective action, writes [John Paul Stephens](#).

The world feels as if it is in shambles. At the time of this writing, I am in Cleveland, Ohio, a city under curfew in the midst of protests against police brutality and racism, following the [killing of George Floyd](#) in Minnesota. This is also happening in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, and people are faced with damnation either way: risk exposure to the virus, or stifle one's outrage. The sense of fragmentation that so many of us are currently experiencing – despite the handmade signs in windows or sidewalk chalk messages of “we're in this together” – can feel debilitating. We seem to be locked into an “us vs. them” dynamic along so many dimensions of our current existence, entrenched in sacrificing collective interests for individual ones.

Arguably, much of what the world is experiencing is akin to a threatening cacophony of blame, anxiety, and fear, rather than a harmonious, streamlined response to the simultaneous challenges of injustice, violence, and the worst health crisis seen in over 100 years. Prior to the current protests around the world against police brutality and racism, the news has been filled with accounts of the US [withdrawing](#) from the World Health Organization and [refusing to participate](#) in European vaccine development efforts. Within the US, neighbouring towns fight over [competing coronavirus policies](#), with city officials lamenting the difficulty in “recognising we're one place.” Indeed, much of the apathy to racism and the slow response of the US to the coronavirus can be attributed to the psychological distance of perceiving these issues as happening “somewhere over there.”

The state of world affairs seems to confirm long-held assertions in social and organisational psychology that it is hard for individuals to [fully comprehend a complex system](#). We can't seem to hold the idea of being “one town,” “one country”, let alone “one planet” in our heads. Yet, while much of what we are seeing in the news has to do with how organisations, institutions, and governments are (not) working together, I think there is much to learn from the work of a choir about how to constantly repair the sense of fragmentation so many of us feel.

In my ethnographic research on coordination in a large community choir, I learned about the importance of aesthetics, emotions and attention when I became one of the singers and observed and interviewed fellow singers and our conductor. Aesthetics was a constant aspect of the singing experience, meaning we could always feel the form of the group coming together as a beautiful “whole” or, instead, feel 150 voices sound like disconnected individuals, just as we now feel the world's disarray when we read the news. That pit in our stomachs is the result of all our bodily senses taking in the images, sounds, and movements that comprise our experience of a collective falling apart.



"Philly Protest for George Floyd" by Joe Piette, under a [CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0](#) licence

In the choir, these moments of fragmentation brought on emotions of anger, frustration, and disappointment. Negative emotions like these are [appropriate](#) when we feel threatened or uncertain, and cause us to focus our attention on the immediate problem. In focusing on "How do I fix this?" individual singers quickly checked in on their own singing, listened to those around them more, and looked more closely at the conductor and their score. While listening to themselves and others meant paying attention to more local actions and concerns, singers also gave attention to the global actions of the group by looking back and forth between the various sections' music in the score, and the facial expressions and gestures the conductor gave to the group as a whole. It was only in spreading attention across both the local and global elements of their group experience that singers could ensure their next sounds fit into the work of the group as a whole, and eventually produce a beautiful choral sound. Singers knew beauty when they felt it – through a sense of wholeness of the group and its sound, as well as the exhilaration and joy it brought – and also knew that it was important to persist in their efforts to accomplish it.

What does this all mean for us? Well, it seems there is little we can do if we think that "knowing" our place as part of a collective simply occurs in our heads. My research suggests otherwise, since tapping into our aesthetic experience requires sensitivity to our bodily reactions and sensations. Foregrounding aesthetic experience doesn't mean trying to escape into what seems soothing and beautiful when the world is, literally, on fire. Instead, it means taking seriously our initial, primal sense of discord when faced with national, state, city, neighbourhood, school and community decisions that seem less than inclusive and pit one group against another. It also means harnessing the negative emotions that such disjointedness triggers, and channeling them into purpose: "How do I help?"

In the end, what we feel is most powerful when it informs our actions. The example of the choir illustrates that we, as individuals, can be incredibly mindful about what we pay attention to in order to work for the good of the whole. I would urge us all to pay attention to our attention: What images are we creating and attending to? Are we weighing our personal discomfort against the safety of the group in our decision-making? Are we consuming media that shows protestors protecting police, as well as images of vandalism? Are we checking in on our immediate neighbours – particularly those of colour, low income, LGBTQ, and the elderly – to see and hear how they are doing, as well as keeping an eye on what our state and local governments are planning? A vision of a united world is inherently appealing, and can be harnessed to pull us all along the "arc of the moral universe". Attending to our feelings, to what is right in front of us, and what seems a world away all need to be employed to knit that fragmented vision back together. Tune in. Don't tune out.

Our current sense of global fragmentation is readily accessed through our emotions and aesthetic experience. Paying attention to both our local and global concerns simultaneously can help change our perception and the motivation to collaborate effectively.

- *This blog post draws on [How the Show Goes On: Using the Aesthetic Experience of Collective Performance to Adapt while Coordinating](#), *Administrative Science Quarterly* and appeared originally on [LSE Business](#)*

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