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OP-ED

## We study shipwrecks to find overlooked history. With COVID-19, we see it right now.

BY CHRIS BEGLEY AND CALVIN MIRES

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Alone on the sandy seafloor, preserved by the cold, dark water, the shipwreck sits upright. Inside, in the galley, silt covers most everything. A stack of dishes glows bone white in the dark. They are shockingly bright and in perfect order, as if somebody might be right back with another load.

This shipwreck lies off the New England coast, representing a brutal confrontation with reality, the aftermath of a mistake. We are maritime archaeologists, and we explore disasters at sea. We study unexpected catastrophes, tragedies from centuries ago. Investigating shipwrecks, we unearth history obscured by time, water, silt, and short memories. We try to straighten out histories bent and distorted by prejudice, politics, and inequality. We find that whether we look back in time or forward to the future, disasters reveal something essential, hidden in the details we no longer notice. In our current catastrophe, in the shipwrecks we experience, the hidden details become visible. We recognize them, finally, as essential.

We explore shipwrecks to uncover important information about trade, the economy, and societal change. We search for the causes of tragedies that claimed the lives of scores of people. We investigate what happened, and what went wrong. The questions we ask might be specific, but they ultimately lead to big questions, the kind that people anywhere might find important. We might ask how people interacted with other groups, how they created identities for themselves, or why a political system collapsed.

We remember specific details about these shipwrecks, and we feel lives lost, evoked in small things. We talk about the dishes and teacups stacked with such care that, even after a boiler explosion and 120 years on the seafloor, we marvel at the competence and cleverness of the steward who stowed them in the steamboat galley. We remember the cargo of iron pipes, still perfectly arranged, after 170 years of battering by the surf in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Central America.

It is precisely these details that reveal the enormous skill and hard work that happens in hidden places. The invisible labor has left footprints, and by noticing these, the people become visible. The façade of the luxury steamboat crumbles and

reveals the structure supporting it. The labor of stowing the plates is not a distraction, or window dressing. It is the structure and the foundation of what we seek to understand. It reveals the human story, and creates a connection with the past that is as relevant and meaningful as any economic or political insight.

Archaeologists discover these overlooked meanings. This hidden labor, skill, and beauty is elusive. The plates are not elegant. The pipes are rusted and common. The people received low pay, doing low status, difficult work. Some people were enslaved. In the arrangement of these everyday things, we find a whole that is much greater than its parts. On the seafloor, we see and feel, in the most visceral way, the invisible labor of centuries past.

We see and feel that invisible world now, everyday, as we endure our current challenge. The farmer, the trucker, the grocery store stocker, and the cashier are suddenly recognized as essential. Artists keep us entertained, maybe sane. We find it impossible to reproduce the extraordinarily difficult labor of our children's teachers. We did not see the shelves being stocked at night, but we see them when they are empty.

That which was hidden reveals itself to us. This hidden labor, the invisible worker, becomes visible during a catastrophe. And once we see it, we must remember. The word 'essential' has not taken on new meaning: rather, its true meaning has been revealed.

*Chris Begley is a maritime archaeologist, a professor of anthropology at Transylvania University, a National Geographic Explorer, and author of the forthcoming book 'The Next Apocalypse: The Art and Science of Survival,' to be published in 2021 by Basic Books. Calvin Mires is a maritime archaeologist and Research Associate at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts.*

