

## CHAPTER 4

# THE DAYS THE EARTH STOOD STILL

*It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.*

—Leon C. Megginson

he original version of the science fiction movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was

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released in 1951 starring Michael Rennie as Klaatu, a humanoid alien visitor to earth who assumes the name Carpenter to warn the world about nuclear war. He wants to speak to all the leaders of the world together to give his message one time but is rebuffed due to political differences and conflicts among the many nations. Realizing the grave warning he must present, he resorts to the scientific community and reaches out to a Professor Jacob Barnhardt, played by Sam Jaffe, after asking Bobby, a young boy he has befriended, who is the smartest or greatest person living. He informs Barnhardt that the earth will be destroyed if it does not heed his warning and asks for help to convene scientists from around the world to meet at his spaceship in Washington, DC. Barnhardt agrees. However, he suggests that Carpenter provide a demonstration of his power to ensure the scientists will attend and take him seriously. The next day, starting at noon in Washington, DC, and lasting for thirty minutes, the entire world stands still. All cars, trains, factories, trucks, lights, elevators, and electrical equipment, except for hospitals, airplanes in flight, and other essential services, cease to operate. All electricity is neutralized. Everyone is frightened, shocked, and bewildered. Major cities around the world, such as New

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York, London, Berlin, Toronto, Hong Kong, Washington, DC, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Paris, Rome, Beijing, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Tel Aviv, etc., were shut down and their streets were at a complete standstill. People hunkered down and were uncertain about what was happening. They were afraid of the unknown,

and in some cases, panic became pervasive. The environment of fear fostered rumors and sensational stories that led many to jump to unfounded conclusions. A sense of helplessness pervaded their thoughts as they found themselves impotent against the unknown perpetrator of this terrifying interruption to the normal daily routine. Shops and businesses closed, and communities were devoid of activity. The earth was standing still, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Like the movie, this is how things looked during the shutdown for COVID-19. Carpenter's message was for the people of earth to put aside their differences and work in harmony to avoid placing the world in peril. Maybe we should heed this movie's message and work more collaboratively and guard against the differences or conflicts that could lead to our demise.

Picture yourself as a small business proprietor in March 2020. Your livelihood depends on a successful small business that is not only essential for your community but also supports your household. Over the years, you've built a stable financial foundation by wisely saving and reinvesting the business income. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shutdowns to curb its spread, your business's income vanishes almost overnight. Deprived of the usual revenue, you face the heartbreaking reality of being unable to sustain regular payments to your dedicated employees. In order to survive, you regrettably have to let go of some of your staff, assuring them that you'll rehire them once the crisis subsides. As time

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unfolds, it becomes evident that the pandemic's impact is far more enduring than initially anticipated. To cover essential business and household costs, you dip into your hard-earned savings. Even when businesses are allowed to reopen, stringent capacity limits and reduced customer traffic persist, preventing you from rehiring your valued employees. Your once-flourishing business now barely manages to provide for your family's basic needs and shelter. The future seems uncertain, with no relief or assistance in sight. In May 2020, the Center for Financial Inclusion and Mastercard's Center for Inclusive Growth initiated a study, revealing that over a year into the pandemic, a considerable number of businesses continued to grapple with diminished profit margins. This financial strain triggered a ripple effect, affecting the livelihoods of countless individuals.<sup>15</sup>

The panic started to consume all segments of life. The shutdowns led to runs on supermarkets and gas stations as citizens prepared to shelter in place for an undetermined time frame. Businesses were caught completely off guard; their continuity plans never having considered an event like the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a complete disruption of economic and financial planning. Companies and employees were at risk as the world and commerce shut down. Schools were

unprepared for a change in thinking that would require all instruction to be virtual. There were challenges with teacher training, school technology, technology at the homes of children, and the sheer understanding of how to engage with students

15 The precarious state of msme: Understanding the impact of covid-19 and opportunities to support their recovery. Center for Financial Inclusion. (n.d.). Retrieved March 31, 2023, from <https://www.centerforfinancialinclusion.org/the-precarious-state-of-msmes-understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-and-opportunities-to-support-their-recovery>

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virtually. Universities shut down, sent their students home for spring break, and then told them not to return. Campuses were empty and instruction transitioned online. COVID-19 dealt a death blow to dining in restaurants. The entire operation

and mechanisms for operating a restaurant had to be rethought. Airports were shut down, and the few flights that did occur were virtually empty due to fear of spreading the virus. All types of protocols had to be developed for mask wearing, sanitation, and proper air circulation.

## **FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY SPREAD**

The psychological shock of the pandemic caused great unsettledness across the country. Fear of the unknown ran rampant as multiple facets of everyday life were turned upside down. Fear was prevalent in health and medical workers along with average citizens. Lack of knowledge about the disease and what threats it presented to human health were of great concern to citizens in the United States and the rest of the world. Forced lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, mask mandates, and social distancing created additional stress and uncertainty because there was no clear understanding of the course of the illness. There was a deluge of questions, but the answers lacked clarity. People wanted to know how they would be affected. What does it mean for my health and my family's health? Is it okay to leave my house? Can I go to work? Can I go to school? Those suffering with anxiety and depression disorders had their conditions exacerbated on multiple levels due to this confusion.

The outbreak changed behaviors and everyday interactions. In-home services and repairs declined as individuals feared exposure and infection. Ambiguous reports and unclear media updates added frustration because there was not a clear outline of what was happening or a solid risk communications plan.

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During the initial stages, coordination between the government and public health entities was inconsistent and hampered clear direction on policy, how to control the infection, and how to protect yourself.

Shopping for groceries took on a whole new critical process for sanitation. Shoppers were masking up and donning surgical gloves and other protective gear to venture out for vital supplies. Groceries were wiped down and sanitized before being brought into the home to minimize risk of exposure. A crisis of this magnitude creates an inordinate amount of distress as individuals attempt to navigate their lives while defending against infection and illness, not knowing what the next day would hold.

Over the next thirteen chapters you will read personal stories of resilience, perseverance, fortitude, and survival in the face of COVID-19.