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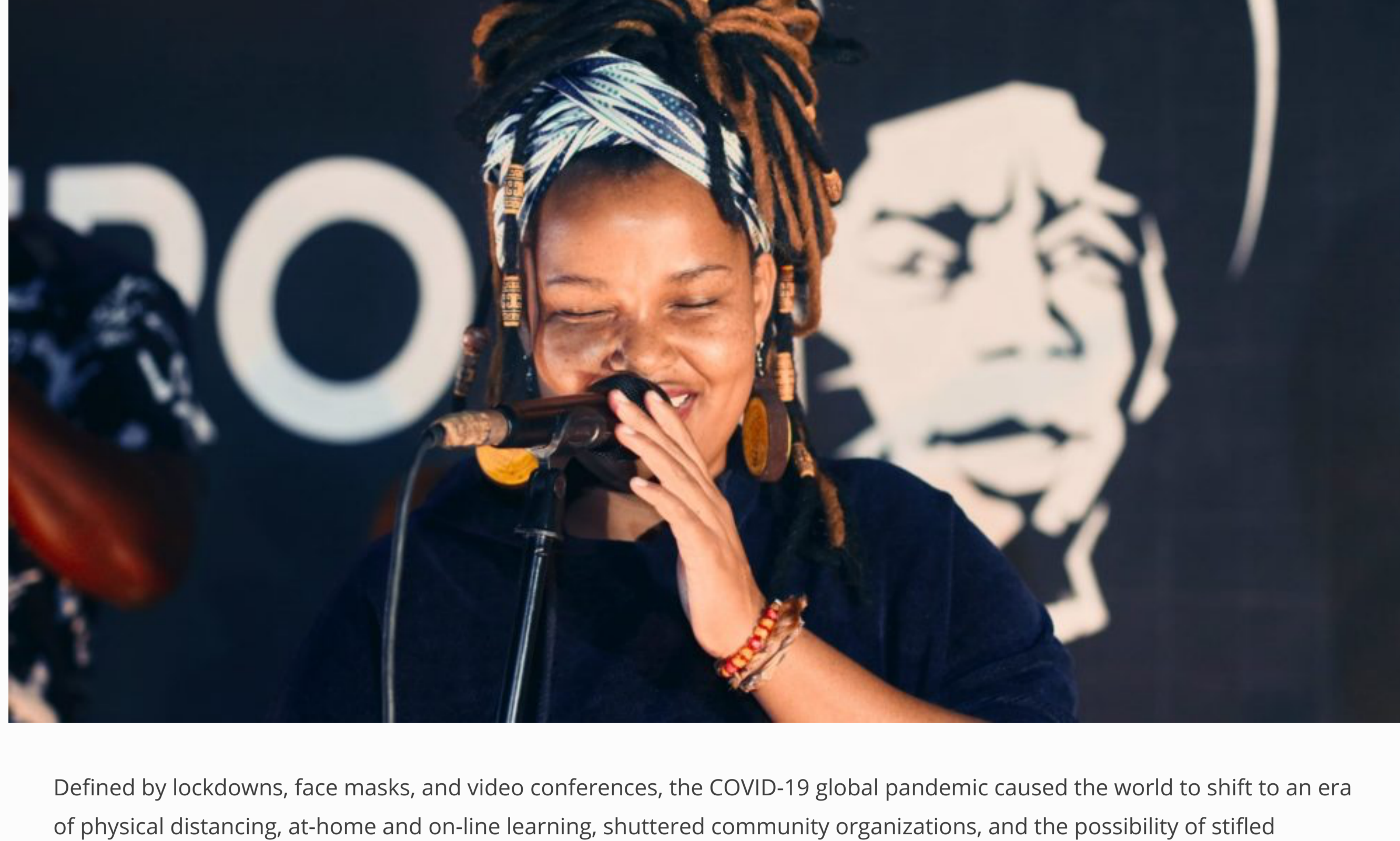
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PROGRAM DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT, AND QUALITY / SUSTAINABILITY

# How Youth Development Programs Have Responded to COVID-19: Creativity, Innovation, and Doing What's Brave and What's Right

By Jeff Poulin on October 15, 2020

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Defined by lockdowns, face masks, and video conferences, the COVID-19 global pandemic caused the world to shift to an era of physical distancing, at-home and on-line learning, shuttered community organizations, and the possibility of stifled creation for young people around the world.

Recently a colleague shared an essay, "A Message of Hope," by English author Neil Gaiman, in which he describes the unusual moment of panic, disruption, grief, and pause we are collectively experiencing as the COVID-19 virus blankets – and potentially re-blankets – the world. Gaiman describes the moment between breaths:

"I've been asked to say something about fragility, about resilience, and restoration here in this peculiar pause. I don't think there is a word for the moment between one breath and the next. The pause between an inhalation and an exhalation. But it seems to me that is precisely where we are, living in that fermata, a world full of people waiting to breathe again" (Gaiman, 2020)

His astute observation provides – in a way that only creative writers can – a powerful image for this unique and unprecedented moment, in which we, as a collective society, operate in a pause of unspecified length.

This pause began with a global pandemic that stripped down many of the immediate cues that define full human interactions. Since, we have witnessed a cascade of crises: national failures to address healthcare and wellbeing effectively; widening recession with growing unemployment; and a reconciling with the systems of oppression disproportionately affecting BIPOC members of our communities. Technically, these are separate crises, but for young people, their families, and the out-of-school time organizations serving them, it is a confluence of hardship.

## Understanding What We Have Gone Through

In the early months of 2020, a colleague and I embarked on a journey to understand how [creative youth development \(CYD\)](#) organizations in the United States were dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This soon turned into an exploration of how youth-serving community organizations can respond when crisis strikes their community.

What we learned through observations of the topical conversation being shared by networks of creativity-focused youth-serving programs was that organizations were subconsciously entering into the work of organizational development. This field of study was pioneered by Polish-born theorist Kurt Lewin (1890 – 1947) and is largely utilized in the for-profit business world. Lewin proposed a simple three-phase model of organizational development, whereby leaders manage the movement of an organization from the known current state through evolution to a new crystallized future state; it consists of 'freezing,' 'changing,' and 'unfreezing.'

Throughout the conversations I observed in early April 2020, organizational representatives described how their programs were largely "frozen" due to the nature of the COVID-19 shutdowns nationwide. When observing a call of program practitioners, one observer remarked that their building seemed to be frozen in time.

In other programs I observed, executive leaders worked alongside staff and young people to reimagine their work. With highly developed organizations that foster intergenerational decision-making as part of their work in positive youth development, this is standard practice. In the case of one such CYD program, [Elevated Thought](#) in Lawrence, MA, programs originally froze into the status as they had always been conducted, and then changed at the hands of youth leaders. As of July, Elevated Thought's programmatic schedule was unfreezing in a new re-invented, youth-led way.

As programs began to grapple with the impact of the crisis, they moved from Lewin's 'changing' phase to the 'unfreezing' or re-opening. This transition presented many challenges for programs due to the rapid unspooling of consequences from the original COVID-19 pandemic as it transformed into an economic recession and civil unrest due ongoing inequities which disproportionately impact the communities which are served by the programs we studied. In one such case, a CYD organization in San Diego County, California successfully "unfroze" and began offering their programming to then re-freeze due to the need to construct different pathways for their programming to respond to the economic recession and civic protests occurring in their neighborhoods.

From an outsider's perspective, and considering the fluctuation of responses by observed programs, I would argue that due to the ongoing nature of the crises of 2020, that the 'unfreezing' has yet to occur in the vast majority of programs, and the 'changing' nature of Lewin's second phase continues onward (through to the time of the authoring of this article).

## Proposing a Working Model for the Future

Based on this understanding of the kind of organizational change programs were navigating, my colleague and I sought to develop a simple and easily understandable model, which could help program leaders (especially amidst the rapid changing environment they were facing) locate themselves in rapid change and map their path forward. We began by examining much of the literature and picking a simplified model, which we could modify to suit the language described in the previous sections of this article.

Over time many scholars have put language and modeling around the observed phenomena of personal or organizational change, especially in times of rapid response or crisis. Some of this literature comes from the study of creatives and others from trust in gaming. The model built by Karl Rohnke in 1984 focuses on several objectives like building confidence, increasing mutual support, and developing agility. Though mostly applied in rock climbing and other similar techniques, the visual model that has been derived by contemporary scholars of Rohnke's work focused on Comfort, Learning, and Panic Zones and is often applied to the OST sector.

In more recent years, this model was popularized and connected to organizational growth by CJ Alvarado in 2015 who described a frame to think about organizational response to crisis. This frame maps Comfort, Learning, and Panic Zones, as well as the corridors that exist within them which lead to opportunity: "As you step out of your comfort zone and into learning zones, you uncover new opportunities and possibilities as well. That's because learning zones have corridors that lead to new opportunity." In the case of crisis, one is not choosing to step out, but is, rather, forced out of their comfort zone. This leads to the corridors which are lined with numerous doors to opportunity, Alvarado's model says. I wondered: How can we then sustain opportunity when navigating through comfort, learning, and panic zones?

We modified Alvarado's model slightly (in Figure 1 pictured at right) to incorporate language we heard through our observations of CYD program leaders into a parallel structure of zones:

- Fear & Uncertainty,
- Insight & Learning, and
- Sustained Opportunity.

Each zone represents the types of possible responses employed by programs and their leaders during a crisis. In the center, the 'comfort zone' is where programs were pre-crisis: their regular operating, mission-driven approach. The crisis, signified by the purple circle, could represent the myriad disruptions, ranging from international pandemics, to natural disasters, or even organization-specific ruptures like the loss of leadership.

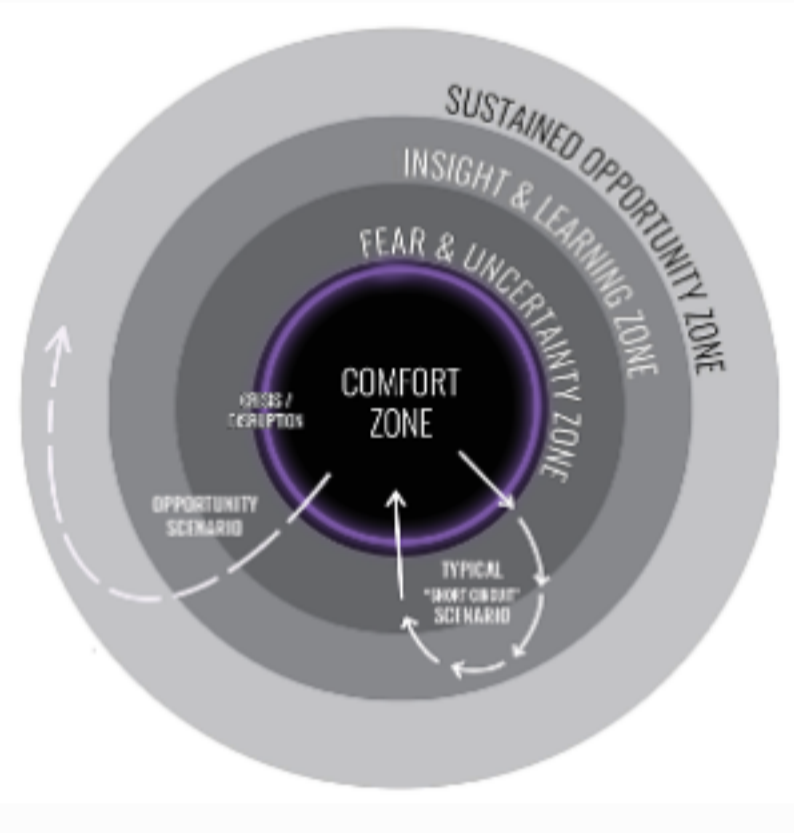


Figure 1. Design by Bridget Woodbury.

The rings outside of the crisis align with Lewin's phases of organizational development, with fear & uncertainty aligning with "freezing," insight & learning aligning with "changing," and sustained opportunity aligning with "unfreezing."

The figure also portrays two scenarios that signify divergent pathways through crisis. The first, typical or 'short circuit' scenario, illustrates how a program exits their comfort zone in fear and uncertainty as a result of a disruption, adapts briefly to the circumstances, but circles back to return to their comfort zone, leaving behind the insights and learnings garnered during the crisis.

The second opportunity scenario, which is propelled by our observed actions of OST programs in youth-leadership and growth mindset, illustrates how programs and their leaders can exit their comfort zone as a result of disruptions, grapple with their fear and uncertainty, gain insights and learnings as they adapt to new circumstances, and grow into sustained opportunities as a result.

## Moving Towards Sustained Opportunity

When exploring this new model to help CYD leaders locate themselves in their journeys responding to the crises, we facilitated strategic conversations with CYD leaders to explore the question, "What allows organizations to seize the opportunity path?"

Building on this expanded version of Alvarado's "Fear, Growth, and Opportunity Framework," we reached out to creative youth development programs, their leaders (executive, staff, youth), and several regional networks to investigate. We collected responses from a representative sample (n=48) of CYD programs that were convened by regional stakeholders in networks in [Massachusetts](#), [Pittsburgh](#), and [San Diego](#), with others represented from Chicago, the Bay Area, San Antonio, central New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.

We began by sharing Figure 2 with its zones of Fear & Uncertainty, Insight & Learning, and Sustained Opportunity and posed the question, "How are CYD programs constructing new pathways through the crisis?"

What we garnered from these dialogues were questions that CYD leaders were asking. After collecting these responses, we coded, reformed, and organized thematically the distinct queries of leaders as they emerged from the Fear & uncertainty zone through the Insight & Learning Zone towards the Sustained Opportunity Zone. Five recurring action-oriented themes emerged:

- Harness Internal Reflections and Insights,
- Build Productive Collaborations,
- Strengthen Program Design,
- Improve Organizational Stability and Sustainability, and
- Instigate Shared Leadership

These questions and provocations offered, bring leaders back to the concept of organizational development, as they seek to change and unfreeze their programs. Providing this modeling, mapping, and guiding questions offer leaders – who are short on time during this crisis – a pathway to construct pathways towards their futures and sustained opportunities. These act as drivers for the development and implementation of organizational policy (or even municipal or funding policy in some cases) that will sustain organizations beyond the 2020 crisis response. We envision that the connections drawn throughout this work elevate ideals held by most local practitioners and can serve as a broadly applicable framework to ensure that CYD programs remain sustainable, agile, and responsive when forced into an environment of ever-changing circumstances.

## Provocations for Leaders

This initial analysis led us to propose provocations for CYD leaders – at all levels: executive, staff, and youth – to use to interrogate their strategies for navigating through the current (and future) crises:

### Harness Internal Reflections and Insights

- Revisit moral compass: Review and strengthen mission and vision statements, strategic goals, and job descriptions. Does each and every one reflects the values of the organization to hold steady through a changing environment?
- Integrate/acknowledge diverse points of view to ensure honest dialogue within the organization: How are we engaging with our team even when decisions must happen rapidly?
- Create a vision and growth plan that reflects mission: Are we doing what is urgent and necessary for us and our community during changing circumstances?

### Build Productive Collaborations

- Work with funders to shift funding models to support authentic work: Is this a true partnership collaborating together to find worthwhile solutions during uncertainty?
- Learn from other CYD organizations (and those in other sectors) doing strong and impactful work: How are we plugged in with peers for knowledge-sharing?
- Examine opportunities to work cross-sector with organizations and efforts confronting the crisis: How can we be a piece of the puzzle?
- Build authentic leadership roles for youth and families: What structures can best support this when we cannot physically connect in our space?

### Strengthen Program Design

- Construct virtual capacities in formats that reflect organization's values: What works best for our participants?
- Develop compelling evidence of impact: How can we translate what is actually happening to others when evaluation is not a priority within a crisis?

### Improve Organizational Stability and Sustainability

- Evaluate expansions carefully: Are our responsive ideas mission-aligned and sustainable?
- Diversify streams of support and income: In what new ways can we balance the budget and remain solvent within uncertain futures?
- Review mission and program for fit within the wider ecology of CYD activity in your community: Where do we fit in the ecosystem amidst new priorities and community needs?

### Instigate Leadership Actions

- Develop strategies that will permit organization to adapt more nimbly: How can we work best together and in what new ways?
- Build distributed leadership capacity roles to include staff, youth, families, and alumni: In what ways are their voices part of decision-making especially during a crisis?

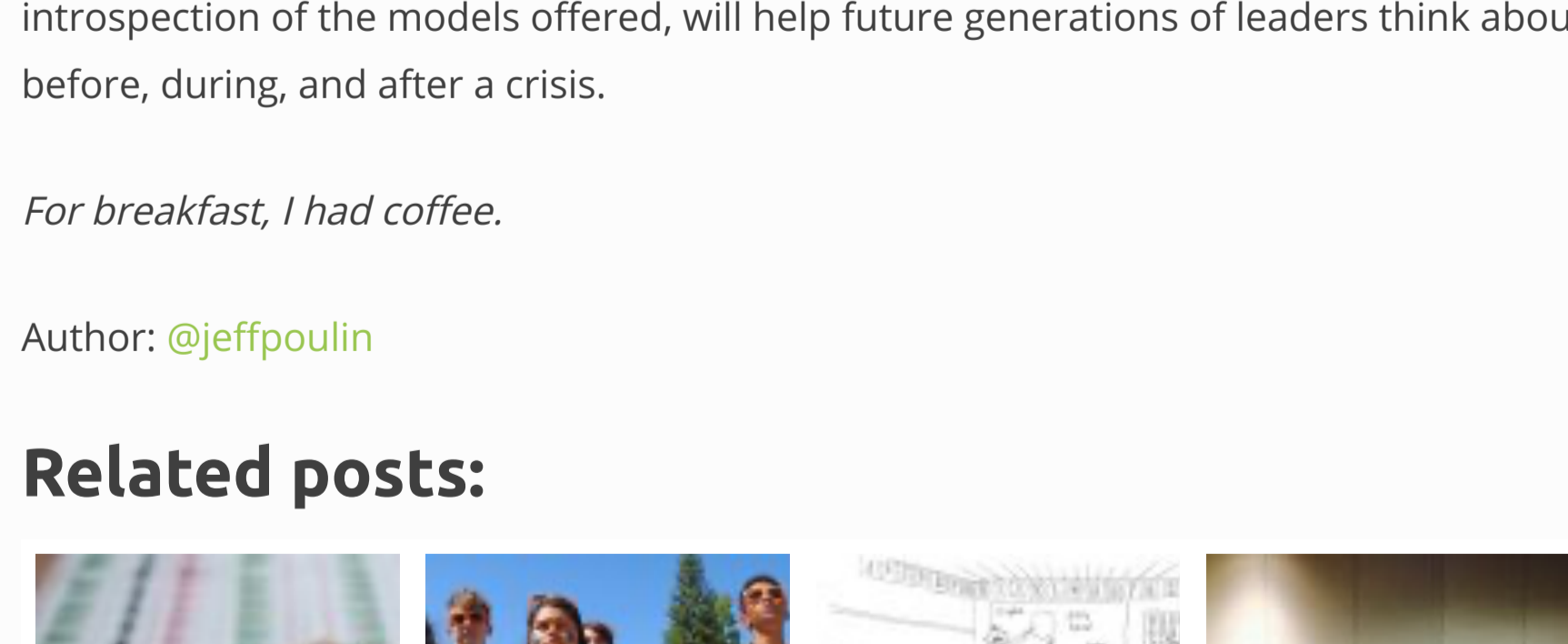
## Conclusion

There can be no real conclusion for this work – especially at the time of authoring this paper, since the crisis of 2020 is still unfolding. But it is our hope that by reflecting on their practices, CYD programs and their leaders will find ways of engaging with the opportunity scenario and emerge stronger with sustainable innovations to share. Further, we hope that the introspection of the models offered, will help future generations of leaders think about their organization's development before, during, and after a crisis.

*For breakfast, I had coffee.*

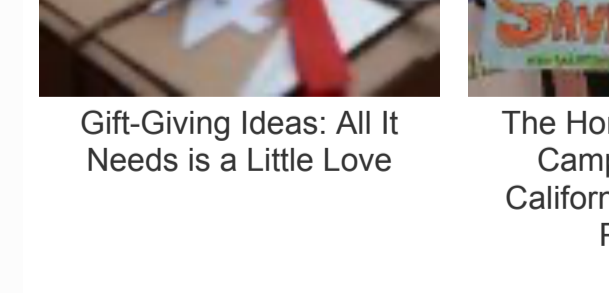
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