

February 24, 2023

A bit of cleanup before uploading:

- I'm removing a lot of the specific notes about my cousin who drank himself to death and about what I learned about his family afterwards.
- I'm replacing the name of our senior community with "our senior community" or some such. It would be easy to figure out what it is, but maybe I won't spell it out. I'm taking out some names of staff members here as well.
- I'm taking out another few other names -- my doctor in Jersey City, for example.

After reading this essay in the New York Times Magazine this week (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/02/22/magazine/covid-pandemic-oral-history.html>), I wanted to re-read my diary and finally declare it finished. If academics are starting to produce papers about this period, then it's time for me to throw this into the databases that they might use.

It's been hard to declare it finished because the pandemic doesn't go away, and yet I haven't made a new entry in many months.

I'm reading through it now to remember what it was like and to see whether there are things I want to change before uploading. Initially I didn't plan to change anything except to repair a few typos, but I started to add a few clarifications in square brackets. And now I see that I want to delete some personal remarks about other people -- some of the stories that came from my Stephen's family after his death, for example. I will plan leave a marker in the text when I do that. I'll also remove some last names.

I note that I have still not had covid, nor ever tested positive for it. For that matter, I haven't had a cold since before starting the diary, and yet I have not been living like a hermit at all -- among other activities, I eat meals with other people a lot; I have flown to Colorado and shared a house with friends; I have spent a week at a camp in the Adirondacks; I spend time with my grandson every week; I went to two week-long tai chi retreats. I do still avoid some group events, especially if a lot of talking, singing, or

yelling might be going on. I can't claim to be consistent or even to have a consistent rationale for my precautions.

A theme that emerged very early in the diary is that we don't know what the best safety protocol is, and that's still the truth. Everybody is still doing their own calculations and taking their own personal risks -- and come to think of it, that's how we deal with all sorts of threats to our health. Nearly all of us are poor at risk assessment, and we all share the human capacity for denial. Do we eat organic food? Do we eat bacon? Do we drive on wet roads? Snowy roads? Do we walk outdoors when the paths and sidewalks are icy? Well, it depends.

I still wear a KN-95 mask a lot but not when in small groups of friends. I wear it to concerts and plays, on airplanes and in airports and other public transportation, to doctors' offices and grocery stores. I don't wear it in the community of the senior living facility where I now live.

Comments as I read the file for 2020:

On Sunday, April 19, 2020, I wrote about my friend Sheree's illness, presumed to be covid. For the past several months, she's been struggling with long covid and trying to resolve lingering effects. I believe her lungs are fine now, but she still has headaches and she falls frequently.

On Monday, April 20, 2020, I mentioned the senior community for the first time, and that's where we've now been living for nearly two years.

Another thing I notice as I read is how many things I have forgotten -- how confused and emotional I was during the first few months. I write so often about my grief and distress. I had even forgotten that the local parks were closed for so long, an illustration of how much we didn't know.

I'm up to late June, and I haven't yet seen myself say something I thought I repeated often during those months: this is a world-wide historical event, something that hasn't happened since 1918. When we feel caught up in details or sorry for ourselves, we need to take a step back and think about that. I'm waiting to see when that observation shows up!

I don't know why I thought it was a good idea to report so many numbers! It makes for tedious reading. The reflections and local details are a lot more interesting now, though clearly I was obsessed with numbers at the time. Even reflections on the numbers can be interesting. On recent TWiV podcasts, I've heard discussions about the need to distinguish between people who enter the hospital because of covid or those who test positive once they're there for something completely unrelated, and even what appears on death certificates continues to be somewhat ambiguous. Was their positive test result a cause of their (for example) heart failure or was it coincidental?

The intertwining of notes about covid and politics make perfect sense, though, because the pandemic in the US unrolled during the frightening strangeness of the Trump presidency. Each one was an existential threat.

I was struck by a note in which I said I was noticing the fear I felt just being outside anywhere near people. That's something else I hadn't remembered.

Sunday, February 26

It's going to take me quite a while to read all this, because I've had three sessions now and I'm only in July of 2020. I'm starting to see notes about kids returning to school. While this is a topic I haven't paid a lot of attention to, in 2023 people still talk a lot about the damage that was done to children by the closing of schools for so long, especially disadvantaged kids of any sort -- unhoused, families without the financial resources to pay for good equipment and wifi, families where both parents had to keep working, kids with learning difficulties. My grandson Evan, who has autism and a few other diagnoses, was getting increasingly eccentric when he was out of school, and it's good to see him back to his usual baseline of oddness now. I can't imagine how children could be on zoom all day -- whenever I'm on zoom for an hour and a half, I can't wait to get the hell out of there.

The hosts of TWiV said more than once that our covid response was misdirected -- we should have closed bars and kept schools open instead of doing the reverse. The governments frequently chose business over education.

Monday, February 27

I'm almost finished reading the file for 2020. What a year! The arrival of the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement -- and both of those momentous events during the disastrous presidency of Donald Trump and the rise of the ultra right wing. (In my personal life, rejoining AA, participating in the Pfizer vaccine trial.) The almost miraculous development of effective vaccines in less than a year, and the slow commencement of vaccination. The capstone of the year was the drama and tension of the election, and the relief of the results -- but the tension of the MAGA refusal to honor them.

Sunday, March 5

I've been postponing starting to read 2021, because I know how disturbing it's going to be to read about January 6.

Sunday, March 12

January of 2021 was a very intense month: high covid numbers and proliferating variants, Trump's attempted coup and its early aftermath, my hunger to get vaccinated and see Henry get vaccinated. I described intense relief after vaccination, and even more after Biden's inauguration was successfully completed. By the end of the month, we were preparing to move to the senior community where we now live.

Monday, March 13

February was stressful, too. It's a bit disturbing to see all that distress, day after day, along with my struggle to find peace. One marker of that distress is the number of times I talk about having trouble sleeping. I keep thinking, as I read, that I have already forgotten how difficult it was. I keep focusing, as I did then, on how lucky I was to be so safe and sheltered from the storms outside.

August 2023; reading April, 2021

It's August 2023 now, and I'm getting back to reviewing this journal. It's a drag to get back to all the gloomy reports of outbreaks of the virus, but it reminds me again how easy it is to let bad news be so dominant. I've talked to a couple of people who seem to think that Trump is still running the country, when actually the Biden administration is doing a pretty good job and the Republicans are pretty ineffectual, really. Trump and various white supremacist groups soak up so much news coverage, and we're so worried about their violence, that sometimes it feels as though they're fully in charge. We need to defend ourselves against despair.

I see an excerpt from an article in the Washington Post saying that reinfection is rare. Ha. This isn't the first time I've read something in my notes that was later proven to be very wide of the mark.

We're in a different period now. There's so little covid around that Henry and I now go to the grocery store without wearing our masks. There are new variants around, but we probably still have good protection against severe disease. I think bird flu is about as much in the news now as SARS: it's killing birds and mammals, and experts fear that it's acquiring mutations that make it more likely all the time to be able to jump to humans. There's no way we're ready for another pandemic -- we haven't finished fighting the fights or grieving the losses from the current one.

I'm also recalling that while I was good at keeping myself occupied, nearly all my social interaction was electronic, and it was all very structured -- letter-writing, texting, AA meetings, working out alone or with Ken over zoom. It was that way for so many of us during that time, and sometimes I still marvel at how different my life is now. I see people in person every day, eat meals with others 2 or 3 times a week, attend community meetings and committee meetings. I'm still doing the letter-writing, though not writing nearly as many as I did then, but now I have both in-person and online sessions. Some things may never change back, though -- I'm still attending tai chi school board meetings online, and AA meetings, and I now take Spanish classes over Zoom.

I still take a lot of walks!

I just looked at the NYT covid tracking pages for the first time in many

months -- I was surprised to find they were still there, since we know that (1) many, if not most, cases are probably no longer reported to anyone and (2) the question of hospitalization "for covid" or "with covid" is tricky, and these stats may be counted differently in different states. They report that 255 people, on average, are dying of covid each day.

I like "turn fear into curiosity," from an entry in early May. My gosh, moving is hard. It's good to be settled here now.

Wednesday, August 9

Still reading 2021. This is a timely activity because we seem to be experiencing another surge, with yet another new variant -- EG.5, dubbed Eris. It's been reported in (at least) India and the UK, and it shows up in growing numbers on the CDC site as well. Hospitalizations are starting to climb. When I last listened to Dr. Daniel Griffin talk about what he's seeing in his practice, he said that nearly all the people showing up in his hospital probably wouldn't be there if they had started paxlovid when they first got sick. I just heard the other day that a friend of mine is sick, and she said in email that she her case of covid has now lasted over 2 weeks, and that the most difficult things have been the extreme fatigue and the isolation. She did take paxlovid, but the longer it drags on, the more worried she gets about long covid. Her anxiety is heightened by all the work she isn't able to do,

I've been thinking about the social aftermath as well. An article in the NYT today about the economic troubles in China said that Xi's zero covid strategy is thought to be one of the causes. And a 'This American Life' podcast episode (#805, The Florida Experiment) described how Gov. DeSantis has made his opposition to mainstream health advice a centerpiece of his brand, which helps to attract like-minded people to Florida to fight with hospital administrations and set up alternative health care practices. They hate Fauci, masks, and vaccines, especially vaccine mandates; they love ivermectin.

I don't have an attribution for this, but I see it asserted that Biden's strong response to the pandemic economic downturn has helped the US to bounce back more than many other countries. The Fauci-haters would

dispute that completely, and it does seem to be true that the pandemic magnified Trump mania and has contributed to the extreme positions of the far right.

We also know that many children have not recovered -- I keep reading and hearing that child psychologists are unable to meet the current demand, and that many children are still hurt in other way, having lost a year or so of normal education and socialization. And surely many children also lost grandparents or parents to covid.

It's peculiar to read these notes and remember so clearly the world they describe. As much as I've tried from the very beginning to pay close attention to the pandemic, I find that I've forgotten a lot and maybe even tried to forget, like most other people. I think that says something general about the human brain, more than it says something about me specifically. We do forget hard times, and we do move forward, and we so easily feel that the way life is now is the way it has always been.