

November 2021

Dear Friends

In this second year of epidemic, I would like to cheer you with a lighthearted essay, but these newsletters report my thinking and reflections, and I have not had lighthearted experiences to think about and reflect on. Ordinarily one's thinking is focused on earning a living, completing one's education, raising a family, growing a business, or making a contribution during retirement. But the epidemic has interrupted our careers, our education, and our lives. I find my focus shifting to finding a way to carry on during the epidemic. We can't get our minds off the epidemic. Not much else is going on. When I look at my calendar for 2020–2021, I see mostly empty squares. Each month the page is almost entirely a blank grid. The epidemic is dominating our lives, disrupting so many dimensions of our lives. Businesses close. People lose their jobs and face eviction and homelessness. Those who are still working have moved off site. School children learn at home. Daycare centers close, forcing some parents to stay home with their children. This epidemic is a pandemic: a high percentage of the population is infected and the epidemic covers a large geographical area, in this case, the whole world. In 2020, the U.S. alone reported 1.7 million cases and 350,000 deaths. Some hospitals are overwhelmed, sometimes for lack of beds but more often for lack of staff, as medical professionals burn out and leave the field or become patients themselves. Patients who need surgery for cancer or heart disease are placed on waiting lists.

When coping with pervasive disruption in our daily lives and the isolation of lockdown, we need the support of others, our friends and relatives. But socializing is discouraged. We are exhorted to practice social distancing, keep six feet away. Restaurants are closed. Carry-out meals should not be group meals. We don't see our coworkers or our neighbors. At home, we are supposed to self-isolate, no more than one person to a room. We can't visit our sick friends in the hospital because visitors are not allowed. Residents in nursing homes are confined to a single room all day, like prisoners, no community activities or group meals. Their only links to other humans are the telephone, the television, and, for some, the Internet. In hospitals, nursing assistants must minimize the time they spend with each patient. We are all deprived of the physical presence of others. We need encouraging words, but also a reassuring hug. We cannot even grieve our departed ones because funerals are limited to a few close relatives.

We try to find our bearings for the present by looking for signs of hope to come and by looking back over the way we came. We remember the chronology: The virus appeared in Wuhan, China, in 2019 and spread by international travel and commence to every nation. On March 20, 2020, as the number of cases and deaths in the US climbed, Illinois governor J.B. Pritzker issued

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an executive order closing all businesses deemed nonessential and restricting other businesses and social gathering. Schools closed. Citizens were required to wear masks and practice social distancing. The following day, wherever you walked you saw a ghost town. Arterial streets had almost no vehicles, even at rush hour. Eerie quiet replaced traffic noise. Parking lots were empty. Sidewalks were deserted. Wearing a mask outdoors seemed unnecessary; there was not another human on the block. Everyone was staying in.

President Biden held almost daily press conferences (grimly reminiscent of Franklin D.'s fireside chats). Banks, groceries, drug stores, and hardware stores were open, but with restrictions on the number of persons inside at one time. Customers spaced themselves out in jagged lines on the sidewalk, and an employee or security guard monitored the door. Some grocery stores gave customers latex gloves to wear while inside the store. Hand sanitizer for customer use was everywhere. The city of Chicago reduced the hours of liquor stores after people gathered on nearby sidewalks because the restaurants and bars were closed. Whenever possible, businesses sent employees home to work there. Schools scrambled to implement remote learning. Church administrators learned how to broadcast services, setting up the camera in an empty nave. A series of community forums about proposals for land use in one neighborhood here moved to a virtual format, prompting protests when the moderator perverted the technology to prevent opposing speakers from being heard.

Some businesses thrived—delivery services, because people did not go to stores, and nurseries and home improvement stores, because homebound people who still had an income invested in their yards and houses. Sales of board games, jigsaw puzzles, and hobby supplies were phenomenal in the first few weeks of the shutdown because people could not go out to movies or performances for recreation. In general, small businesses like independent stores and restaurants failed, but big corporations posted record profits.

In April 2021, vaccine became available in the U.S., first to seniors and people with compromised immune systems. The number of cases and deaths declined. In early June, more than a year after the governor's order, the state and the city began to phase out restrictions on businesses and social gathering and dropped mask requirements, completing the process on June 10. Daily life showed traces of what some people call "the before times," what we used to think of as normal, although some voices warned that we may have to accept a "new normal," one with some permanent adjustments.

My personal chronology of this second year includes a singular bright event. After restrictions were lifted, on July 18, 2021, we were able to hold our annual picnic, the happiest event I can report to you in this grim year. After a hiatus in 2020, we were grateful to get together again. The picnic has been held on a weekend near Bastille Day since the early 70s, but its roots reach back to 1966. In the early years, Bastille Day was quietly commemorated. Later the picnic evolved as participants made their own contributions, some of which defy explanation because no one remembers any more. It's like explaining why people dress up like monsters and go from door to

door asking for candy on October 31. Explanations are many, but vary. (First-timers at the picnic are generally charmed.)

After more than a year of isolation and loneliness, we were uplifted on July 18, but in the last few days of July, the delta variant emerged in the U.S. and the vaccine proved less effective against it. We put on masks again, and some restrictions on our activities were reinstated. The path back to normalcy will require a high percentage of vaccinated individuals in our population and more effective vaccines or boosters as viruses mutate.

Although “unprecedented times” has become a cliché, I still find myself searching for a way to understand the days we are living through. Other periods of history offer parallels to ours. For example, in the *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio’s young people who left medieval Florence because of the plague prefigure the sudden influx of tourists in Michigan and Wisconsin resort towns during the off season. In a library, I once ran across some regulations issued by public health officials in a medieval Italian city during the plague, like the emails we received along with the governor’s order. Theatres were located outside the city in Shakespeare’s time because of the plague, arguably an early form of social distancing. Remember the “pest house” mentioned in *Romeo and Juliet*? It was the Elizabethan version of quarantine. Even before the moratorium on evictions expired, a tent city of 16 makeshift dwellings sprouted up a few blocks away, like a scene from the Great Depression. I have not seen breadlines in the streets, but most neighborhoods seemed to move quickly to establish communication lines with homebound people and set up emergency food deliveries. Shortages of food and other essentials evoked fears of a return to World War Two rationing. I found I am not alone in seeking historical insights. A book club here is reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1947). Another classic would be *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe (1722).

To take a wider view than the era of the virus, if you have been reading these newsletters for a long time, you may remember that I broke my arm at age 24 and again at 48 and promised to be very careful if I reached age 72. I am now just a few weeks away from completing that dangerous year. I am happy to report, “so far, so good.” In January I took a hard fall on the ice, injuring that arm and the leg on the same side. The leg recovered, but the arm is still sore and sometimes difficult to use. I expect to do well enough.

I believe we will “come out the other side” as the saying was early in the epidemic. As in wartime or hard times, we all need each other. Encourage each other. Support each other by communicating in safe ways, like telephone and Internet. Write more letters, and keep the letters as constant reminders where you will see them often. Protect each other by washing your hands, wearing masks, getting vaccinated, and observing the six-foot limit, but remember to care for people by helping to ward off isolation. Check on your friends and neighbors regularly.

Ellen

