

One New Yorker's Perspective on life during a Pandemic

Day 33:

Initial feelings of fear and panic were combined with hopelessness and a general obsession with watching all things Covid19. Must see TV included Cuomo, Fauci and Birx and the occasional BBC and Sanjay. It was a constant attempt to learn the facts about this virus that was changing the world until the realization came that no one knew all of the facts. This virus kept presenting differently and the more we learned the more we found we didn't really know it. We witnessed the rules change as no age group was exempt any longer. We were horrified to learn of new symptoms and watched as the list continued to grow. Family conversations happened in boxes over zoom which made it feel even more disconnected then connected. The weather in the northeast didn't help, with tornado warnings and hail generating even more of an apocalyptic feel. But the hours, days and then weeks passed. We woke up, checked our temperatures and soldiered on. Small victories to be celebrated were food deliveries actually arriving. A good day included a walk and maybe good news from a friend not heard from in a while who was okay. It became real when we put a name or a face with someone diagnosed or who was in the hospital. We watched the death toll grow, checking websites daily, town by town. As the number of obituaries grew, we bought sympathy cards in bulk. Funerals were held on zoom or in processions of cars where people stayed inside passing through cemeteries. Our world that once was big seemed smaller and more vulnerable now. Those of us who had ever questioned if we were doing enough now found comfort in being told to just do our part. We were humbled by nurses and doctors and found ways to show our gratitude. We waited on long lines for food only to find empty shelves and aisles. Our hearts ached for families and friends furloughed or fearing life needing food with no paycheck in sight and we found ways to support each other. We grieved with families saying goodbyes to loved ones over Face Time.

We became frugal with food, toiletries and paper goods. Sought after hand sanitizers and lysol wipes were hot commodities exchanged among close friends and family with such gratitude. We sat longer. Human doings became human beings. A good book was a treasure, a chore a welcome relief from empty to do lists. Something was happening in the world much bigger than us that reminded us just how small we were. *We the people* took on a whole new meaning. Doing nothing was doing something, not just for ourselves but for other people known and unknown to us. Acceptance was forced upon us and it settled in on us as time went by. Conversations began with asking genuine questions like how are you dealing with all of this and are you well or in need of anything? Strangers made eye contact over masks and exchanged silent waves. Those who felt okay today were aware of how fleeting it was and how lucky they were. Life assumed a simpler cadence. Internet kept our careers and work selves focused while filling our days with importance from those lives outside our homes that had once consumed us. And those of us grateful to have children in our daily world found some semblance of reassurance in providing structure and routines for them, and by so doing, ourselves. With no end in sight, we adjusted. Resiliency became a forefront character trait, well needed now. We started asking what comes next, when can we plan, will we ever gather together again. We got restless and ventured out on sunny spring days to walk among others while social distancing. We wondered if this was to be

not just the new normal but our life as isolated people living among people. Diagnostic tests, antibody tests and vaccines were talked about daily as lifelines for hope. Any sign of illness became a cause for concern. Virtual doctor appointments became the norm. Through it all, we grieved for those whose lives were lost, quietly supporting each other in the privacy of our own homes. We laughed aloud at the onslaught of jokes making the rounds and tuned in to NY and Jersey showing their strength through music and comedy. Life slowed with the feeling a plane makes when about to make a landing, with engines slowing and movement halting. We gave in to that feeling. We held hands or prayed or meditated and accepted life on life's terms. With all we have been able to do as a society we continued to be amazed that a virus could bring us to our knees in 2020.

Time passed with endless days rolling into the next. We awoke to the spectacular beauty of a New York spring. With it came hope that the shared sacrifices have worked, that the appeal to our better angels will continue and that what comes next will bring with it a better idea of what to do next as we learn to live with the uncertainty.

Day 78:

Days become weeks, weeks months and time passes only to be acknowledged by the changes in the season. A spectacular New York spring about to become summer adds more space to the life we now lead. The outdoors has become a new living room. We emerge from our homes to strike up conversations more than six feet away from neighbors. We share intimate fears and whisper updates about sick friends from a distant touchless space. Conversations drift back to news updates with shared tidbits of the ever-evolving information about Covid19. All updates are given a time frame to verify their validity. Credence is given to today's updates, last week's facts quickly discarded. Sources are questioned and always named (a doctor, a scientist, the CDC). Facts have a shelf life, accurate only for today as the experts are seeing the virus for the first time learning in real time. We watch the states re-open with fear and awe as New York counts down on hospitalizations, intubations, deaths. A post traumatic feeling hangs over the region.

The new normal is confusing. Beaches will now open but churches, schools and businesses remain closed. We worry that someone we don't know there will behave in a way that impacts us all.

Walking with social distancing and masked waves remind us of where we are now. Businesses file for bankruptcy and debates over economic vs. public health concerns happen daily. Food supplies dwindle and new shortages occur. Conversations are dominated by the uncertainties of the future. Can we ever get back in our cars still holding full tanks of gas to go anywhere else? Will doubt be our constant companion? Will we contact trace our friends or relatives before welcoming them into our home? Will the virus come back before we are prepared to protect ourselves and our loved ones?

We live with the uncertainty while phrases like "the new normal" become commonplace and we learn to figure it out as we go along. We beat on, accepting life's new terms (what choice do we

have?) while already skipping over this summer to dream of the next. And we hope that the shared sacrifices have worked, that the appeal to our better angels will continue and that what comes will bring with it a better idea of what to do next.

Day 110:

We now live in this gray area of recovery from the coronavirus. The summer weather offers the illusion of normalcy yet we watch other states' numbers rising drastically. The tri-state governors have ordered restrictions on travelers from those states and we wonder how it can be enforced. Some beaches, some parks and some pools begin to re-open. Towns get creative in finding spaces for outdoor dining. We walk and see people emerging from their homes who haven't been seen since March. We all grapple with degrees of re-opening and re-entering our community. We talk openly with friends about social distanced gatherings but are careful to check the weather forecast first before confirming. This is our new normal and we navigate difficult conversations with family and friends to share what we are comfortable with, what contacts we all have and who impacts those decisions. In these murky times, we struggle to follow our own moral compass so we won't have any regrets on the impact those decisions have made on ourselves or others. There continues to be so much we don't know about this virus as we watch the age of impact drop suddenly by 15 years. We learn about the airborne effect and search for better quality masks.

Summer provides the backdrop for the political battles that rage on and we look to local and state leadership to guide us. Economic concerns vs. public health concerns dominate the news cycle. What had seemed so simple as a way to do our part to protect ourselves and others (wearing a mask and social distancing) has now sparked heated emotional responses. Horrified, we watch images of even this entering the rift of our nation's political divide.

And still, we beat on. We support friends and family and each other through losses of jobs, of loved ones, of milestones celebrated alone. We embrace the quiet and learn to live with the uncertainty of the new future. We rediscover a feeling once lost: hope. Out of pain can come progress. We acknowledge how small we are in this big wide world and now feel the reality of how interconnected we all really are. If history is told by the survivors, let our voices be heard. We the people, together, stepping thoughtfully and gratefully into our new world.

Loretta R. Butler 2020

Day 677:

After two long years of fear and isolation, interspersed with hopes after vaccines and diminishing cases, we are facing the most contagious viral mutation yet. We have done what we were told to do, we have been vaccinated, boosted, wear masks out in public, don't go to large social gatherings, etc., etc. And yet, we send our kids and teachers back to schools, adults back to offices and see bars and restaurants filling up again. Broadway opens, shows close, same with sports teams: we are given daily updates and don't make plans. The rules keep changing, and although we are told the reason being that they are following science, we scratch our heads. This seems so unlikely: science is based on facts, right? Then what is changing? It becomes harder to trust voices and health organizations that we have listened to regularly during this pandemic and we have come to accept that we may indeed get this virus or (hope?) find out that we have already had it. Towns distribute N95 masks and test kits, and it shifts to local responsibility and individual decisions. The choices we will make will impact those around us and we weigh risks and returns on a daily basis.

How long can this last? Now the hope for an ending becomes an expectation for learning to live with covid. We are no longer shocked or saddened if someone tells us about their positive diagnosis, but are more likely to feel resigned to it. Unable to get home tests or PCR appointments for a month, our holidays looked different and smaller for another year. We access websites to get free tests shipped to us, with government assurance that they will be available for all. Exhausted medical staff are interviewed and news feeds showcase their tears and fears. Teachers are strained and drained, concerns over students' social emotional needs in the forefront of everyone's minds, but who is supporting the adults?

And the politics of mask wearing continues to agitate some, frustrate others. Weary New Yorkers hope the peak is behind us and again look warily at strangers passing in halls, elevators, trains and streets. We change Zoom backgrounds, window shop on VRBO as the snow and ice make it easier to hunker down and stay safe. We long to let go of words like "pivot", "unprecedented times", "variants" and Greek names that we never wanted to know how to spell. Will this never end? Can we together embrace hope?

Loretta Butler 2022