

Covid-19 diary, 2022

January 9, 2022

There's a lot to say, but so much of it is repetitive that I've grown tired of saying it, I guess. Still, here we go:

We're in the midst of a new wave of covid cases. It is being called the omicron wave, because that is currently the dominant variant. Skeptical observers think that the increase isn't solely due to omicron, though, because it's also true that enormous numbers of people have been celebrating since Thanksgiving by flying around the country, going to concerts, eating out, and otherwise dropping their guard. I'm reflecting some of the discussion I hear on TWiV. It also seems to be an article of faith in the news media that this new variant is "less severe" than delta, the variant that preceded it, but Dr Daniel Griffin says that NY hospitals are filling up with very sick people all the same. He considers it possible that omicron may look less severe because so many people who are infected with it have some protection — if not vaccination the prior infection.

The numbers are stunning. In NJ, the reported number of new cases is more than 30,000 per day — this is more than triple the highest previous number, reached one year ago. We've always assumed that this number is an undercount, and this must be more true than ever before, especially among the vaccinated, whose symptoms are likely to be very mild. Furthermore, many people can now do their own home testing and may not report the result to the health system, perhaps because they don't know how to or perhaps because they don't want to.

Workplaces across the country are having difficult continuing to function because of sick employees — flights are cancelled, hospitals are struggling doubly hard (more on hospitalizations in a minute). Here at the senior community, the dining room is closed, and this is due more to the lack of staff than it is to the desire to keep us all safe. We normally get our units cleaned once a week, and Henry and I have been doing our own cleaning for a couple of weeks now — I report this not to say it's a hardship, but just to say that the national trend is showing up in my life in this small way.

In NJ, the number of hospitalizations has also exceeded any prior peak — the current peak looks to be roughly 20% higher than the peak a year ago, and the present curve is still headed straight up.

Watching the maps in the NYT, it looks as though this has been proceeding across the country from east to west, and now most of the country seems to be in an urgent condition.

But let me pause to celebrate the vaccines, because while everybody seems to be getting infected, it is the unvaccinated who are packing the hospitals, and the unvaccinated who are dying. For many weeks, the Times has been updating curves of case and death rates for these two groups, and they consistently show that the unvaccinated are 5 times more likely to be ill and 13 times more likely to die. Dr Griffin likes to say that the public health messaging is “scaring the wrong people,” because those who have declined to be vaccinated aren’t listening and the vaccinated, who are listening intently and anxiously, have less to fear.

Here, again, there have been a small number of cases — 6, maybe? — over the past couple of months, and I haven’t heard of anyone becoming very ill. Since most people here are over 80, that’s another tribute to vaccination.

Somebody here sent email to a few people including an article from the Atlantic about the dire situation in hospitals. It made me wonder whether we shouldn’t revive some of the practices from early in the pandemic by which we expressed our gratitude to hospital workers — showing up to cheer at shift change or sending pizza or sandwiches to the hospital workers. Let’s see if anyone is interested in that thought — unlike me, many of them have local connections and may have an idea how we might proceed.

The other topic I’ve talked about in this journal is our national political situation, and since we’re just a few days after the anniversary of the 2021 assault on the Capitol, this is a good time to revisit that topic as well. Well. The Biden Administration has been having a lot of success, passing a couple of significant bills that have led to a strong economic recovery and rebuilding international ties. However, the GOP in state after state

continues its assault on voting — particularly on voting by poor people and people of color. Furthermore, they've been passing laws that would allow legislatures and local officials to override the vote and send their own chosen electors to the Electoral College. The Democrats in the Senate, with their razor-thin majority, will have to do something about the filibuster in order to pass some of the legislation coming out of the House that will protect voting rights.

The “insurrection” of January 6th was remembered in cities across the country, with rallies organized by Indivisible and other groups, and Princeton joined in. January 6th, as I probably noted last year, is my birthday. I've been telling people that since those insurrectionists broke my birthday, and I would have to change the way I observe it. Going to a rally for voter protection seemed perfect. The rally in Hinds Plaza, next to the Princeton Library, was co-sponsored by Indivisible and a local peace organization. We heard statements by Corey Booker and Bonnie Watson Coleman — Watson Coleman is the new Congressional Representative for Montgomery, since redistricting has reduced the size of Tom Malinowski's district, and I was glad to hear her strong statement. As I mentioned in an entry last year, she contracted covid while sheltering in the Capitol building, presumably from one of the GOP members who refused to wear masks. In her statement, she tied together the GOP's rejection of reality in two areas: science and public health guidance about the pandemic and Trump's so-called “Big Lie,” the lie that he was the rightful winner of the 2020 presidential election.

This is a photo of the rally taken by a photographer for NJ.com.



There were two speakers who impressed me particularly: Laura Zurfluh, of Indivisible Cranbury, and (I think) Reverend Lukata Mjumbe of the Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church. I didn't know anything about either of them at the time, and only now and I learning that the Witherspoon Street Church seems to be principally African-American. On their web site, I learn this: On March 10th 1836, colored members of the First Presbyterian Church (Nassau Presbyterian Church) in Princeton, New Jersey were dismissed to form "The First Presbyterian Church of Colour of Princeton".

But I want to say something personal about being at this rally. On a couple of occasions, listening to the speakers and the crowd, I found myself beginning to sob. This tells me just how frightened I really am, and just how moving it is to be along people who share my fears about the direction the GOP wants to take the country — toward minority rule, toward white supremacy. They have absolutely nothing to offer in helping us face global climate change, wealth inequality, health inequality, police violence, shootings of all sorts, opium addiction, and many other grave problems facing us. They don't seem to think any of these problems is even

interesting.

On the lighter side, I just started following @artistschiele and @artistmunch on Twitter, and my feed now includes a lot of gorgeous art, and not only by Schiele and Munch. Goodness, but twitter is full of surprises.