LIVING WITH COVID

The date I remember the most was Thursday, March 19, 2020. I was welcoming my evening Movie Club members at the Dixon Public Library, ready to energetically analyze "The Godfather." Disturbing news reports had been circulating the last few days concerning a possible new pandemic -- reported as originating in Wuhan, China that past December -- as rumors and fear began to spread both nationwide and around the world. Suddenly, I received an emergency fax shortly before 7:00 p.m. from the Solano County Library system headquarters: in bold capital letters, it urged immediate closure of all libraries and all workers were to be sent home! I told my bewildered club members the dire news, and that has been the last time I have seen any of them face-to-face.

[Earlier, in mid-February, my wife and I took a two-week Holland America cruise through the Panama Canal, which also stopped in several Central American countries. We felt completely safe, but every passenger was aware of extra hand-sanitizer stations on board, and signage reminding everyone to frequently wash their hands and cover their mouths if they coughed or sneezed. No face masks were issued at this point, and nobody got sick on the entire voyage. People followed on the emerging pandemic news with keen interest, particularly the reports of strange new illnesses on Princess Cruise Lines ships and others, such viral outbreaks causing early returns to port and/or quarantines. We were glad to have made it home safe and healthy on March 1!]

After March 19, everything here in Davis came to a virtual standstill. People stayed home from work. Stores and businesses shut down. Bars and restaurants shuttered. Our downtown streets were deserted. Freeways were mostly emptied. Medical facilities and grocery stores remained open, but panic buying led to a severe shortage of -- incredibly -- toilet paper! Next to vanish from the store shelves was hand-sanitizer, Clorox wipes, Lysol disinfectants, and other cleaning products. No one knew how fast the deadly new virus spread, but we only knew it attacked the respiratory system by breathing in infected droplets. World health experts were otherwise baffled. Next to close were our local schools, churches, movie theaters, and our public library. UC Davis followed by cancelling classes, then told all students who were able to return home to their families. The campus was soon locked down.

Meanwhile, expert immunologists went to work on developing a vaccine to combat the Covid-19 menace. Face masks in public, and social distancing of six feet from others in public, were now required. Older adults age 65+ , and those with pre-existing medical conditions, were discovered to be most at risk of getting very sick and even dying from the virus. (Later, it was found that 81% of the total U.S. Covid deaths were from these groups.)

Locally, people in Davis tried to make the best of being stranded at home. Many houses were thoroughly cleaned top to bottom for the first time in years, and long-delayed repairs and renovations were finally enacted. Garages were likewise totally cleaned out and reorganized. (Speaking for myself, I went mercilessly through the vast accumulations of my travels to 114 countries -- keeping only the most precious souvenirs and memorabilia. It actually took a few weeks to throw out all of the debris!) Many residents also relearned the joys of backyard gardening and landscaping. Neighbors rekindled relationships with neighbors. People now had much more time to interact with others than before, most not having to rush off to work, etc.

To no surprise, we learned in late April that our small group, two-week tour to Indonesia in June was cancelled.

The City of Davis discouraged Memorial Day picnics, and later cancelled its traditional Fourth of July fireworks celebrations. The Federal government sent out stimulus money, to keep our national economy alive, for many were either out of work or had their businesses shut down. The USPS, Amazon, FedEx, UPS and other delivery services thrived, however, as people ordered their items on-line. Restaurants offered pick-up at curb-side or even home delivery. Fast-food chains that offered drive-through services also did well. 'Big Box' stores like Wal-Mart, Target, and Home Depot did huge business, but many smaller stores struggled or simply went under. There was a shortage of cash, so people were urged to use touch-less credit card devices when paying in person. Public restrooms -- of those businesses deemed 'essential' -- were rigorously cleaned every hour. Those who could work from home on their computers and remotely network with their offices did just that, while public schools set-up home schooling lessons, with frustrating and limited success -- while private and parochial schools safely remained opened with effective, protective health measures for the students, whose age group was proven to be not at high virus risk. Meanwhile, 'Zoom' computer group conferencing for businesses became the new default. All the while, hair salons remained closed, so people either got rather shaggy or crudely cut each other's hair at home.

Being outdoors was true salvation for my wife and me, and we were forever thankful that we lived in a favorable year-round climate. We walked at least an hour a day, and bicycled an hour every day unless it was raining. I also did daily bending and stretching exercises, and used two, 10 lb. hand weights for thirty minutes of training. After dinner, I always walked an additional half-hour. When it got dark in October, I nightly observed the red planet Mars as it slowly arced across the sky, and beginning in January, I always looked for Orion's Belt. These evening walks were always peaceful and relaxing, yet I seldom saw any other walkers during the dark early evening months. Our National Parks were initially closed due to Covid restrictions, but later, more and more people nation-wide rediscovered the beauty of nature once the parks reopened. Yosemite even had to enact a reservation system, allowing only a few hundred visitors a day -- such was its popularity. [It fully re-opened on March 1, 2021.]

How did my wife and I typically spend our days? We joked that it was like the movie "Groundhog Day" with Bill Murray -- the same thing, over and over again! But compared to younger couples with children, we seniors suffered very little. We had our health, our finances were secure, and we didn't need to worry about losing our jobs. I missed my six volunteer jobs, and my part-time reference librarian work in Davis and Dixon, but we made the best use of our time during quarantine lock-downs. My wife did a lot of reading and exercising, and made dozens of fleece blankets for her community 'Project Linus' charity group. I likewise did a lot of reading and exercising, and wrote more than twenty-five new short stories. (I currently have twelve book collections on Amazon, and have written 110 stories in all genres so far, which you can read for free on my website: www.jackkarolewski.weebly.com -- Read "Survivor" for my pandemic-themed, fictional adventure!) I reorganized all of my numerous laptop computer files and photos. I am also happy to report that we avoided both excessive television viewing and over-eating/weight gain. Instead, we watched only one movie per night, and skipped the gloomy and often 'sensation over reason' network news programs -- preferring to read the BBC or the AP on-line for their less frantic daily reports.

I also took comfort in music to relax, especially my favorite songs from the 1960s. I later received a free, three-month subscription to Sirius XM satellite radio, so I discovered Channel 69 -- "Escape" -- which featured commercial-free 24/7 soft instrumental music. Its alluring motto was: "Now...more than ever...you need Escape..." And after my free trial expired, they gave me another three-months for only $2! I could write my short stories, do chores, nap, or simply daydream while gently listening to such perfect music.

A parched and windy August into September brought huge, smoky forest fires to Northern California, and Davis was under their toxic clouds for several days. Face masks now served a dual purpose for a while when venturing outdoors!

The summer of 2020 was also filled with political and racial unrest, resulting in some peaceful protests but also some violent rioting, arson, and looting in Portland, Seattle, New York, Minneapolis, Chicago, and Los Angeles. A new vocabulary of words like Anti-Fa, Black Lives Matter, cancel culture, social justice, white superiority, defund the police, etc. all crept into our national dialogue. In Davis, our gentle statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Community Park was gravely vandalized, and even our town's police headquarters had their front doors smashed in during those turbulent weeks.

The low point of the pandemic for many came in the dark and colder winter months. When would this all end? people wondered. Baggy sweat suits and pajamas became the new, everyday outfit for many. Mental health challenges arose, with boredom, forced isolation, depression, anxiety, insomnia, and the daily reminder of mortality all taking a grim toll. Some days went by productively, while other days dragged on and on. Watching the conflicting news reports on the spread of Covid made others paranoid with every fever, cough, or headache a possible sign that one had caught the deadly disease. Some people even feared going to see their doctor, believing that they would be exposed to Covid at the clinic. Teen suicides increased. Alcohol consumption went up. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Eve -- all basically went bust across the country, just like Easter had in the Spring.

Covid testing sites next emerged, with either a nasal swab while sitting in your car through a drive-in clinic, or a saliva test spitting into a test tube. The world opened or closed 'essential services' based on ICU hospital capacity. In California, a colored 'tier-system' was devised, to let each county decide how much social interaction and business re-openings were safe while still being face-masked and socially distanced. Meanwhile, restaurants continued to adapt by moving their dining tables outdoors under tents with thick plastic or plexi-glass walls/separators.

Nationwide, there was a unexpected puppy shortage, as people wanted the tactile, warm cuddle of a new pet. My wife and I cared for two female feral cats (both ear-tagged, to indicate they were already neutered and inoculated) whom we named Fraidy and Mittens. They came into our backyard one day looking for food and water, so we obliged. Over time, they grew to trust us, and came inside for short periods for brushing and petting -- a routine that continues to this day. I also noticed people in Davis, on our more wooded nature trails, taking up the fine art of bird-watching, complete with binoculars and bird identification guides.

Meanwhile, our daughter is at M.I.T., completing her Ph.D. in Chemical Oceanography through Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute near Falmouth, MA. She was due to graduate last Spring, but Covid's emergence has delayed her research and thesis by a year. She -- and other young people -- decry the wasted year of their budding lives. The enforced social isolation, the lack of regular dating and parties, the laboratory/classroom restrictions -- all have been frustrating. But she remains resilient and upbeat, as we frequently email and phone her to offer our love and support. Better days will return! we assured her.

In November, we had a Presidential election, with the media in a 24/7 frenzy, as both sides whipped up further toxic divisions among our citizenry. The result was less than a firm mandate, however, so our country remains virtually half-and-half split between liberals and conservatives -- the so-called Blue States and the Red States. Time alone will tell where we are headed as a nation. And will our post-Covid economic recovery succeed, and can we ever pay down our crippling and explosive National Debt?

The good news of the final arrival of Covid vaccines in mid-January, 2021, gave us the double-dose Pfizer (94% effective), and the double dose Moderna (95% effective). When my Kaiser Health Foundation announced it would vaccinate all of its members over age 65, I went immediately on the phone to snare an appointment. I waited on hold for four hours, but then got lucky, and was given my first dose of Moderna on January 17, and my second dose on February 14. However, these initial vaccine supplies nationwide sadly waxed and waned in delivery and distribution, as Federal, State, and County medical organizations were terribly uncoordinated -- frustrating most people with their being unable to book vaccine appointments, or with health provider phone lines and/or websites being overwhelmed and crashing.

My wife and I volunteered in Yolo County to help get people vaccinated at a temporary, drive-through clinic in the vast parking lots of Pioneer High School in Woodland. 100 volunteers like us distributed 1200 shots on one, 10 a.m.- 4 p.m. Saturday, while 150 volunteers like us distributed 2500 shots on another Saturday, three weeks later, from 10-5:30. People were so happy to finally get their vaccinations! My wife (as did all other volunteers, regardless of their ages) got her two doses of Pfizer during this time. [Our previously mentioned daughter on the East Coast is still awaiting her vaccination turn, however.]

As more and more states and businesses are gradually opening up again -- especially because millions of vaccine doses are now being given -- there is much hope and optimism that this awful Covid-19 ordeal will be largely overcome in the coming months. What I am looking forward to most is a resumption of international travel, but that depends a lot on how other countries around the world have tackled the virus and made such travel safe. Still, I remain confident of a return to much normalcy. We still don't know how long the vaccinations will provide the necessary anti-bodies against the virus, or whether we will need an annual booster shot. But life will go on, as it always does...We adapt, and we are resilient as a species!

Lastly, here is a comparison between the horrific 1918-1919 Spanish Flu epidemic and our current 2020-2021 Covid pandemic:

1918-1919 / 500 million caught the disease, which was almost one-third of the world's entire 1.7 billion population; of those, 50 million died -- 675,000 of those in the U.S.; The virus mostly killed those in their 20's, in the prime of life, in about four agonizing days; it was not possible for a vaccine to be developed back then, so the strain had to run its course and become inert naturally; the economy of the world was never shut down; face masks were eventually worn, but there were no social distancing, etc. regulations; life went on in spite, and the flu eventually went away. (Perhaps not surprisingly, very few books were written about this tragic scourge until many years later, as people initially wanted to simply forget the awfulness that had happened.)

2020-2021 / currently (world population is 7.9 billion), there are 221 million cases world-wide -- with 29.6 million of those being in the U.S.; world-wide deaths now stand at 2.67 million, with 536,000 deaths being in the U.S.; the vast majority of Covid deaths were in ages 65+ and in those with pre-existing conditions. Younger people were rarely at risk, and the majority of those of other ages who got the disease did not require serious care or hospitalization. They simply rested in isolation at home and recovered after several days of fever, coughing, headache, and muscle aches -- much like a really bad flu. Bed rest and fluids were later proven to be the ultimate cure for most of those infected.

Two books I would recommend regarding both epidemics, which ironically occurred almost exactly a century apart:

"Pandemic 1918: Eyewitness Accounts From the Greatest Medical Holocaust in Modern History" by Catharine Arnold (2018).

"Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live." by Nicholas A. Christakis (2020).

[By way of a final note, I personally know of no one who ever got sick from this dreadful disease, and for that I am truly thankful -- even as we deeply mourn all those who have died. And huge hugs of gratitude must go out to our tireless essential health care workers, First Responders, and scientists/immunologists who worked so hard to help us survive this unexpected and challenging year -- the not to be forgotten time 'living with Covid...']

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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