

The Long Reach of a Pandemic: No One is Immune

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The major national newspapers and some smaller regional ones are publishing before/after photos of streets that have been wiped clean of cars and people, showing blocks of shuttered businesses and often including some comment about how one can hear birds in urban areas or breathe more easily for lack of industrial and auto pollution. We mask- and glove-up to risk grocery shopping or have it delivered, pick up takeout at the curb, and engage in what one pundit called the “COVID swerve” when we come near someone else out for a walk. Those who can work from home or online are fortunate but still complain about boredom. Family doctors are engaged in various restructuring of practices in organizationally complicated ways, including doing much of our regular business by phone or screen. I used to suggest to residents that instead of asking patients to come in for a follow-up in a few weeks, just pick up the phone and call them. Now they do this as a matter of course.

In a little community of 120 people in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico, our nearest neighbors are a group of seven American Orthodox monks. Their small monastery has a lovely blue domed chapel filled with icons and incense (and, often, singing,) a community house for cooking and gathering, and their individual cells in the hills. The monastery sits in the middle of very old orchards which the monks have carefully pruned back to productivity. In years of good weather, they have an abundance of apples, peaches, apricots and occasionally cherries to harvest. But their garden is in a constant battle with frost, critters of all kinds, and, in the past few years, grasshoppers eating things down to the ground. They freeze large quantities of produce and fruit and have a well-functioning root cellar. They brew beer and hard cider and are moving toward renewable electricity.

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When I spoke to the abbot recently about how they were managing the pandemic, he said that they practice social distancing – from society – all the time. They are, after all, monks. They are not allowing visitors to come for Sunday services but otherwise follow their daily pattern of prayer and work. Their only contact with society was trips to the post office or occasionally to the local store. Their stored goods should carry them far. If any place in the world should be immune to the effects of the pandemic, I thought, it should be the monastery.

But the abbot told me that they were struggling because their chief source of revenue comes from supplying hand dipped beeswax candles to Orthodox churches throughout the country. Because the churches are all closed and cancelling orders for candles, their candle dipping has gone idle, and to make matters worse, just as they finished a new shed to accommodate increased production. Along with praying for church members and for the sick and dying in the world, the monks are praying for all of this to end. The burden of grief and the effects of almost everything in society coming to a halt even pervades rural canyons in very out of the way parts of the country. In fact, nothing is really out of the way.

My paternal grandmother, after she was widowed in 1929, gathered her eight children in a desperate flight from their home in Central Illinois back to the farm towns of Eastern Kansas where her family still lived. The younger children were parceled out to relatives and Jesuit boarding schools. The older children and my grandmother found work and lived in a small house in Kansas City. Farms were comparatively self-sufficient but were also experiencing falling demand for their wheat and livestock that threatened their mortgages and their future. The eastern edge of the Dust Bowl was less than a hundred miles away. My memories of my grandmother, who died when I was in kindergarten, are of a very quiet woman with a kind face who sat and watched us play. All I can think of now is that my

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grandmother didn't exhale for a decade after they moved to Kansas City. Every day began with worrying about her children—those who lived in the country and those who lived with her in the city—and whether they would ever be together again.

Our patients are not to that point yet, but things are moving fast. The Great Depression took years to reach its bottom so despair had years to grow deeper. The changes now are sudden and menacing and feel out of control. When we speculate that less densely populated areas of the country have structural immunity to the effects of the pandemic, we are shown repeatedly to be wrong. If we ask our patients what they are experiencing financially or emotionally at the moment – and we should - we'd better be prepared to listen to what they have to tell us. We can reassure and coach our patients about risk factors or staying healthy and being careful. What we can't do is assume that any of them are untouched. If monks are affected, everyone is.

We will survive and most of us will find a way back to something stable but it will not be where we started. Churches – or people – will buy candles again and the fruit will restock the freezers and root cellars. If you need reassurance, read [The Plague](#) by Camus or [Disturbing the Peace](#) by Vaclav Havel or almost anything by Thomas Merton. There are far too many metaphors about resilience and hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution to not be reassured. If the 1930's were the Great Depression, these times today are the Great Anxiety. Every day brings a new worry, just like for my grandmother. Her children made it but carried their experiences with them for their lifetimes. Our children and grandchildren, too, may use the lessons they learn today to remake a more just society and a more equitable world. That may sound like cold comfort, but this is the time of year when all religions and cultures offer prayers for renewal and bounteous crops. Belief and hope can carry us far. The monks get up every morning at 4AM to pray for us. We should welcome their prayers.

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