

COVID: face-to-face

When I first learned of it, it had not yet been named—a strange new viral outbreak half a world away. At the moment, I was thousands of miles from home myself, in Oaxaca, Mexico, vacationing with members of my husband Glenn’s family in late January, 2020. At night we’d gather around a long table in the charming house we’d rented for the week, and my sister-in-law, Lily, would check in by WeChat with her daughter Joey, back on Long Island. There’d be greetings all around, a lot of waving to grandbaby Leo, and then the two of them would fall into conversation in their native Chinese dialect. But an urgency in Joey’s voice and volume one evening drew my attention. Turned out my niece was begging her mother to find a supply of face masks—as many as she could buy—and send them to her, so she could then ship them to friends and family in Hong Kong, where there was a critical shortage. Joey had encountered sold-out shelves at her local CVS. Lily complied with her request, adding Oaxacan *farmacias* to her daily tourist explorations.

My focus had been squarely on getting ready for our Mexico trip when the first case of the mystery virus was confirmed in the U.S., on January 21st, just days before our departure. If I heard that ominous report amid the pre-flight prep and packing, it didn’t register. Nor was I aware that global travel restrictions had been enacted on February 2nd, the day we flew home. Our high-anxiety, near-miss connection between Houston and Newark airports had left me drained; I’d sworn off flying altogether. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a public health emergency the following day. Still, I remained oblivious—de-compressing—the high color and heat of Oaxaca fading in the bleached, wintry chill of home.

I started writing about our trip, hoping to archive a trove of impressions, reflections and anecdotes before they too ebbed away. I planned to share them, piece

by piece, with the writers group at the library. I'd been a member for several years, meeting Wednesday afternoons in the same room where I worked and chatted with a great bunch of needle-crafters on Thursday mornings. Albert Wisner Library had become the center of my social life, the jigsaw-puzzle table its sometime hub.

By March COVID and CORONA were headline terms, and I was tuned in to every scary development. Cases of the virus, already running rampant in New York, spiked alarmingly, crippling the city and the entire tri-state area. When the writers group met on the 11th, I was still revising my final Oaxaca chapter—*Houston's Own Ring of Hell*. Next day I sent an email to the group, seeking consensus, suggesting it might be wise to stop meeting in the board room for a while. Within the hour, the library broadcast its own email—a blanket cancellation of all in-house programs until further notice. Had we felt the Ides of March upon us?

Shortages cropped up: a scarcity of toilet paper and hand sanitizer, a critical lack of protective gear in hospitals, no stockpiles to be plumbed. It wasn't long before there was a scramble for masks, an echo of Lily's scouring the neighborhoods of Oaxaca. Several friends started sewing their own; face-mask patterns proliferated online even as elastic cord went out-of-stock. TV ads touted hi-tech, copper-infused, no-fail brands at two-for-one bargains. I had a half-full box of dust masks, the very lowest level of protection, in a bin of old supplies; should I take them over to Saint Anthony's anyway? Glenn dug up two N-95s, leftover from a pack of five he'd bought to work on some project. He drew a smiley grin on one and big lips on the other with a Sharpie and we started wearing them, declaring ourselves Priority One.

The urgency to mask up caught on quickly, if not universally. At first I felt compelled to offer a muffled greeting to every person I encountered on our dwindling round of errands, seeking some exchange, an acknowledgement of camaraderie:

“We’re all in this together, aren’t we?” At the same time, I eyed bins of produce warily, as I did cereal boxes, doorknobs, and the contents of our mailbox. Whose hands to trust? Sanitized or not? All suspect. In short order, my hale and hearty goodwill withered. I slogged up and down aisles, eyes to the floor, following the arrows, stood waiting on vinyl footprints, gauging 6ft distances. I barely nodded to acquaintances—got in and out as quickly as possible, amenities abandoned and be damned. Eye contact itself felt dangerous. It was not how I wanted to live.

Hunkering down was not the problem. Glenn was retired, and I’d worked from home for years. Sheltering in place was hardly antithetical to our laid-back lifestyle. Volunteering ground to a halt; the Repair Café, Too Good to Toss and Earth Day cancelled. I envisioned undertaking all the projects that I’d put on hold or shelved due to loss of momentum. The suspension of the needle-crafters gaggle was the beginning of its dissolution, but a member of the writers group offered to host meetings on Zoom; we could submit our “pages” by email. A number of us tried and found the plan workable. The Warwick Valley Chorale had no such option though. With the spring concerts cancelled, Glenn’s Tuesday night rehearsals ceased. The chorale was then hit as hard as possible when its beloved director for over 30 years was hospitalized with COVID. Weeks later, he succumbed—the first person close to us we lost. Several more chorale members would die of the virus in the months ahead.

The relentless toll was at first sobering, then devastating—incomprehensible. Faces layered with polyester gauze or fabric, a sense of anonymity prevailed in public. At home, a numbing ennui sapped any impulse to make use of my unencumbered time. I heard of house-cleaning sprees, but undertook none. Anxiety reigned: every cough, headache, wheeze or hint of overheating was suspect—noted, analyzed, waited out with fingers crossed. We had real scares. When Glenn’s temperature spiked for

several days in a row I assumed the worst, but he finally agreed to go to the ER and tested negative for COVID, Lyme, or any other culprit. He rushed me to a CVS in Ringwood following another brief family getaway and the leap-through-hoops it took to schedule a test. It came back negative but I spent a miserable week in bed with a likely case of RSV, the toddler virus. (Leo had had the sniffles.) Every outside venture had a whiff of danger. A slip of caution could land you in the ICU or worse. “The Sopranos” had a scheme for it—*going to the mattresses*.

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A fuzzy, rainbow-tinted corona surrounding the moon is a sign of permutations in the atmosphere; in winter it means snow, and I start to fret. How much? How heavy? Attached to VIRUS, CORONA is a strictly bad omen. Even after we’d had all our shots, the atmosphere was suspect, divisive. Continued masking seemed the safest course, but it had its own escalating strictures, as mutations with Greco-alphanumeric labels spread with ever greater ease. Toss those pleated blue surgical masks and forget the color-coordinated, outfit-matching cloth variety. Only industrial-grade masks were trustworthy—the most uncomfortable of the lot. Hot, hard to breathe, too tight, sliding down or catching in my hair, snagging on my glasses, constantly repeating myself, can’t wear earrings. I stood firmly behind the need to keep on masking, but I had issues.

Are we there yet? Two years on, the face of COVID has changed. We can show our own again in most places, but I still carry masks in my purse or pocket. They’re not the high-test kind, and far from brand-new. They’re the charade variety—they make it seem a little safer in a crowded room. I feel like a pariah though. Will the unmasked crowd assume I’m unvaccinated, immunocompromised or just paranoid? Lucky is more like it. Neither Glenn nor I have contracted the virus—yet. Among our

family and friends, we're in the minority. We've still got a number of government-issue test kits on hand and no doubt I'll find myself standing over one again, watching for that tell-tale second stripe to appear, the kitchen timer ticking away.

Hugging is back in style but tentative, not held so long or close. The chorale performed for the holidays last year and again this spring—in masks, as they'd been for months, rehearsing. The writers group has grown and split in two—one lot meeting back in the board room, the other still on Zoom. The Repair Café has resumed, with masks required for fixers and seekers both. Too Good to Toss just held its comeback—its biggest donation-and-giveaway weekend yet.

BEFORE and *AFTER* will mark our psyches from now on, *US* and *THEM* leaving ugly scars. There are COVID victims yet in ICUs, a daily average of 500 dead before their time in this country alone. MONKEY POX has grabbed the headlines, harking back to AIDS and the chaos of its own cultural divide. A century ago the SPANISH FLU killed my great-grandmother on my mother's side in her mid-40s, along with millions worldwide. It originated in Kansas, but Spain got blamed. Bats? Wet markets? Evil laboratory plots or fatal errors? Maybe it's the escalating heat that caused COVID or maybe it'll cure it. Echoes and ironies abound. "End times," I've told Glenn more than once, dreading I'm right and hoping I'm wrong in equal measure. With any luck, I'll never know.

M. Bono
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