

Corona Chronicle

Week 39

Wednesday, Dec. 9th

It suddenly seems as though the walls are closing in on us; the enemy (the virus) is getting closer and stronger – it is hitting home. Last Wednesday the number of fatalities from the coronavirus had reached 271,000 - and now, one week later, we are at 286,000. Yesterday morning Mark and I were awakened in the wee hours by a phone call from a congregant whose husband – a personal friend of ours and also the vice-president of our temple board of directors – was being “worked on” in the ER of St. Anne’s Hospital. His heart had stopped, and the doctors were attempting to revive him. They were not successful. At the age of 66, Daniel was one of our “younger” congregants, and he was by far the most learned Jewishly, having been the son of a rabbi and having attended Jewish day school while he was growing up. He was a gentle man with a lovely voice, and we could always count on him to help us out with rituals that required advanced synagogue skills, such as chanting from the Torah or the Megillah. We are deeply saddened by this loss, and our community is diminished.

Now we don’t know whether Daniel’s death was related to the coronavirus or not; Daniel had had a case of “double pneumonia” last January. No one was suspecting the coronavirus at that point. The official cause of death was heart failure. But one can’t help but wonder.

In addition, we have recently had two congregants in the hospital with the virus, who, thankfully, are now recuperating at a rehab facility. May they both have a full and speedy recovery! [*Updating this on Friday: I am very sad to say that one of these congregants was our longtime member and board member, Judy Berg, who died on Thursday, and whose funeral we have, alas, just returned from – may her memory be for a blessing.*]

Up until the High Holidays, we seemed to have escaped as a community unscathed. Mark and I had only performed one funeral of a victim of the virus, early in the spring, and that was for another community whose rabbi had recently retired – not one of our own members.

I have been reading the testimonies of nurses around the country. It is heartbreaking – both in terms of the suffering and sorrow they have witnessed, and in terms of the sheer exhaustion that they face both physically and emotionally. In

some ways it is worse than dealing with casualties of war – because there you can at least hold the hand of a dying patient. Some of these medical personnel have to wear the equivalent of hazmat suits, even carrying their own oxygen for breathing inside them. All that the patients can see are their eyes, and one nurse mentioned that she had a terrible headache by the end of every day because of the weight of the gear strapped on the upper part of her body and her head.

And yet still, many on the outside of the hospitals who don't see these casualties and these struggles for life up close still do not believe in how severe this danger is; they still maintain that requiring people to wear masks in public places is an infringement on their "liberty." They talk about having gone to fight for our country overseas to defend our liberty – so how can we take it away at home?

Did they fight for the right to spread disease? To sicken and kill their neighbors?

From a clergyman's point of view, we are faced with smaller, but still serious questions: How do we comfort the bereaved? We are warned against hugging – we cannot lend an actual shoulder to cry on. Yes, many funeral homes set up virtual funerals so that large numbers of people can "attend" the goodbye rituals of those they love, and there are now virtual shiva's as well. But it is not the same. If it is comforting at all, it is at best lukewarm comfort.

Mark and I have been staying out of hospitals since the pandemic became known. We could not forgive ourselves if we infected one another or bereaved our son, just on the verge of starting his young adult life.

But of course no matter how conscious and careful you try to be, there is no guarantee that you won't pick up the virus through a quick trip to the supermarket or to CVS. I recently heard of two older women who were both infected by the same cleaning woman – who displayed no symptoms herself.

Now I don't feel so bad about all the many corners full of dust bunnies in my house.

Meanwhile, the number of people in this nation who still don't believe in the certified presidential election results...it is just mind-boggling. Michigan's Secretary of State, Jocelyn Benson, who is, as part of her job, the state's Chief Elections Officer, was visited this past Saturday night by dozens of angry protestors armed with bullhorns and signs, yelling across her lawn, "Stop the Steal!" She was just finishing decorating her Christmas tree and was about to settle

down with her young son to watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* when the ruckus started.

Yes, we should be allowed to assemble and practice free speech in this nation – but to try to intimidate officials at their place of residence – this is going too far. Some news reports of the incident maintained that some of the protesters were armed. I watched a video of it (made by one of the protestors), but as it was so dark, I did not see evidence of weapons – just bullhorns.

At the other end of the spectrum, *Time Magazine* is reporting this week that the federal government has apparently been withholding contact information on more than 600 parents of immigrant children who were separated from them at the Southern U.S. border between 2017 and 2018. In the meantime, some of these children, who were taken away from their parents as infants, cannot even recognize their parents after all this time. Even the older children who are finally being reunited with their parents are having a difficult time reestablishing their relationship with them. Some say that this “withholding” was not *intentional*; the government personnel charged with finding the parents simply did not think to contact the Department of Justice’s Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), which was the one place where phone numbers and other contact information had been kept. Others of course, believe that this was all part of the effort to deter more families from trying to seek asylum here – the prospect of having their children taken from them and never seeing them again.

What is the truth? I feel flabbergasted that one side does not believe the officials who are charged with certifying election results, or believe what the CDC is warning them about the coronavirus – and yet I myself do not believe much of what other officials in the government put forth on issues such as the treatment of asylum-seekers, or on the safety of fracking.

How can we get back to a consensus of trust in our elected officials and in the agencies that they appoint? Not that there ever has been a total consensus amongst the American people about anything. But it will be difficult if not impossible for us to successfully address the very real dangers we face as a nation (and around the globe) as long as there continues to be this level of distrust between the “red” and the “blue” sides of our populace. We have had terrible fires raging across the West; a great number of floods and other storm-related disasters across the Southeast and Midwest; and now real sickness and death ravaging every state in the nation. And it is still not enough, for too many people, to get them to take Science seriously.

Yesterday was my 61st birthday, which I was looking forward to celebrating in a quiet way with Mark and Lev. But the day started out in such a heartbreaking way. Nonetheless, I baked myself an apple cake (a tried and true recipe of my mom's), and made poached salmon for dinner – a favorite of us all in our home.

After dinner, while Mark washed the dishes, I played my “new” (45-year old) piano, which was recently given to me by a generous family in Andover MA (their cantor, a colleague of mine, let it be known that he had a family looking for a good home for their piano). The piano movers came last Thursday, and they also took away the 80-year old piano that I have been *shlepping* around the country for over 30 years. I believe the last move from Long Island to Fall River was too much for it. Last year I had asked Mark for my birthday present to get a piano tuner to our home to begin work on it. The tuner told us that something in it was very broken – not worth fixing. So it had been holding up family pictures, vases of flowers and candles for all these years since we moved to Fall River, but was unplayable. My grandparents had bought this piano sometime around 1940, if not earlier, for their two daughters to take lessons, and it was subsequently in my own parents' home when I was growing up, and later it came to be mine as an adult. So you could say I was attached to it. But, sad as I was to see it go, knowing that it was *not* going to a “good home,” but rather to a dump of some sort, it is now a pleasure to have a piano that I can actually *play*. I dug out an old tattered book of classical piano favorites (“dumbed down” for non-advanced players like me), and now our pandemic isolation is beginning to be accompanied by Bach, Mozart and Beethoven.

To switch from classical music to classical *art* – there is a word that comes to my mind for this period we are living through: *chiaroscuro*, an Italian word that has to do with the interplay of light and shadow in a painting. Our days are so filled now with this interplay of the deepest of shadows, of sadness, of suffering, of foreboding, on the one hand; and with *light* – the inspiring tales of heroism (think of the teachers and medical personnel and of other essential workers), and of generosity on the part of so many ordinary people who are reaching out to help the growing numbers of their fellow Americans who have lost their jobs or their homes, or who do not have the resources to feed their families.

Yesterday I went walking in a part of the Bioserve where I had never been before – on the “Edmond House Trail” (near the conjunction of Freetown, Fall River and Dartmouth). The afternoon was quite cold, and the woods were somewhat

melancholy; but still I loved the quiet there. You could see plenty of evidence of humans having been there recently in the dirt-bike tracks – but I saw not a soul in the woods. At least not a *human* soul. Somehow I can't help feeling that every little bird or squirrel, even the moss growing on a stone at the bottom of a tree has a kind of a soul – or perhaps I should say, rather, that a *soul-force* runs through all of God's creation. I love the way it is put in the *El Malei* (the memorial prayer) that is chanted at every funeral and at every *Yizkor* service – *v'yitzror bitzror hachayim* – we ask that the soul of the departed be “bound up in the bond of Life.” I think of this as the Big Soul that holds us all.

Tomorrow night is the first night of Chanukah. We begin with just the one small light (along with the *shamash*, the helper candle), burning against the greater darkness. But the light keeps getting greater every night. May we all keep moving towards the light, knowing, nonetheless, that the light and the darkness in our lives will always go hand in hand.



December 8th walk on the Edmond House Trail, SE MA Bioreserve, Fall River