

Adapted from the “Chambers Christmas Newsletter 2020”

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Early in 2020, Bryan was getting ready to conduct a criminal jury trial—nothing unusual for a superior court judge. A week or so before the trial, he met with the attorneys involved and was informed by the prosecutor that one of their witnesses might wear a facemask to the trial. The witness was a physician apparently of Asian descent and accent. Although the request seemed a bit unusual at the time, Bryan was aware of news stories then beginning to circulate about some kind of virus affecting Wuhan, China. Also, he remembered the H1N1 scare of years past that was a big concern in Asia but never really took hold in the United States. Bryan told the prosecutor the witness was free to wear a mask in court if he chose to do so. During jury selection, one of the potential jurors, a pilot, requested to be excused so that she could continue training on some transcontinental jet. She also explained that she had recently returned from China. Bryan excused the juror and thought just a moment about the mysterious new virus and what could happen. Soon, he had dismissed those thoughts and concentrated on the trial. That trial would be the last jury trial tried in Gila County for several months.

Within a few weeks, a handful of cases of what came to be known as COVID-19 began to appear and then significantly spread in many areas of the country. Initially, Arizona seemed to largely be spared from the virus but not from its effects. As people feared the worst, like other places in the country, there was a run on commodities in our community. Walking through grocery stores in early spring seemed like something from a disaster movie. The shelves containing essential commodities like meat, milk, eggs, bread, beans, and rice were bare. Toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and hand sanitizer were practically non-existent. As soon as masked grocery workers would bring out goods to restock the shelves, concerned shoppers would converge on the newly stocked shelves and empty them. Occasionally, we would see swarms of vehicles unusually converge on convenience stores based upon the rumor that they were about to receive a shipment of toilet paper or some other essential item.

Soon, our governor announced a temporary closing of the public schools and a lockdown. The temporary school closing was extended—at least for in person education. Martha’s schools hurriedly began something called distance learning. At first, teachers prepared paper packets of homework for their students to complete at home. Neither the schools nor the students were prepared for this abrupt change. For Martha, this meant trying to come up with meaningful at home music assignments for approximately 700 students ranging kindergarten to sixth grade.

Thomas was in his last semester of schooling. He turned twenty-two in April. Twenty-two is the cutoff age for students receiving special education services. Although Thomas has many of the social challenges associated with autism, he still likes being with other people. The social aspects of school were probably the most significant for him. He and Martha both dutifully made sure that he December 2020 completed his homework packets, but they were no substitute for the social contact he lost when the schools closed. It all seemed to be a very anticlimactic end to a nineteen-year scholastic experience that began shortly before he turned three.

Even before the lockdown began, the church announced that meetings in our chapels would be temporarily suspended. We were authorized to hold worship services in our home. We sincerely missed seeing our many friends at church, but as we met together each Sunday morning in our front room, we gained a new appreciation for the fundamentals of our faith. We discovered that these fundamentals are as relevant—perhaps even more relevant—during the uncertainties brought on by disasters than they are in more normal times. While we do not claim to have seen any visions and we are far from perfect, we certainly felt the fulfillment of Jesus's declaration that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Matthew 18:19-20. During the months of home church, our home, and in particular our living room, became a little more like what it was always supposed to be.

As the lockdown continued, we tried to limit our contact with the outside world as much as possible. Bryan still went to work, but soon began covering his face. By June, the Arizona Supreme Court had issued a face covering mandate for all people entering court facilities. Still, he had little face to face contact with other court staff. Court hearings became more virtual which brought the challenge of learning how to do the same things differently, sometimes with new technology.

Martha tried to limit her shopping to times she thought the stores would be less crowded, and she tried to shop less often. Most restaurants were closed, but even when they began to partially open trying to follow social distance requirements, we tried to limit ourselves to take out services.

Eventually, we began to venture out more in the public. It seemed a bit surreal. Some people seemed to be going about life as though nothing different had happened. Bryan imagined whether we might have felt a little like one of those Japanese World War II soldiers emerging from a Pacific Jungle cave years after the war ended and learning that the war had long ago ended. It appeared as though some people seemed to have been living as though there was no pandemic.

As the year passed, the virus increasingly became a political issue. Rather than consider that people wearing masks were merely trying to lessen the possibility that they would either transmit or be infected by the virus or were at least trying to be polite to those who believed that mask wearing was necessary, many people viewed wearing a mask as

some sort of political statement. Having friends and family on all sides of this issue, we do not intend to make any political statements in this newsletter, but continue to use facemasks in public settings in case it might help and as a courtesy to those around us who think it may.

Fortunately, we do not believe that any of us have contracted COVID-19. We are aware of a few family members who had non-life-threatening cases. (One family member might have had it early on before testing was widely available.) No family member appears to have suffered any serious health consequences. We are, however, mindful that many people around the world have been and are severely impacted. Whether or how COVID-19 compares to other diseases, pandemics or disasters will be debated for years to come, but to those who have lost a loved one, job, or opportunity, its effects are real. Our prayers have and continue go out to all who have been so negatively affected. At the same time, we are grateful that the pandemic has not been as devastating as it could have been.

So, while we have so far been spared the most devastating effects of COVID-19, it is something that seems to have impacted and continues to impact almost every area of our lives.

It is interesting how something so small that it cannot be seen by the naked eye can have such an overwhelming effect on the world. Bryan had a college roommate who used to recite a version of the Hughes Mearns' nonsensical poem Antigonish.

Yesterday, upon a stair,
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today.

I wish that man would go away.

With COVID-19, that nonsensical poem might begin to make sense. Or perhaps, maybe it still makes no sense. Either way, we hope and pray that the COVID-19 Man goes away in 2021, and we wish all a very merry Christmas and a prosperous and healthy new year.

Merry Christmas,

-Bryan, Martha, Hank, Katy, Millie, Riley, and Thomas