

What Now?

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 26 May 2020 09:43 - Last Updated Tuesday, 26 May 2020 10:44



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I never thought I'd say it, but I miss the early days of coronavirus. Those halcyon days of yore – a couple of months ago – when we were all intensely focused on “flattening the curve.” We had a clear purpose back then. A goal. A mission. We were united in that mission – as a community, a country, a world! – and it felt good.

The platitudes were warm and cozy, wrapping around us like a fuzzy blanket. We just had to “hunker down,” “shelter in place,” “stay at home,” “be safe,” and everything would be okay. We were “all in this together,” and we would surely come through it “better and stronger than before.”

Oh, and back then it seemed there was an end in sight. My imagined “all clear” was early May, but your mileage may vary. The point is that this thing felt finite. Like an aberration. Just a temporary interruption in our regularly scheduled program.

But now . . . *what*, exactly? I keep reading articles about the New Normal, but the phrase is no longer in scare quotes. No longer ironic. Suddenly – though it actually crept up on us slowly – we're no longer just *getting through something*. Instead, it feels more like *something is through*. Finished. Kaput. Like the old world is just *gone* – poof! – and the new world has yet to define itself.

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As pregnant with dazzling possibility as it is – this moment they’re calling The Great Pause – it is not my comfort zone. Historians may one day look back on 2020 with 20/20 vision, but living it in *real time* feels like flying blind.

I don’t think I’m alone. I don’t think I’m the only one who’s not quite sure what she should be doing.

Our local economy has reopened – sort of – but I’m uncertain of the protocol. In some camps, dining and shopping and group revelry have resumed in full force, while in other camps, such behavior is anathema. Shameful. I know this, because those camps are making their feelings known – in no uncertain terms – all over social media.

On Facebook, there’s a large contingent – mostly older, higher risk (Covid-wise), lower risk (finance-wise) folks – admiring each other for “staying home,” while complaining about those who aren’t. When they *do* venture out, on the occasional toilet paper run or whatnot, these people rush home to report on the *unbelievable* number of cars on the road, the *outrageously* crowded parking lots, and the dearth of face masks they encountered in Aisle 7 at Publix. Then their fellow stay-at-homers gather ‘round to cluck like hens about everybody who’s doing “the reopening” wrong. Often, these people are wearing masks in their profile pics.

On the flip side, you have the Freedom Fighters, those who have somehow mistaken their more anxious, more careful fellow Americans for enemy combatants in an imaginary war to strip them of their liberties. These folks go where they want, do what they want, and post about it on Facebook, flaunting their unmasked mugs like badges of honor. They fancy themselves mavericks and tend to think Dr. Fauci and Bill Gates are in cahoots to take over the world. Their profile pics often include the Gadsden flag. Don’t tread on them.

Somewhere between the hyper-critical, hyper-vigilant mother hens and their cavalier, coiled-up counterparts is – I think – where most of us currently live. We’re ready to go out, we *want* to go out, but we’re not sure we *should* go out . . . or how to behave once we get there.

My daughter and I dipped our toes in the water of “society” last weekend, heading downtown to Plums for brunch. We sat outside on the patio, where the tables were well-spaced and the

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servers wearing masks. It was heaven being out amongst fellow humans, with the river breeze on our unmasked faces. (It's hard to eat in a mask.) Later, we strolled over to Common Ground for some gelato, and there were people on the porch wearing masks. I can't be sure, but I think they gave us the stink eye.

(That's what I hate most about masks. You can't read people's expressions. I also hate that feeling that I'm suffocating to death, but one doesn't like to complain when there's a pandemic afoot.)

My book club has been meeting weekly via Zoom – not always to talk about books, just to keep each other company. It's been fun, but we're starting to wonder when it might be safe to meet in person again. Though we're all 32 in our minds, the youngest member of our club is actually 50 – several in their 60s – so we're not necessarily “low risk.” Still, we're a small group, in decent health, and I'm guessing we may soon throw caution to the wind.

Meanwhile, comes word from the Church Choir circuit – yes, there's a circuit! – that it won't be safe to sing in a choir until there's a widely available Covid vaccine *and* an effective treatment. Apparently, singing together in close proximity is about the surest way to spread a virus. (Science says so. Google it.) They're estimating it will be 18-24 months before choirs sing together again. Whether you sing in a choir – like I do – or just enjoy choral singing, this is an enormous loss. In my opinion, the great choral composer John Rutter wasn't exaggerating when he said, “a church or a school without a choir is like a body without a soul.”

Speaking of which . . . nobody really knows what to do about church *or* school. I think churches are now “allowed” to open – they've recently been deemed “essential” by the president – and some are doing so. Others are holding out until things seem safer. My church is one of those, and I appreciate this conscientious approach. Our virtual services are lovely and so very convenient. I can watch them on my phone, any time! But I'm not going to lie; I spend too much time in the virtual realm already. Church took me out of it. And without the discipline and fellowship of weekly choir practice and congregational worship, I feel myself slipping away, backsliding into the world of Sunday morning brunch and Meet the Press, a world where pleasure and politics crowd out spirituality – the world I left behind when I returned the church 15 years ago. This is on me, not my church, and I will have to address it. But I'm getting all too comfy in this worldly world, and I find myself praying with the psalmist, “How long, Lord?”

And what about school? How will that work in the fall? The recently-released CDC guidelines include the wearing of masks, no sharing of supplies, repeated disinfecting of surfaces, staggered arrivals and schedules, daily temperature checks, no field trips or assemblies, and a

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host of other suggestions that make my mind reel . . . and make me grateful I no longer have a child in school. Of course, we have our own concerns, with a daughter who's supposed to start Clemson in August. Will it actually happen? And, if so, how? Will she have a normal freshman year in any recognizable sense? And, the crucial question: Will there be football? (Hey, it's Clemson. You gotta ask!)

So many questions, so few answers. It's unsettling. In this issue, you'll find essays by writers who thrive on "unsettling" – who embrace the unknown, and unknowable, with gusto. As I prepared these essays for publication, they inspired me and gave me courage. I hope they do the same for you.