

DIARY OF A
WORLD PANDEMIC

Orange County, California
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A Personal Account

C. L. SMYTHE

PART IV

MONITORING RESCINDED

Back to Business As Usual. . .?

Selections from a Daily Log

WEEK 21

DAY 141

SUNDAY, AUGUST 2

This morning, the show *Sunday Morning* aired a somewhat funny (but not really) segment in which one of their correspondents suggested a disbelief that the month of August was actually here. “What happened to June and July,” he queried? It immediately brought to mind my opening paragraph of yesterday’s journal entry which alluded to the sameness of every day as tantamount to the loss of ability for one to mark time. This was a reminder to me that we are all in this pandemic together. However widespread our physical locations, even if unknown to one another, we often share the same human emotions and needs.

Another segment of this show reminded me that three weeks ago, I indulged myself in a bit of a rant after being hugged by a person who was pretty much a total stranger. I was horrified! At that time, my question was, “*Who* still hugs in the social/medical climate of today?” I never did figure that one out. . .but now another question arises, *Why* still hug in the social/medical climate of today?

This morning that same question was posed. This particular segment was introduced with a film clip, one which had gone viral on the internet. . . but, one that I had not seen. It depicted a quartet of babies, perhaps 12–15 months old, engaged in a hug fest. . .again and again, they turned to each other reaching their arms up to hug. So, what causes this specific behavior, so apparent in these tiny little souls—this seemingly natural response to other humans? I’m sure there are many answers. Adults in the environment modeling that same behavior ranks pretty high with me, but this program looked to another culprit. . .Oxytocin! This is the hormone that is released by the Pituitary gland when a newborn baby breast feeds. Although the main purpose for this hormone speaks to maintaining the survival of the human race (sexual response), it also becomes active when people cuddle and hug. . . because of this, it is often referred to as the

“Love” hormone. . .I think of it, in part, as the glue to bonding. Oxytocin is a feel good hormone that gives us the sensation of safety, peace, and well-being. . .of connection and closeness. So, it’s not just a cliché to say, “I need a hug.” It is a genuine human need.

This story went on to point out that the need to stay masked and to stand no closer than six feet away from each other, cannot possibly be emotionally healthy. . .and yet, it *is* necessary. So what can we do about this? How can our human need for “warm fuzzies” be transmitted in a world without touch?

The experts on the subject had several answers for this question. . .none ideal, but a start. One talked about learning new behaviors that have the potential to provide connection, saying that eye contact would be very important.

In lieu of hugging another person when we meet, as was my *modus operandi* in greeting in the days of yesteryear, I’ve taken to making eye contact and hugging myself as a symbol of a *virtual* hug for them. It turns out that even hugging yourself (I would guess especially as a message of warmth to others) can be beneficial in releasing bits of this necessary feel good hormone.

Another way of tapping into this hormone which has of late has been missing in action, is the small talk we engage in with others. Our neighborhood Friday Night Asphalt parties are a good example of this. Although we definitely don’t touch, and we sit so far away from each other that often hearing what the others have to say is a problem. . .there are tremendous feelings of warmth emitted. Folks have told us that Friday has become the day that each of them looks forward to. . .our gatherings have set it apart from every other day of the week.

I also found that I got feelings of warmth and bonded friendship though the text chat group, my girlfriends and I formed early in this pandemic. Sadly, lately it’s dropped off. I guess everything gets old and stale. . .

So *why* do we still feel the need to hug. . .even when hugging holds a bit of danger? The answer is human connection. . .an element that is even more important in a world where everything seems less stable, secure, and certain than ever before. . .and, sadly, an element which is apparently now only available at a premium.

Another one of the experts, displayed models of safe(r) hug positions. The face-to-face hug is done very quickly with masked faces turned as far away from each other as possible. . . before disengaging and moving away. Then there is the adult/child hug, with no bending down, but hugging the shorter child to the mid-section of your body. And last, is the back-hug, with one person standing behind the other to hug—no face-to-face.

To hug or not to hug is undoubtedly a personal decision for each one of us. Although I *do* feel the need for a hug, I know that I'm not ready to reengage in this behavior at this point. . .or maybe even ever. But as a step forward, perhaps today is the day I will reengage my friends in daily text exchanges. . .at a distance!

DAY 142

MONDAY, AUGUST 3

Just when we think it's safe to go out. . .or at least safer, we get hit by the reality of this dire situation. For a couple of weeks, the numbers of new COVID-19 cases have been steadily waning in Orange County. It was beginning to feel good checking into the OC Health website each day to find lower and lower numbers. . .500, 400, and finally 200 new cases in a day (remember we'd had more than 1,500 new cases in Orange County at our peak a few weeks ago, so this was a definite improvement!) Is this what has been referred to as "flattening the curve," I ask myself as hope raises it ever optimistic head.

Yesterday, my small bubble of euphoria was burst when those numbers soared once again to over 600. What's up. Why all this up and down action?

Truly I don't know the answer. . .maybe nobody does. But, yesterday, an information ribbon running below a sports program telecast read that with more than 150,000 deaths in the USA, we now hold the record over all other countries for COVID-19 related deaths. Further, I read that health officials are expecting another 20,000 Americans to die from the Corona Virus and complications before the end of August. . .according to this report, the disease is (almost to a case) being spread by asymptomatic folks at parties and other gatherings. Hmmm. . .I don't know, but I think there is a message in there!

I know we have a higher population than most countries, meaning more people crammed into smaller spaces in parts of the US, and which could account for higher numbers, but we also have the most money, the greatest technology, and the best resources. How can it be that we are in such a state?

Well, for whatever reason, apparently we are! The situation has become so traumatic that our young people are making the decision not to procreate. . .to put off having a child or children until the timing is better. . .more secure times make for a greater willingness to look to

a positive future. It appears that during other periods of National stress (such as 9/11/2001), people of child-bearing age made similar decisions, but when the situation became less toxic, they simply jumped back into the baby-making mode—the delay became a mere blip in the population of the future. The same was expected during the economic downturn in 2008, but strangely when the financial world righted itself, the trend to make up for lost time in creating a family just didn't happen. . .at least to the extent it was expected.

Now, with a pandemic in full swing, with virtually no sign of abatement, and with the threat of economic crisis looming in our great nation, we have a double whammy. Who knows what the effects on our population in the near future.

That being said. . .in a world that is riddled with overpopulation. . .perhaps this is Mother Nature's way of putting the human race in check. Hmmm. . .

DAY 145

THURSDAY, AUGUST 6

It's strange what we focus upon to bring us joy in the midst of a pandemic. . .small elements. . .things which have always been present, but formerly seldom noticed. Now those same elements seem important. . .even essential to our life. Currently, within the small, yet comfortable, confines of home and garden, it is the beauty of nature in which we are finding solace.

My favorite subject of the moment is the female hummingbird who lurks in the vines layered upon the length of our back garden. She has been around for the last couple of months, an alpha of this small space, shoos all interlopers away from *her* feeder. Well, shoos is a soft way of saying *dive bombing* any other hummers who dare to enter her yard. She sits undetected under a sprig of ivy waiting to swoop out, a streak of drab color, in chase of the potential invader . . . (it's truly a show, kind of like watching two fighter jets overhead in a fight to the death, darting and diving in an attempt to get the upper-hand). . .and then returns to triumphantly zip back seconds later to perch upon her sprig of ivy to continue her watch.

A couple of weeks ago, when we couldn't figure out what kind of a hummer she was, I snapped a picture of her with my handy dandy phone camera. We zoomed it to see the coloration of her plumage. She appeared to be a dull brown with a dusting of rust on the wings, and a grey-white chest and throat. There are only a few types of hummingbirds indigenous to this area according to my fold out, laminated Orange County Bird Guide. . .and none of those pictured there looked like my bird. The Allen Hummingbird had a rusty orange head, and other colorful markings, while Anna's Hummingbird was even more colorful with iridescent magenta markings.

I turned to our more expansive Audubon Bird book for answers. Upon looking up those birds which had the potential to be found in our backyard, I came upon the Allen Hummingbird

once again, only this time *our* hummingbird's picture was there. Almost an exact match. . .
Hmmm. . .this must be a female. Upon finding that our fierce warrior was a princess, I bonded
even further!

And then, much to my dismay, she disappeared for a few days, only to be replaced by
another bird, one with different habits. . .a bit shier, with a completely different perching place.
He was much more brightly colored. . .and I hated him! Where was my girl? Did he run her off?
The cad!

But last night, *he* was gone. . .and *she* was back. . .acting as if nothing was amiss. I was
elated. She's back. . .safe and sound. I was thrown back to the days of waiting for a teenage son
to return to the fold after a night out on the town. OMG! How can I worrying about a *bird* in
much the same way I do my *children*? Too much time on my hands, no doubt. . .I really must
spread my wings a bit (no pun intended). . .human diversion, it turns out, can be helpful to
balancing priorities!

DAY 146

FRIDAY, AUGUST 7

On Wednesday, I went up to my friend Anne's back patio to have lunch with her and Terri. They had just finished a round of golf, and had stopped at Gina's Pizza on the way home to pick up a pie. . .the wine was abundant (although other than a sip, I didn't partake. . .one can only drink so much in a day, and I knew that Gary would be waiting for me to share food and wine when I got home that evening), and the talk stimulating. Oh. . .it is so good to do something which feels so normal (well, except for the seating and concern about breathing on one another). Scarcity of the bounty of friendship makes its value apparent.

Anne lives in a hilltop mid-century modern house above the village of Laguna. Somehow the era seems to fit her eclectic personality. She is cutting edge, while still being traditional, just like the house. Throughout this crisis, she has been a friend. . .yes, and before as well. . .but especially now. I think it is easy to see in times of crisis, who are the friends and who the acquaintances.

Friends touch in even when there is nothing to talk about. . .just to check in—they send you funny and often informative bits of information to keep the flow; acquaintances call when there is something to say. . .or something they need from us. Friends don't spread the word when we've been caught in a weak moment and blurt out a problem that we've secreted away from others; acquaintances tell everybody. . .fodder for the masses. (The owner of the schools where I worked for 42 years, used to call this business of spreading the bad news, playing, "Ain't it awful!" An apt description in a title.) Friends share both their down times and periods of elation. Acquaintances share elation. . .points of interest which put the bright light of fortune immediately over their head. Friends encourage; acquaintances generally aren't around when we need encouragement. . .so much for that. Friends are inclusive; acquaintances exclusive (we're not really in their sphere of awareness, so how could we be included?). Having made a point, that in some ways may make one position look oh so much better than the other, I'm afraid

that I must admit that I understand both sides of the equation of friends vs. acquaintances. . . because I too, am a friend to some and an acquaintance to others.

True friendship is, indeed, golden. But, that being said. . .it is precious because it is so rare. If one has a handful of true friends, she can count herself as one of the lucky ones.

WEEK 22

DAY 148

SUNDAY, AUGUST 9

A few days ago, a friend sent me an article about the news content we have been receiving regarding the Corona Virus, COVID-19, and the multitude of numbers we have all been following with more religious type zeal than I have ever in my life felt for any reigning philosophy, religious or non. The article raised the question as to whether we are receiving real information. . .or have we been fed data that is skewed by process, and breakdowns in systems—both machine and human error. This on top of a statement made by a neighbor that according to a friend of his, the numbers could be off by a multiple of 7 times! He didn't say which way.

Good grief! Can we handle any more? Indeed, who *do* we turn to in times of need. Sometimes, I read different numbers regarding new cases counted in the same city, on the same day, from different sources. . .both of them *believing* that the information offered is true.

And therein lies the problem. What we *think* we know as truth, is often the element that creates divisiveness amongst people. . .even friends. I remember a bumper sticker in my earlier life, spied during a time when I was seeking out the direction of my belief systems. It read, "You don't have to believe everything you *think*." At the time, I felt ideas fall into place. . .such a simple, catchy phrase. . .a play on the adage, *you don't have to believe everything you hear*, but now it took on a whole new meaning. One that released me from some of the beliefs rained upon me when I was too young to know any better. . .but, which no longer made sense to the adult I had become.

Now, years later, this simple phrase reappears. "You don't have to believe everything you *think!*" Undoubtedly, many of us engage in what I think of as confirmation bias, wherein we search for support for beliefs already in place—what we *think* we know, while ignoring other types of information. . .even facts, that might upset the balance of our reality.

And now. . .here I am. . .the balance of my reality already in topsy-turvy mode. . .where do I go now to get, not confirmation for my bias about what is real, but facts about what is actual in the vast void of the world as it exists today?

Maybe I will just simply stop reading the numbers. . .but, probably not. It is somehow better to have something, even slightly askew, than nothing.

DAY 149

MONDAY, AUGUST 10

Today for the first time in several weeks, our Girl's Pandemic Text chat had a message from Julie. She and her husband, Geoff, left in their very long motor home on June 18. . .and have just simply *stayed* gone. They've spent the last seven weeks in many states. . .driving all the way to Kentucky to the first of the season's regional horse shows. . .where their new horse is showing for the first time. Along the way, they have sent pictures and videos. It has been quite a journey.

For the last several weeks they have been resting and visiting with Northern California family members in the Sierra Mountains, north of Yosemite, where they have a cabin. Yesterday, we heard that on Thursday, they would again take to the road, back to Colorado. . . to attend yet again another. . .you guessed it. . .horse show.

It seems to me that they have found the perfect way to "shelter at home". . .by carrying their *home* on their backs. Somehow they have been able to turn this pandemic into their own personal adventure.

I realize that in order to have an adventure, one needs to actively seek one out—and the willingness to seek out adventure, requires one to actually *have* a *spirit* of adventure. . . somewhere along the way, sadly, mine has gone missing. Or did I ever really even have one? Exercising one's spirit of adventure (should one be able to locate it) often involves risk-taking. . . something that I pretty much shy away from. . .

We used to take off for two-week backpacking trips into the wilderness of the Sierra back-country. We would pack everything we would need to survive (minimally), and start off on a nine- or ten-mile hike towards our destination. After pretty much an all-day trek up and down mountain slopes (mostly up), when we finally arrived—hot, sore, hungry, and exhausted, and, (in my case) with blistered feet, we were faced with the serene beauty of a high Sierra lake (some at an altitude so high, that we were above the tree line), and remarkable granite rock formations, but also with dry-light food, and a sleeping pad that was about a millimeter thick, along with fully

12 hours of darkness. . .and nothing to read, of do. . .but sleep. This was what Gary's spirit of adventure got me.

After a time, the glow of the "adventure," even for him, began to tarnish. . .dare I say. . . Yippee! And, we began to enjoy the less rigorous strain of day hikes (sometimes 18 miles in one day, but at least I wasn't carrying a backpack), and the comfort of a rustic, but homey, cabin, along with a hamburger served on a semi-clean plate as the dark of night fell around us. This was much more my style.

So, if we actually *were* people who could still *find* their inner spirit of adventure, I could see us simply running away from home. . .for weeks or for the summer. . .when life in civilization proved to be too stressful. Why not? Places to see, and things to do. . .all within the comfort of your home . . .on wheels! Instead, we'll be living vicariously through the adventures of Julie and Geoff. Thanks, friends. . .

DAY 152

THURSDAY, AUGUST 13

This morning I awoke with a start. . .but still connected to some extent to the dream I had moments before been experiencing as real—survival within a dystopian setting, realistic and of epic proportion. . .the impression left was something between *The Hunger Games* and the *Divergent* series—life after doom. Anybody who is similar in age to me remembers that eerie voice saying, “This is the voice of dooom. . .” Well, I’ve heard ‘it’ and now seen it. . .in living color. I wish I could remember more about the experience. . .but, like most of our dreams it has now retreated to my subconscious. . .maybe it’s better this way. . .the day went from bad to worse from there anyway, even though I had no idea what I’d been through during the night!

Today was a swim day, so after half a cup of coffee, I headed to the pool. Once in my lane, after meeting and greeting other regulars from behind our masks and in a socially distant manner, I began my regular workout. I think it was on my second pass that I noticed two patches of what looked like something floating on the surface of the water. . .tiny bubbles. And then, those two sometimes problematic words crept into my mind. . .*what if*. . .? What if the virus has morphed and is now breeding in chlorinated water? What if the person who used this lane just minutes ago was covered in sun tan oil, and the virus was using the residual as a feeding ground? Okay, I’ll admit it. . .this sounds like craziness. . .but, once it begins, it can be overwhelmingly convincing. When I left the pool, having avoided these two areas for my entire swim, I pointed them out to the lifeguards. . .aeration from the heating system, they said. Why didn’t I simply look to the bottom of the pool where I would have seen the vent? Crazy-making!

I gulped my coffee as I drove home. . .feeling like an idiot. As I drove into our garage, I noticed that Gary’s car was gone. Maybe he washed it and has driven it around the block before putting it away. Then I noticed that the gate was open. . .so was the front door. . .and his mask and phone were lying by the back door on the counter next to an empty pad where the note he *should* have written lay. He had been on the phone when I left. Oh, no! I hope something hadn’t happened that was so distressing that he had rushed out. . .forgetting everything that was a

routine part of who he is. . .like shutting the door! When I found him upstairs, I was almost mad to see him enjoying an old episode of Perry Mason! “Where is your car?” I huffed. “I’m having the oil changed,” he replied, nonplussed.

Yikes! Who *am* I. . .and what have I done with the sane and savvy woman I once was. . . the *me* I was. . .can it only be four months ago? I think some serious deep breathing exercises are in order!

DAY 154

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15

A few days ago (I think it was Thursday), suddenly realizing that I hadn't checked in on Governor Newsom's daily COVID-19 update for the entire week, I tuned in at the typical time. . . around 12:00 p.m., to find. . .no news conference. Hmmm. Maybe things have gotten so good that there is no need for a daily update. But I didn't think so. . . I tuned in again on Friday, and there he was, looking a little older and more haggard, but still his politically correct charming self, our governor. . .Gavin Newsom. And, of special interest to me as a former educator, this was the day he was outlining the State's guidelines for the public school system, Fall semester.

He started out by saying that safety was our number one priority. Safety for our kids, for our teachers, and for our schools' auxiliary staff members. To ensure safety, the state of California will be supplying masks, face shields, no touch thermometers, and hand sanitizer to all districts.

While in-person learning is the ultimate goal for this school year, (he said, while pointed out an awareness of the negative social-emotion component of isolation for students), this school year will begin with approximately 90% of its students on-line (apparently that is the percentage of all students in the state of California who have access to technology and connectivity). As COVID dies down (as we all hope it will), we may then enter into a hybrid model of delivery, with some students spending part of their time on campus.

A major goal stated was to prepare both students and teachers to excel at distance education—hopefully spring-boarding off lessons learned from the past (the less than effective 2020 Spring semester, when everybody was a novice at the distance learning process and struggling to somehow meet the need).

Apparently, \$5.3 billion (some capital coming through philanthropic sources) has been allocated to support this process of distance learning, including technology for all, affordable and accessible connectivity (to *close the digital divide*), tech support, daily interaction with teachers, challenging assignments, and adapted lessons to English language learners. Approximately 80%

of the funding will go to low income students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and homeless students.

The most interesting area to me was the “how”—delivery systems. How will schools ensure a positive and thorough educational experience to the children of this state during this time when they can’t physically be on-site?

According to the people in charge of education within this state, districts are providing on-line platforms for their teachers which offer tech training, and online curriculum development. Online subject matter will include Core curriculum, Arts, P.E. and social-emotional learning, plus some specialty classes which student can choose to attend or not. They are planning for large group, small group, and one-on-one lessons, as well as scheduling regular teacher office hours for additional support. Some monies will be used to support mobile science labs which will be distributing “Brown Bag science experiments,” presumably to be done at home, hopefully with the support of a virtual teacher. And, there will be additional, follow-up paper lessons provided. Expected positive outcomes from this experience include more tech savvy teachers and students, and a stronger home-school connection.

Wow. . .the powers that be do have what appears to be a well-intended plan. A downside here is that the ability to carry out such a plan will require a shift in paradigm of major proportions (talk about learning on the job!). . .for both children and adults. The reality is that when making such a shift, it is not unusual for feelings of disequilibrium to erupt—a natural side-effect. . . hopefully they’ll be able to weather the storm.

WEEK 23

DAY 156

MONDAY, AUGUST 17

As is to be expected when humanity is submerged in pandemia, I (along with multitudes of others) have been reading everything I can get my hands on regarding the issue of vaccines—their development and timeline of availability. It turns out that there are all kinds of opinions about practically everything the subject is capable of, including old methods of producing vaccines—the tried and true, vs. the new methods—those reading more like science fiction. What a surprise! Finding direction in such a sea of ideas appears almost impossible. All one can do in such a situation, is to embark on a personal quest to sort through all of the available information and to attach their philosophical wagon to one or several. . .truth be damned. . .well, not really. We all want the truth, but how is one to separate truth from belief? And. . .in the end, if we're being honest, it will be folks other than mere citizens of the world, who will be making the decisions about global health. Regardless, being who I am, my quest for truth will continue.

The first truth I've latched onto is how remarkable the human immune system is. Somehow programmed into each of us is the ability of this system to filter out the bad from the good. . .the abnormal from the normal. . .the friend from the foe. . .the alien from the known. . . and then to conjure up defense mechanisms. . .like sending in troops of white blood cells to gobble up the unwanted invaders. Truly, if one takes even a moment to consider the humongous task that the human immune system is taxed with . . .that of saving us from ourselves, it becomes immediately clear that without our immune systems, we would, quite literally, be dust!

So how does a vaccine play into a defense system that is pretty much already perfect? As I understand it, and for sure, I'm no expert in these matters, vaccines act to put the immune system on high alert against a specific enemy by introducing the foe into our bodies in a weakened or inactivated state. . .(at least that's how it has worked in the past), once the intruder

is recognized, our natural immune system is essentially armed and dangerous. . .at least where this malady is concerned.

But now there are all kinds of new ideas about vaccines. One that caught my interest is the mRNA—messenger RNA, a genetic approach which is apparently designed to ward off germs by recruiting the body's own cells to produce what is necessary to fight the battle. Because I know virtually nothing about this method, it sounds especially scary (at least to me). Do we really want to start messing with our genetic systems? When man begins to try to best Mother Nature . . .Mother Nature usually wins.

There are also *treatments* out there in the works. Anti-viral drugs (at least one I have read about, Remdesivir) have seen a smattering of positive results in helping some patients already in the throes of COVID-19. It appears that the U.S. has purchased all available supplies of the drug mentioned, just in case.

The battle for vaccine appears to have taken on a note of nationalism, with each country/government vying to reserve enough serum to service its own people. . . It escapes me how a pandemic can become political fodder. . .but we're watching it happen even as I write.

DAY 157

TUESDAY, AUGUST 18

As ludicrous as it sounds, the hummingbirds have taken over our lives. . .well, at least the part that includes entertainment. We've officially adopted the warrior princess, even naming her. . .Rose, after my dear friend who just before she died, said to me, "When you see a hummingbird. . .it's me."

A couple of weeks ago, I suggested that we put up a second hummingbird feeder to attract more hummers. Little did I know what we were setting up for our alfa-bird. I had forgotten that, being who she is, she would now be guarding two ends of the yard, separated by at least 50 feet . . .a lot of distance for such a small sprite of a bird to cover. . .it turns out. . .continuously.

Each evening, when we venture out to the willow table ensconced on our brick patio to enjoy dinner (and lately. . .a show), Rose appears. She sits on the same sprig of ivy (this rarely varies) and simply watches. Is she watching *us*. . .or is she watching the feeder which hangs from the back deck, just over our heads? We like to personify her. . .as if she *actually* cares about us . . .while still acknowledging that she *is* a bird.

Okay, back to the *new* feeder which hangs from the eaves at the upper end of our small secret garden. Within days of its appearance, other hummingbirds began to venture into our yard. For an entire week, we watched the "dog fights" in the air above us, as the warrior princess drove off all invaders. We began to worry if it was all too much for her. . .she is, after all, so tiny . . .would she simply expire from all the exercise? Gary suggested that maybe it would be better if we just took the new feeder down. . .so she could rest a bit. No, we decided, nature would work it all out.

And then, last night, I spied two *new* hummers, flitting about in the red blossoms of Bougainvillea in the distant part of the yard. . .two birds that the warrior princess was simply ignoring. Yikes, was she unwell. . .depressed. . .had she given up? What was happening?

We watched. . .and watched. . .and watched. Strangely, it appears that Rose has allowed this couple, male and female Allen's hummingbirds, to move in. They are very active, protecting

their feeder, and never venturing into the vicinity of *her* feeder. We now think of them as the uptown birds, as opposed to our girl, who is a downtown bird. . .she hangs out with us. . .where the action is.

While we've, too, welcomed these new visitors, our girl is still the favorite. Why not? . . . she takes the time to engage in bonding behavior with us. . .or at least that's how we see it. Although we don't see her at all during the day (not sure where she's hiding), every evening, perhaps only a minute after we settle ourselves around our outdoor table, pour the wine, and pair our iPod with the speaker to let the music flow, she flits out of nowhere to settle on her branch. Gary thinks maybe she's partial to Roy Orbison. She appears to be especially active just as the light in the yard is starting to dim. She flits about, sipping daintily from her feeder, and spontaneously chasing away anything resembling another hummer . . .and, then, sometime between 7:00—7:15, when dinner is over and the sun is slowly slipping towards the horizon, she zips off her sprig of ivy to hang in the air just in front of our faces, frantically flapping her miniature wings. . . Time to go in, she seems to be saying. . .I've had enough of your shenanigans, listened to your weird and eclectic music, and now it's time for bed. We don't argue. . .we simply go in. . .as any sane person would.

Apparently, in nature there is balance. . .these small creatures seem to have struck a pact—an agreement. . .how civilized. Too bad the humans in our world can't seem to do the same at a time when it seems that evermore, politics rule. . .even during a pandemic!

DAY 158

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 19

Time is flying by. . .we are already halfway through what would have been, in a time before COVID, our week in the cool air of the high Sierra Mountains. Instead, of taking our typical, relaxing and fun family vacation, we're going to get our annual flu shot today!

What is it about injections that makes an adult (well. . .kind of an adult. . .) quake? Okay, I get it, there *is* the idea of someone sticking a very sharp (we can only hope) object into your skin. . .and then there is the pain (Ouch!), however momentary. . .but what is the *phobia* all about?

Yesterday, when we heard that the flu vaccine (the super shot, for old folks) was available, we decided that we would just go for it. . .stand in line at the local CVS to be inoculated. Just do it, I hear through the thought bubble in my head—get it over with. I allowed myself to be talked into it because we have had questions regarding the role played by up-to-date flu and pneumonia shots in repelling the Corona virus, and/or fighting complications (such as pneumonia) from COVID-19 once contracted, (if there is any such correlation. . .but in our defense as perhaps less than crazy, this is an area I've not heard mentioned. . . at all! Does that mean the possibility doesn't exist. . .or that it has been overlooked in the confusion and accompanying melee of an ensuing pandemic?). Better to act on the possibility of positive benefits, than to just look the other way.

Truly, it *sounded* like a good idea, we knew that we didn't want to spend the next few months (or year. . .) watching over one shoulder for signs the dreaded COVID symptoms, and over the other for signs of the flu. . .but I do hate shots! It took me years to allow myself the luxury of a flu shot, but after two separate bouts with flu-related pneumonia (consecutive years), I had finally given in to the idea. Now after almost 10 years without the flu, I'm a believer. But, then. . .there is the business of the actual shot.

Gary, as always the one who wants to get virtually everything done before the crowd gathers, had me out of the house by 9:00 a.m. . . .without my coffee! So, I will admit to already

being a bit off. . .but upon entering the parking lot outside the drug store, I felt kind of pissed. Hadn't I just had one of these? . . .okay, so what if it was last September. . .it *seems* like yesterday.

Checking in was a bit dicey, since neither of us hear very well, and we were listening to a young woman (very young. . .is she a junior high student working as a pharmacist for the summer?) who was heavily masked through a thick glass partition. When we finally figured out what the rules were, and had signed the paperwork (without really reading it. . .who reads those things anyway? . . .if we read it, we'd probably run at the implications), we headed for the tiny little "shot" room off to the side, which apparently also serves as a storeroom (all the unopened pasteboard boxes were a clue). As Gary sat patiently waiting in the red plastic chair indicated, I began to wander, trying to distract myself. Nail polish, hair products. . .hmmm. . .what do I need? . . .and then I heard our name. . .I turned mechanically and headed for the pharmacy. I'll go first, I heard myself say, kind of shocked at my own words. But, the words sort of made sense. . .what if Gary went in first, and I heard him yell or something? I'd be out of there in a flash. I went, and waited. . .with my eyes squeezed shut. . .and then I heard her soft voice say. . . "All done!" What . . .are you kidding? I looked at my arm. Sure enough, there was a brand new bandage!

What a wuss I am. . .I watched Gary go into the little room without even a whiff of sympathy . . .it doesn't hurt, I say with the bravery reserved only for after the danger has passed. Okay, all good now. . .until next year!

DAY 159

THURSDAY, AUGUST 20

For the past several weeks, due to a reporting glitch across the state of California, Orange County has been appearing to have fewer positive cases of COVID-19 than it actually does. Now apparently, the anomaly has been resolved. . .and we have more accurate information regarding what is actually happening. . .at least that's what I'm currently reading.

While today, it was announced that our neighboring county, San Diego, has been taken off the "Watch List" of counties with high numbers of new daily COVID cases, even though the new cases appear to be waning here, Orange County, according to the rules set down by our Governor, remains in need of scrutiny. The way I understand it, a county must have less than a certain percentage of new cases per 100,000 residents reported for three consecutive days, and then remain at or under that number for the next 14 days, in order for certain businesses and schools, to reopen. It appears that we're well above that number in OC. Yesterday we had 295 new cases reported, but is that the per capita, or total number for the day county-wide? It's all a bit complicated.

As we draw closer to the start of school, as one might imagine, emotions are running high . . .for our children, their parents and teachers. Most adults, even those of us who are no longer directly affected by the decision of on-line or in-person education, are worried about the ongoing social-emotional health of the children. . .the school environment is where much of that happens. Knowing what we, as adults, are experiencing within the structure and limitations of isolation. . . and the accompanying ambient stress and angst which are willing partners to an already problematic situation, we are aware that the children, still actively developing who they will eventually become, may encounter some true emotional and social deficit if kept too long in this type of a holding pattern.

What's the answer to such a question? Do we go for physical safety or emotional health? My niece tells me that 70% of the children in Massachusetts will be returning to some sort of on-site schooling—they have been very careful there about requiring masks and encouraging hand-

washing. They have also developed a tracking system which is highly effective. If one person comes down with COVID, they can quickly get to all folks who may have been exposed. She believes that this is key to getting all of the kids back to normal. . .or to that which is *now* normal.

Well, obviously, California is not Massachusetts. . .apparently our population is still rampant with non-conformists. Hopefully, soon, they will get the picture. . .this is not an entity trying to control its masses. . .it is about all of us, for once, joining hands (figuratively, of course) to solve a problem, which I'm very much afraid, has not made its last appearance. . .in this new world of morphing viruses.

WEEK 24

DAY 162

SUNDAY, AUGUST 23

Mid-morning today, I received a text from Gareth, “Orange County has just been taken off the Governor’s monitoring list,” it read. This was the news we had all been waiting for—the OC is off the “Watch” list. . .a sign of better things to come. Now all we need to do within the county is to keep our daily numbers of new COVID cases below 100 per 100,000 people for the next little while, and restaurants, bars, and most importantly, schools may begin to reopen.

This is huge. . .to me it means that although we will need to keep our guard up, we may be granted a little more leeway—the option to safely see friends once again (somewhere other than our own driveway), to eat in outdoor restaurants, to shop in-person, as opposed to on-line, though I’m pretty sure that meeting with a group of any size in an indoor environment will still be on hold—masked or not.

At dinner tonight Gary and I discussed for the first time in five months, the *real* possibility of going to Carmel in October. . .surely by then much of what has been acting as a deterrent to the idea of traveling the approximately 375 miles between here and there, and staying in a place where limitations, and store/restaurant closures could not possibly add to the lightheartedness ordinarily accompanying such a venture, would be over and done with. We are left with hopefulness at this inference that the Coronavirus is finally beginning to wane. . .if not totally trusting in the validity of the newflash. We’ve been hopeful before, only to find ourselves, like Charlie Brown, who trusting in spirit when faced with a football held in place by his ever-loving friend, Lucy, instead of scoring a goal, finds himself flat on his face. . .wondering why he is still so gullible as to trust in that which has failed him so many times. Per Charlie Brown’s example, we’ll remain just a little skeptical. . .so as not to injure ourselves in the fall.

With that in mind, the idea of returning to even a slight semblance of normalcy will keep us buoyant in spirit . . . at least for the moment. Tomorrow I will tune into the Governor’s mid-

day update speech on the state of the state. . .and hear whether my fantasy gets a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

DAY 163

MONDAY, AUGUST 24

While this morning, I had tuned into the State of the State update with Gavin Newsom in the hope of hearing more about what it means to be a county no longer in need of monitoring, what I found was discussion about another state-wide catastrophe—wild fires. It seems that all of California is on fire in this month of August.

The concept of wildfire is not unknown to me. As a child, growing up in the hills of Malibu, I experienced its wrath twice. . .I especially remember the destructive fire of 1958. Each time we were evacuated, we returned see ashen hillsides, blackened shrubs, eerily ghostlike chimneys standing alone. . .and the house of my childhood, one my father had built from the foundation up. . .still standing. At least until the fire of 1994, just two weeks after our new neighborhood, Laguna Beach lost 400 homes to fire, we heard that the Malibu house had burned to the ground. Yes, I deeply respect the potential danger of wildfire.

Today, I learned the facts about the magnitude of our current problem. While in 2019 we had what was considered to be a horrendous fire year (4,292 fires; 56,000 acres burned), 2020 is worse. . .much worse. Our current fire storm has been mostly due to lightning strikes and dry brush. We are having a heat wave which has brought humid air, and high temperatures. . .a perfect mix for dry lightning. So far, this year we have had 7,002 wildfires which have burned 1.4 million acres (1.2 million acres burned in the last week of so).

Currently there are 627 fires burning up and down California's vast length. Units of fire fighters have been deployed from across the state (we received notification last Tuesday that our own Laguna Beach Unit was assisting with the Carmel fire in the central coast). Approximately 14,000 are now battling the multiple blazes, with mutual aid from dozens of statewide fire departments, and even some out of state aid (such as the National Guard which has supplied helicopters, and additional engines).

The presence of COVID only complicates the issue, with new protocols being put into place and constantly in need of revision in order to maintain safety for fire personnel and for those evacuees in need of shelter.

Although, I didn't get the information I was seeking. . .what we can expect in the near future regarding daily existence, I did get a little perspective. While we are definitely in a *need to know* holding position regarding what happens next, at least for the time being—there is a bright side . . .no smoke in the air we breathe.

DAY 164

MONDAY, AUGUST 25

It's funny how one's perspective changes over time. Problems which once seemed insurmountable, now aren't even the size of an anthill. It seems that our minds and our emotions morph into new formations according to the need of the moment. . .and all of the surrounding moments—perspective is shaped out of what is currently taking place in our lives, or in our world, what we've learned from our prior experience, and what we can reasonably project as a possible or even probable future.

During an earlier phase of the Coronavirus and it's offspring, COVID-19, just when we began to see the first signs that we might soon be coming out of our experience of isolation, I began to wonder how I would handle the sticky situations of social propriety. . .it was all so new . . .a whole reframing of niceties, expectations, and responsibilities. What would be favored. . . what would be frowned upon. . .or just barely tolerated? Would others in our social world understand our position on to go or not to go as simply individual perspective? It all seemed like such a humongous dilemma. Yikes, I asked myself, am I back in high school?

It was at this time that Gary began to talk about the dangers of peer pressure. Don't get sucked into something you are not comfortable with, he warned, just because someone you care about sees it differently. Well, I admit it. . .I listened. . .really, because what he said made so much sense. And wonder of wonders, this humongous dilemma is now an anthill.

The truth is that we all have our own individual perspective about virtually everything. . . expecting anyone to have the same sets of circumstances in their life. . .and therefore, the same take on the world and everything therein, isn't a possibility. . .and worrying about it is only setting ourselves up for heartbreak—we can listen to the ideas of others, and sometimes squint a little in an effort to see where that person is coming from. . .ultimately even share certain viewpoints, but at no time will *everybody* agree on any given issue.

So with this newly found balance firmly in place, when our Rummy Tiles group reconvened this week, I felt no angst at knowing that I would not be going. Sure. . .I miss the people, the

comradery, and the diversion such a gathering offers, but. . .not a chance. Then, a couple of days later, when the current leaders of our social club sent out a survey asking for feedback about the idea of gatherings during the fall, I had no trouble letting them know that I was voting for putting it all on hold. . .at least until the state gives the okay to once again safely gather in groups.

Indeed, no matter what we think we know about ourselves, when push comes to shove, we are all capable of change. As humans, we appear to have a built-in resistance to change. . .it's never easy. Why is that? I think it's because change, by definition, involves upheaval. . .that being said, without change there is no possibility of personal growth. To continue to grow, is to continue to thrive. . .

DAY 167

FRIDAY, AUGUST 28

Today, at 12:00 p.m. sharp, came the much awaited news conference which had promised guidelines for the next steps in our statewide battle with COVID-19. Governor Newsom began by giving a brief update on the horrific California wildfire situation: 14,000 lightning strikes in the last 10 days; 730 fires, most of them barely contained; 2,100 structures decimated; and, 7 lives lost. Pretty grim.

Just when I thought that the fires had trumped the need for a guiding light as to what counties could expect in the days to come, our governor began to talk about where we, as a state, stand regarding the issue of COVID-19. After giving the statewide numbers, which still look pretty high, but appear to be going down, and saying that COVID would be around for a while (at least until we have an effective vaccine or remedy), he introduced a new blueprint—a system of guidance for counties towards the possibility of reopening. The matrix has 4 color-coded tiers which counties will be, hopefully working their way through. The Purple tier replaces what has been called the “Watch” list—those counties with a high rate of new COVID-19 cases (which means 8% and over per 100,000 people residing in that county). For counties in the Purple tier there will be no change or reopening of additional businesses until they have remained under 7% new cases per day, per 100,000 people for 14 consecutive days—then, theoretically, they will be allowed to move up the matrix. The red tier, counties with what is considered still substantial spread of the disease (4—7% per 100,000 residents in that county), will be allowed to reopen some indoor businesses (schools, museums, zoos, etc.) with modifications (no more than 25% of max occupancy at one time). The Orange tier (considered to have moderate spread of the disease, new cases below 4%), and can allow up to 50% of full capacity for indoor businesses. And finally, the Yellow tier, which allows for full capacity, still with safety measures in place (social distancing, masks, and hand-washing) for indoor businesses. Hopefully, a green tier will someday be put in place. . .indicating a green light to freedom!

This new plan will be statewide and looks fairly simple (there will be a government website through which citizens can keep track of state progress, and tune into their own county, as well), and also looks like it will be a long and arduous struggle toward that highly anticipated Yellow tier. This plan looks to be more stringent than the former “Watch” list. . .Orange County was off that list, but now finds itself back into the lowest level, Purple, wherein there will be no change. . .for a while anyway. In fact, only one county in Southern California has moved to the Red tier. . .San Diego.

With this new framework in place, we will need to look to what, we surmise, will not be the *near* future, for change—waiting patiently to move down the matrix. We will look for the public service ads, produced by the state to curb the urge to party hearty (even with beloved family members), and the social media blitz designed to promote customer-validated health and safety as a service to businesses struggling to stay afloat. We will continue to wear masks, and gloves, to wash our hands frequently, and to stay at least 6 feet away when in any public place or conversing with anyone outside our home cohort. We will not gather in groups. It is beginning to look like a fairly bleak holiday season this year.

WEEK 25

DAY 169

SUNDAY, AUGUST 30

Writing is personal. . . a true baring of the soul. It presents a heavily pixilated photograph of who the writer *is*, which reveals more about that person than mere conversation ever could. Like other arts, writing is crafted out of one's prior experiences, combined with the present moment. When looked at critically by others, the negative can be a true blow to the self. . . the positive, the salve necessary to keep on writing.

Over the years, I've written for educational journals; those felt different. They were mostly based on facts, strategies, and outcomes which could not be debated. . . or should the ideas therein come under fire, with less chance of personal attack. But writing from the soul creates vulnerability.

Hence, my lack of willingness to share what I've been writing in this journal since March 15th. . . especially because this sort of writing comes out fast, and has little to no editing. It is also a record not only of external events, but also the internal—the stress, anxiety and loss felt when being relegated to true isolation for the first time in a lifetime of familial connection, and the deep comradery of friends. It includes the many lows of the time. . . and I hope, also the levities . . . those funny things that crop up, even in devastation. It is what connects us as people—those shared events of the outside world and the inside. . . that which makes us human. . . but, then there is that vulnerability.

One can never be objective about their own creative work. It is hard to say if one's own writing is good, the content engaging, if the main message is there—if not glaringly, at least in a way that gets a point across—maybe even impossible. Is it boring. . . how could any person want to read what is so personal to me? What if. . . others don't feel what I feel. . . the highs and lows . . . am I just a wuss?

I write for a variety of reasons. Putting ideas onto paper, for me, actually helps to process the information, the incoming impressions. . .it creates balance. However, knowing that writing is a form of communication, by definition requires the attention of others—if one is to write, one needs readers.

Of course, Gary has always been my primary reader. He has read everything I've ever written. . .always supportive of my craft, but willing to give honest, straightforward, and constructive feedback. Throughout the years, if sometimes a bit resistant to it, I've appreciated his objectivity.

Over the course of this pandemic, I've sent excerpts of my diary out to a variety of friends . . .some expressed interest, but most didn't. . .they all have their own experience to live through. By now, twenty-four weeks into our pandemania, the number has been pared down to two loyal souls. . . both of whom have read the content of each week, each day (169 of them, at this point), and still profess to be faithful fans of my work. To Terri and Kathy, I give my heartfelt thanks for their steadfastness. . .their willingness to see this thing through my eyes. . .hear it through my voice.

It turns out, that we write to share ideas—what we feel, think, and know. . .or don't know. I'm am so glad that these two wonderful women are sharing this with me. Let's hear it for good friends!

DAY 170

MONDAY, AUGUST 31

Today is the last day of August. . .where did June and July go? When consciously calculating the days and weeks of our “time-out,” we know that we’ve been at this for 5 ½ months, almost half a year. . .but, somehow the experience has all run together like a water-color picture gone amok—all smeary and shadowy.

Tomorrow marks the day, Gary and I were married, many, many years ago. Two teenagers in love (well, he was actually 20, not technically a teenager. . .but very, very young). At the time, virtually nobody would have given our marriage a snowball’s chance in Hell. But we fooled them! Gary quips that some of them (those who are still around), continue their vigil, even now after all those years, to see if it is going to work out.

I have to admit that we’ve never made a big thing out of our anniversary. Most years, when the date rolls around, we’ve just returned from Mammoth, and have a trip to Carmel planned for the next month. Neither of us, at this point in time, enjoy a night out on the town . . .and, truly, how much can one celebrate? We find that just being together is a celebration in itself.

In the days of yore—before COVID, we had discussed the idea that in some ways, our European river cruise, which had been scheduled for mid-June of this year, and which for obvious reasons has now been move to June of 2021, would be the event planned to cover all celebrations for the year. . .but sadly, that was not to be. And now, as our state moves into the colorful matrix system which will allow counties to slowly work their way from purple (where Orange County is currently—the high new cases category), to red, orange, and finally yellow (which we’ve been told is colored yellow as a signal that we don’t yet have a green light to safety—instead we should see a stop light which advises us to proceed with caution), we understand that our yearly trip to Carmel is most likely a no-go, as well.

So, with no opportunity for major celebrations anywhere in sight for the near future, tomorrow evening we will commemorate this significant date in our lives together, that which

set the course of our lives, with our hummingbird, in our own backyard, eating Gary's very excellent fillet of Sole Meuniere, served up with an equally superior bottle of Mary Edwards Sauvignon Blanc. C'est la vie. . .

DAY 171

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 1

Last night, I received a text from the city of Laguna with a link to what was being called *New State Guidelines for Reopening Begin Today!* Whoa, what had happened between last Friday, and today that would allow for such a thing? I had understood from the Governor's speech that those counties still in the purple category would be in a holding pattern.

Maybe, I'd read what the Governor had to say wrong. . .according to the city blurb, all Orange County retail, shopping centers (at the minimum of 25% capacity), barber shops, and hair salons could reopen indoor operations with modifications as of Monday, August 31. No doubt, a little more research is in order.

The Laguna Beach City link offered the new California Government link, *Blueprint for a Safer Economy*, so I went for it. I first checked out the offer to check to see where my own county was in this process. . .sure enough, when I typed in Orange County, and nail salons, information popped up. Orange County was, indeed, still in the Purple tier, nail salons could operate only outdoors, but hair and barbershops could reopen indoor operations.

I tapped on the link to take me to the new state guidelines. Apparently, specific indoor businesses are considered less likely to provide an environment of communicability, i.e., masks can be worn at all times (which crosses restaurants off the list), at least six feet of distance can be maintained (I'm guessing that hair salons and barbershops qualify here because there is little face-to-face contact), and the number of patrons per square foot can be limited (operating at a 25% capacity). Although, this list is not inclusive of all elements necessary. . .these were the big three.

What are considered higher risk for the transmission of the disease like movie theaters, bowling alleys, convention centers and theme parks are not designated for reopening as yet. Bars, night clubs, etc. will continue under the guidelines issued in July. . .which means that they will remain closed until further notice.

The clarity of information was like a breath of fresh air. . .earlier today, I saw a news story about how the numbers of COVID-19 deaths across the country have been misrepresented by those in charge. It appears that one group views COVID-19 related deaths as different from actual deaths from COVID as unrelated to any other factors. Those deaths from C-19 with no additional health factors, it was reported, make up only 6% of the total number. That means that 94% of all people who are reported as dying from COVID-19, had underlying health issues. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the immunologist who serves as consultant to President Trump, as he has to many other Presidents over the years, (although he didn't deny the accuracy of the former statement) rebutted these numbers by saying that regardless of what other underlying health issues are present, if a person contracts COVID-19, and subsequently dies while still in the throes, the cause of death *is* COVID.

Once again, perspective gets in the way of truth. Here we have two different definitions of death by COVID fighting for top billing. It would be oh so easy to simply say, that there are different ways of looking at any element, and that it doesn't affect the truth—of the (at the time) nearly 160,000 deaths from COVID-19 across the U.S., 94% of those dead had underlying health complications. It's just information. . .why bury it in rhetoric?

DAY 174

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4

Typically, when there is a crisis in my immediate emotional environment, or in the world at large, I go inward. . . into a protective mode. . .like a wounded animal secreting itself to lick the wounds of life. This has been my *modus operandi* since childhood, as I coped with the fallout of an alcoholic parent. I did this each time I lost a family member, when a best friend died, when I discovered I had cancer. . .and during the many other times of less momentous affect which happen for everyone along the rocky path to becoming the person s/he will eventually be. I find that this pandemic has caused a similar response. . .manifested in the growing need to find a secure and emotionally safe place. . .away from the world. . .to wait it out.

People handle loss, hurt, fear, and all of the rest of these destructive feelings that are a normal part of everyday existence in uniquely different ways. Some get angry at the loss of control one feels when in a situation not of their choice. Others get busy. . .distraction works. And still others become anxious and depressed.

But not I. . .when faced with one of the many downs of life, I hide and focus my attention on some pretty deep thinking. . .conjuring up all kinds of solutions and outcomes to whatever is the behemoth happening of the moment. . .as if that does any good.

Part of the problem with the propensity to overthink virtually anything, is that in the thinking we have a tendency to make "it," whatever it is, bigger and worse than the actual. For example, on the occasion of my first mammogram, the completed X-rays were placed on a lighted screen for the technician to view for accuracy before sending them on to the radiologist, but which also gave me a full view. Because I had never seen what a normal X-ray would look like, nor did I have the ability to analyze it even if I had seen one, by the time I finally got the results (normal), I had myself dead and buried, and Gary remarried!

What I wouldn't give for all the wasted moments and energy I've put into the stress of trying to conjure up the *what ifs*. . .

WEEK 26

DAY 177

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 7

Today is Labor Day. . .the end of a 3-day weekend that has often been a treat for us. . . three days to loll about doing nothing before returning to the rigors of the workweek. Although it has never been a travel weekend for us, and since our retirement, we're not concerned about the need to go back to work, Labor Day has always marked the end of the summer. In a tourist destination beach town, that means fewer people, less traffic, and a town that once again would become the playground of the residents. But this year, we found that we've had so *much* lolling about time, and so *little* access to our town for so long, that we almost forgot that this was a special weekend.

What a difference a day makes. Yesterday, we could hardly breathe for the cloying heat; today there is a stiff breeze, and an almost twenty degree drop in temperature. What a relief! Not realizing that today would not be a replay of yesterday, we got out on our walk early. . .well, if not early, by 8:00 o'clock. . .or so. As we walked, quick flashes of the vast differences in routines, settings, and perspectives reached out—photographs of a pandemic. Here are a few things that we see in the world of today, which were heretofore not a part of our lives:

1. Masks, masks. . .everywhere. This is a good thing. . .even folks walking early in the day, have a mask. . .if not covering their face, hanging at the ready should they need it. It's not unusual to see a mask hanging from the rear view mirror in a parked car, like the fuzzy angora dice of the 1950s . . . just in case. A little less within the norm was the masked face of a giant ironwork dragon we saw this morning displayed in somebody's front yard! A few months ago, we wouldn't have caught the meaning. . . but now. . .we definitely get it! Signs everywhere, even in the parks and beaches warn

of the need to wear a mask. No mask, no entry they say. And it seems that most people are complying.

2. Businesses have moved outdoors. Whole streets in business and shopping districts have been closed off to offer *outdoor* dining and shopping. Even nail salons, which were mandated in the state of California to close fairly early in this pandemic and have had to stay closed to indoor service, have set up kiosks on sidewalks along the outside of the building that formerly housed their business. Restaurants have put up shade tents and moved onto patios, into parking lots. . .or even into an alley. . .whatever they must do to keep afloat.
3. Entry into indoor spaces is highly limited and procedures have been changed in order to provide safety—one-way foot traffic, spacing stickers for social distancing, clear plastic panels to provide safety to both the clerk and the shopper during checkout.
4. People standing in small groups (or sitting in driveways) to enjoy conversation at a distance, or crossing over to the other side of the street when coming face-to-face with another walker as each pursues his/her daily exercise regime. So many people out walking. . .gyms, while open, are still viewed with trepidation when thinking of areas of potential germ transmission.
5. Less conspicuous spending. No place to go. . .no need for a new outfit. No hair salons open. . .no need for a color and cut. Nail rooms suspect. . .natural nails. It could go on and on. . .

The world is ever in flux. . .changes continuously occur. . .but, usually slowly enough as to not be directly visible to the casual observer. Conversely, the changes during a pandemic come at rapid fire. . . and may be gone the next time we look as the next need arises that demands change. Humans throughout time have had to adapt, to environmental need, to war, to pestilence. This is our moment in history.

DAY 178

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8

This morning I was anxious to tune in to the Governor's update speech which was scheduled to begin at noon. We had heard that this date, September 8, was the earliest that Orange County could move out of the dreaded Purple tier (indicated by widespread new COVID cases) of the new state framework, which would effectively move Laguna Beach and all the other towns in the county into the Red tier (substantial spread). If, indeed, we had made the cut, it would mean that some businesses which have been closed to indoor service since July would be able to reopen. . .with modifications.

When the news conference began, it was to report on the ghastly wild fires being experienced throughout California. . .and while some of those which had been reported earlier are now moving towards containment, none have been controlled, and with the threat of wind events expected in the next few days in several of the fire danger areas, all are still in danger of spreading. Further, now we have 900 separate fires burning, and 1.8 million acres lost, plus 8 lives. With all of this knowledge, still some folks just don't get the danger. The Governor stated that one fire, the one in San Bernardino was under investigation as having been man-made. I had heard on the news that a young couple in the area had set off a smoke generating pyrotechnic device (designed to emit either blue or pink smoke) at a gender reveal party celebrating the upcoming birth of their child. Although it's clear they didn't intend harm. . .they had gathered at an outdoor park so that social distancing could be observed, it is thought that this device ignited nearby dry brush to start what is being called the El Dorado fire. It had already burned approximately 9,000 acres, and was only 10% contained at air time. This young couple, if the current investigation yields results, may own a hefty fine. . .at the very least.

After listening to the disastrous news regarding the burning of California, the news about COVID seemed positive. . .It's all relative! Bad news first, makes lesser bad news the good news! Orange County, along with 5 other counties had, indeed, moved into the Red tier. A little later I received an email from our city letting the community know that the reopening of local

businesses had begun. . .it reiterated that OC had moved out of the Purple tier and into the Red, clarifying that once in a tier, at least three weeks must pass before a county would be considered a candidate for the next tier (making our first possibility for mobility to the Orange tier, Tuesday, September 29). . . reopening will be slow and steady this time around. Further it was reported that although, bars would remain closed, gyms, restaurants, movie theaters, and other indoor services (including nail salons), had opened today, with alterations. What wonderful news! Although nothing was stated as to the possibility of on-site schooling yet in our county (that must be a privilege of yet another tier), just for good measure, the Governor showed the product of a California partnership with Sesame Street (which was apparently funded by donors) —a sweet vignette depicting Elmo and his son talking about how school would be different this year. . .and when and when not it was appropriate to wear a mask (wear one when actually in the on-site classroom, as opposed to when with classmates via distance learning). While the boy went off to remove his mask, Elmo talked about how school would be different this year and how children might feel about that. Truly simple but brilliant—a good idea that just may work in spreading the good word. . .In my years in education, I always found children more receptive to what puppets have to say as opposed to what their parent had told them!

DAY 181

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 11

Today marks the 19th anniversary of another critical period in American History. . .one that was equally as shocking to me as this world-wide pandemic has been, and which also had far reaching results—the terrorist attacks on New York City’s Twin Towers, and on the Pentagon.

To be honest I’d forgotten about the importance of this day, until during our Friday night asphalt party, our neighbor Rob, a former Fire Chief, and sometimes FEMA guy who is called out in cases of national emergency, proposed a toast to the heroic acts, and lives lost on this historic date: 9/11/01.

I remember the day clearly, as I do the day JFK was assassinated. We American’s have so few horrendous happenings of national concern, that when they occur, the images are embedded forever into our brains. . .almost like a brand.

I had gotten up early that day to go to the gym before heading to work, as I did most days. It was when I was changing from gym clothes to my office apparel that someone asked if I had heard about what had happened in New York. I hadn’t. . .but even when I heard the news, it didn’t really register. Why would anybody fly a plane into a building. . .had the pilot had a heart attack or passed out? Where was the co-pilot? Throughout the day I heard snippets of information. . .generally speaking, a school, without televisions or radios to connect to the outside world, is somewhat insulated, so still when I was driving home that evening I wasn’t sure what was going on. It was when I got home to hear that Rob had been flown out in a plane with special clearance to travel across the nation in an American sky that had become an immediate no-fly zone, to lend assistance in still another attack. . .on the Pentagon, that I finally realized the full import of what had happened. Over the next few days, news continued to seep in to reveal a devastation that I had until then never experienced. . .even really imagined. . .or *could* imagine with no foundation for such thoughts.

Things in America changed immediately. Fear moved in, as we were to discover that these incidents were no accident. . .but meticulously planned terrorist attacks. Who attacks *America*?

I mean really, America is a country with more resources than anyone in the world. . .the social climate out there seemed to say that in making such a choice, that man, organization or country responsible would be letting themselves in for a world of hurt. And of course, there was an overriding concern that if it could happen once. . .it could happen again.

Even when the air space was again open, I refused to board a plane. Gary drove me and my colleague, Heather, to northern California so we could make the required practicum visits to teacher trainees doing internships there, and she drove us both to a professional meeting in Las Vegas later that year. When we finally did board a plane, it was months later. . .and over the years to follow, we were to find that the new, more stringent security rules applied to all passengers boarding a plane, were here to stay.

Today, as I was reminded of that historic event. . .and of the scary times following it, it seemed shameful that I had actually forgotten about it. And yet, the fact that I *could* forget about the horror of it all, lends credence to the fact that all things pass. Soon this pandemic and all the constraints of living through it will fade into memory, and then into the oblivion of daily existence . . .as we continue to live our lives within a newfound rhythm. The human spirit is difficult to quell. . .

DAY 182

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12

When I retired, part of my self-therapy at losing a part of my identity—the career woman part—was to begin to write. . .for my own pleasure. I had, throughout my career, sporadically written articles which were published in educational journals, but this would be the first time I would write purely for myself.

At that time, I didn't really know what my subject would be. . .I only knew that it must be something familiar to me. . .I had always heard that in this type of writing you must write about something you know. I finally decided that I would put down in writing something which had long been a goal. . .an auto-biographical history of my life to share with family.

For years I had written and re-written this account in my mind, the details honed out as the rhythmic and repetitive motion of my feet pounded the trails of the High Sierra Mountains, working to the benefit of body, but also churning up connections with my creative right brain. Consequently, by the time I was of retirement age, I was pretty clear about the content of this account, and because I was also familiar with human development, a subject I had taught to prospective teachers for twenty-five years, as the story evolved, my biographical data (my life) turned out to be written within a developmental framework. . .in a sense I had used my own life only as the vehicle to write about the human experience—using the common human elements of emotion and natural developmental events to act as the context for the universal connection between us all.

Although the product did not turn out to be light reading, I was happy with it. I had some copies made at the local print shop to distribute to our family, and to give to a few friends. . . and, then waited with trepidation, to receive feedback. They all loved it. . .as one might imagine of family and friends.

The problem with this kind of feedback, I realized after the fact, was that nobody who didn't know me well (and love me) and, therefore, who could remain objective about the content, had been asked to read it. . . and so objectivity was difficult, if not non-existent.

Then, just last week, the perfect “reader” came to mind. For months, I have been swimming next to a woman, who, prior to the pandemic, I had known only by facial recognition. We would wave when we saw one another, but didn’t even know each other’s names. It was with the coming of the need for more structure at the pool when it reopened after the initial shut-down of California (social distancing, masks, fewer people, etc.), that we actually became friends . . . both of us had opted for the 9 o’clock time slot on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, making the chances of meeting up pretty regular. Over the course of the last 3 months we’ve talked about various things—she manages a book store, is married, and has a couple of children, and is an avid reader. She knows similar things about me. . . I am married, retired, have kids, am an avid reader, and I write. One day, while paddling side-by-side across the pool, she asked about my writing. After a brief description of the content of my book, she expressed interest in the premise. It was then it came to me that she might just be the person to read through the content, and objectively assess the readability, appeal to other readers, and quality of the work. I spontaneously asked if she would like to read it. . .and she immediately said that of course. . .she would be honored.

Today was the day that I took the manuscript to my new “reader”. . .and now, I’ll be waiting for her feedback with bated breath. Although I *want* to be open to what she has to say, the yea or nay, thumbs up or thumbs down, is resting heavily in the air around me. . .the work is so very personal, there is no real way for me to objectively assess it. Is my work readable, well-written, does it communicate what I intended, is it too heavy, will people find parts of it funny, how wide-spread is the audience of would-be readers, and really what genre does it even fall into? While knowing that I need the answers to these questions, still my own subjectivity makes swallowing the objective difficult . . .the waiting game is on.

WEEK 27

DAY 183

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13

Within the semi-safe bubble of our own environments, sometimes we forget that as we celebrate a minute success in our fight against COVID, others are facing additional time in the veritable purgatory of shut down. It seems that, although in my personal world of Orange County, the number of COVID cases are going down (a daily average of 147 new cases across the county for the past 6 days), and businesses are reopening with alterations, this is not the case in our State Capital. The cases of COVID-19 in Sacramento have continued to ramp up (the county remains in the Purple tier), and according to some sources, the trend is going in the wrong direction for the county to even be in *consideration* for moving into the next tier. This news promises a long, lonely winter for those stuck in the mire of other people's decisions concerning the need to wear a mask, and to maintain social distancing—people who, in fact, have refused to take up the mantle of responsibility for keeping themselves and others safe.

In living through such unparalleled times, it is not unreasonable to expect change—both external (the concrete) and internal (the more abstract). . .some alterations easily accepted into our everyday life, some constraining. The concrete changes in our immediate surrounding are somewhat evident. We see them all around us. . .business closures, a lack of services, limited resources, new social and safety requirements and procedures, caution taped parks and trails, closed beaches. We've all had these images impressed upon our brains. But, what of the abstract outcomes?

I imagine that although we are all well-aware of some of the abstract fallout—ambient stress, fear, feelings of social isolation and exclusion (i.e., loneliness), emotional disequilibrium, differing ideas regarding health and safety, ambiguity of information which might be helpful in understanding the whole, etc.—what may emerge throughout our country and our world, as

additional structural consequences, those elements which are not as immediate to our awareness, not so up-close-and-personal, are still to be discovered.

It will be in the years to come, once we have an antidote for COVID, and can resume life as it was, that we will begin to see the far-reaching damages to our financial, physical, political, structural and social strata. For starters, looking at one small part of the whole of our existence, what will the pretty much universal stress of life in captivity. . .not for the 3-week time period initially speculated, but for fully 6 months, with no sign of abatement anywhere in the near future, do to our carefully balanced immune systems? We all know that stress can kill. . .and it seems that when shrouded by the shadow of doubt that is the Corona Virus hanging over us, the rigors of daily life grow into crises of major proportions. . .increasing the already ambient stress in the atmosphere. Where will it lead. . .?

In truth, imagining that we will even ever have the capability to return to the days of yesteryear is most likely an over-extension of an emotional need. Reality with its harsher take, may in time, reveal an entirely new world with whole new sets of needs and requirements. We are currently in a holding pattern. Time will tell. . .

DAY 186

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16

This morning I learned that my cousin Bob, has died of COVID-19. Up until now, we didn't even know anybody who had tested *positive* for the disease, and now suddenly somebody in my extended family has *died*. . .the horrible death that COVID is capable of. Today, I heard a statistic which I thought was significant: of the 6000 deaths in California's largest county, 92% had underlying health issues. Other factors cited were economic situation, and ethnicity. But, Bob (not a California resident) had no underlying health issues (according to his wife, he was so healthy that he took no medication of any kind), he was not economically disadvantaged, and he was not of a minority ethnicity. . .For this man, only a few months older than me, the deciding factor it seems, was age.

As I talked to his widow, images Bob and me as children chased each other across my mind. . .pictures of rowdy boys interjected into the staid intellectual atmosphere of what was home life for me within my family of origin. His family (my father's sister's) had lived outside the country, in Central America where his father worked as a civil engineer, and came to California only sporadically, traveling on the huge banana boats which somehow sounded romantic to me . . .and probably weren't. . .I remember stories of the huge tarantula's that hung out in the ship's hold, feeding on the bananas (definitely not something on my list of wonders to experience in this life!). However seldom the visits, those were memorable times. . .full of laughter and activity. We hadn't known each other at all as adults—we each lived on a far-flung edge of the U.S., and without our parents alive to keep the connection, family reunions weren't to be—but the boy that he was, I do remember fondly.

Although, Bob had lived a life sometimes fraught with danger—civil uprisings in the underdeveloped countries of his childhood, and a stint with the United States Special Forces as a Green Beret during the Vietnam War—it was a tiny, yet insidious, microscopic enemy, which apparently is still be scoffed at by many disbelievers, that killed him.

Before his death, Bob had been hospitalized for 7 days, and on a respirator for most of that time. . .until his organs began to fail, and he succumbed to the unknown arena of death. I wondered how he had contracted the virus. Apparently, sometime in mid-August, they had embarked on a car trip to another state, stopping along the way to stay in motels and to eat. Once there, they'd had contact with only two other couples, neither of which members have shown any symptoms before or after. Bob's wife, after he was hospitalized, had developed a slight fever, and still cannot smell or taste anything, but truly, she has no idea where they were exposed. Think about it—something as simple as a car trip. . .and now he's dead! It is simply ludicrous. . .and far too close to be ignored. This kind of concrete evidence, so closely connected to one, makes for a vivid reminder of the virulence of COVID.

It is so very strange that this disease strikes a fatal blow here, and a slight discomfort there. Bob's wife is somewhat younger than he was, but still in the age bracket for danger. . .and yet her symptoms have been hardly noticeable, while his body was devoured by this deadly virus. What makes the difference? It is so very puzzling. . .and it seems that there is no way to tell, should one be unlucky enough to contract the disease, if s/he will merely be uncomfortable for a few days, or be eaten alive.

Yesterday, I was writing about loosening up a bit. What a difference a day makes! Today . . .well, let's just say I'm not thinking of taking any car trips any time soon. . .and I won't be letting my guard down.

DAY 188

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 18

I know it seems like overkill when it comes to my penchant for writing about the Saga of the Hummingbird, but truly, she is one of the joys left in our daily life, and focus upon her in the midst of the destruction which has become our world, has been a thing of beauty. So I've decided to indulge myself and record more about this remarkable living creature—a mighty spirit in a one-ounce package: our Warrior Princess.

This morning, having read in our handy Audubon book that typically, the hummingbird's most active time, is early in the day, I took my breakfast out into the cooler morning air to watch for movement. As I sat and read, fully 45-minutes passed. I decided that the non-specific time reference within the bird book had probably meant the dawn hours of the morning—daybreak . . .not a time *I* would be showing *any* activity. . .now, at 9:30 a.m., it was probably too late for there to be any activity on her part. . .but I called and clicked anyway, just for good measure, and suddenly, there she was, flitting about. She ate a bit, and then flew back into her hiding place. What a darling!

We have noticed that her interactive pattern has altered a bit with the natural changing of evening light. As the day shrinks, so her activity configuration is condensed. For the last several evenings, she comes out only for about an hour, the hour of the fading light. Until that time, she lurks, perfectly camouflaged against the brown twigs, and green leafy backdrop of our vine-covered backyard fence, watching for interlopers. Any bird even thinking of moving in, must have gotten the word by now that this space is unavailable, since there appear to be few invaders! She is fierce, she is unrelenting, she is uncompromised in her need to protect her feeder. . .and I swear it. . .her people.

Again Gary, although he thoroughly enjoys her antics, would say, she is only protecting her food source. . .we, the people, are just in the way. I would say that we *are* her food source, and that she does relate to us. Case in point: from the beginning of our “relationship,” as the light wanes, most evenings she does a mid-air dance not 3 feet from our faces. . .always looking

towards us, she hangs in the air, her wings whirring, for 15—30 seconds, whirls around several times, and then darts back to her lair. Sometimes she does this several times in an evening (we counted five times the day before yesterday), and even though we'd really like to stay and watch, we respond by going in. We take it to mean that she's done with us. . .our acquiescence is the obligatory reward—the treat offered to encourage the adorable bird behavior. If that's not interacting, I don't know what is!

The *Uptown* birds are still with us, as well. Although we don't often see the female, the male has become known to us as Fat Bird, because he is large and puffy, with bright, vibrant color. He darts and dives in his part of the yard, but interesting, never enters our princess's *Downtown* area. Sometimes he'll spend hours perching on a low hanging branch just outside our kitchen window, allowing us full view of his daytime activity. We've decided that while not tiring of our fav, we like him, too! We've found that he's not just a pretty face. . .he has personality!

During the summer months, Gary and I are likely to use our outdoor shower for our daily rinse off. This too, has proven to be opportunity to watch the show. Because the feeder hangs just above the shower head, our guy likes to dive bomb whichever one of us is in the way. . .he swirls, and darts until we simply go indoors—getting the message to vacate *his* yard.

We all need diversion during times such as these. . .and if we look closely, we can find it in the most surprising places. . .and in the most delightful ways. Our world has become minute . . .its scope limited of necessity, but we have found that our lives can still be, none-the-less, brightened, and cheerfully alive (at least temporarily), if we are willing to search out these tiny moments of joy.

DAY 189

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 19

Last night, a simple statement that spoke to the concept of loneliness. . .a required solitude, reminded me that many of us are experiencing the fallout of an isolated or semi-isolated existence. It's not that we can't go about our daily existence. . .we do our errands (masked and armed with hand-sanitizer!), have conversations with friends and family (if at a distance—a few at a time, over the phone, or through video conferencing), and can still enjoy the outdoor environment within the close proximity of our home. It's just that there is an overlaying pall surrounding all of it.

This week has been an especially down time for me. I have decided that this low is directly connected with my cousin Bob's death. It is definitely strange that I could be so emotionally torn up by the loss of someone who wasn't really in my daily life. . .ever. We always lived in different countries, states, or cities. We didn't even really have a *long-distance* relationship. . .and yet, there was a connection. Bob and I were connected by a shared family history, by memories, by blood. He was one of four people from our generation, still living. . .now there are three—his brothers. At this point, I have lost all other family members who share memories of childhood, of happy times with mutual grandparents, of family happenings.

Once I attached my first cousin's death to my waning spirit, I began to wonder about the disparity of symptoms that COVID brings to its victims—some experiencing just a little discomfort, others ending in death—and a ravaging demise, at that. What makes the difference . . .could it be in the genes, as some cancers are?

Obviously, this is an isolated event—personal to me, and considering that everybody in our current world situation has struggles of one kind or another, it is just meant as an example of an incident capable of upsetting the delicate balance of our already skewed emotional equilibrium, surrounded, as we are, by the ambient stress that is COVID-19.

Our Friday Night Asphalt party last night, after a week of such melancholy, was a welcome reprieve. . .truly more than ever. It was there that I was to be reminded that however personal

my experience, I was definitely not alone in my angst. A neighbor, newly included in our weekly gathering, shared that she was so thankful to have these Friday nights; she said that while she really didn't mind being *alone*—she felt she had fared pretty well during the first five months of our collective confinement—that about a month ago, she had hit a wall when she realized that she had become desperately *lonely*. . .a totally different concept from being alone. Alone can be solitude, peace, respite. . .lonely is despair, sadness, and need.

It turns out, that our Friday night get-togethers, which grew from a concept that had merely started out to be a diversion—a break from the reality of the war on COVID, have become a lifeline to many of us.

Although, there have been many offers to join with others in the spirit of social connection, we have chosen to remain true to our original decision to stay close to home, and to join with others whom we know to have concerns similar to ours. . .with stringent adherence toward safety.

As I face the newly discovered (to me) question of who is most susceptible to the Corona virus, and why, I can't help but feel that, for us, semi-isolation continues to be the right choice. Although we've learned a bit about COVID since it began its spread late in 2019, we still don't know much . . .and may not for many years. If, for example, it appears in the years to come, that the virulence of COVID is indeed complicated by familial similarities in body make-up, such as genetics, I certainly don't want to compromise my own chances (or anyone's) to survive this thing because I miss partying!

All things must come to an end. . .hopefully a happy one. We can, and must. . .simply wait it out!

WEEK 28

DAY 191

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 21

For some reason, my cousin's death has hit me hard. It is so weird. . . I didn't even know him as an adult. . . haven't seen him since his return from Vietnam in 1970. . . my memories are all of him as a child. . . and yet, I feel a deep sense of loss.

As a kid, I lived for those visits, which happened every other summer, when my Aunt and Uncle would haul their brood of four active boys all the way up from Central America to our Malibu, California, hilltop home. Our grandparents would come as well, pulling their house trailer behind them, ultimately parking it in the large circular driveway which lay just outside the house. Our life, usually one of quiet, calm demeanor, suddenly became alive with running feet, loud laughter, and a serious lack of privacy. Bob was the oldest of the boys, just 3 months my senior, and the ring leader. He was so full of pranks—I remember, as a 10-year-old, not allowing myself to drink tomato juice for several years after Bob insisted that it was pigs blood! With 7 acres surrounding us, you'd think there would be enough room to contain all of this commotion, but most of the time the house was stuffed to bursting. I'm sure that neither my mother, nor my father enjoyed these visits as much as I did—it was definitely a lot of extra work for them—but they were surprisingly good natured about it.

To escape from the confines of the indoor space, we moved out. . . 3 carloads of people traveling about to see the sights of Malibu. . . a small, sleepy town at that time—really an alternate lifestyle, with few amenities. Some of my favorite memories were the trips up the Pacific Coast Highway to Leo Carrillo Beach (much before it became a State Park). This was a place of such beauty that many of the Hollywood beach movies were filmed here. . . it wasn't unusual to see huge studio trucks lining the Pacific Coast Highway in preparation for filming a boat landing, a scene depicting pirates clamoring over rocks, or a beach party in progress. And yet it wasn't that remarkable beauty that drew us as kids to love this stretch of coastline. Here, there were miles

of white sandy beaches, divided by huge outcroppings of rocks, sea caves to be explored, crashing waves, and sand crabs and the like, to be discovered. . .and held over the heads of the girl cousins. This may be the reason why, today, I can't stand having wiggly creatures in my hair. . .like those damned Japanese beetles that somehow get into it, buzz around and then can't get out! We spent whole days there, on the beach, just playing, something we never did within the experience of my typical family life, and returned home windswept and exhausted, with sand scrunched into every crevice, and skin red and sore from too much sun. Such good times.

All of this, the memories of such animation, now still, leaves a sense of emptiness—a void. And brings up the eternal question of what's it all about? . . .what do we strive for in life, and why?

I have lost most family members with whom I had a shared childhood—a whole generation wiped out. Bob is one more. . .the circle of common experience grows smaller. Although I was not aware of it before now. . .I know that I will miss knowing that he is alive and well, here on Earth. . .a concrete symbol of the joys of childhood.

DAY 192

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22

This morning, while engaging in my thrice-weekly swim, Lisa in the lane next to me, asked if I had heard that our local Wells Fargo Bank, was temporarily closed due to COVID-19. I hadn't, and was shocked that after fully 6 months, with all of the social distancing protocol in place, with laws requiring masks, with required additional cleaning measures, and obsessive hand sanitizing, such a closure should be necessary.

What does this say about the current state of the possibility (or is it probability?) of the transmission of this stubborn disease? Checking our Orange County website, I found that yesterday there were 138 new cases of COVID reported county-wide, and no deaths. Laguna Beach continues to trend slowly upwards with the new count of total cases city-wide at 210. This overview certainly doesn't bode an unhealthy surge, considering where we were a couple of months ago with 1,500 new cases in one day within the county. In fact, I heard on the news today, that Californians across the state, are now testing at the lowest positivity rate on record—just 3% of total tests taken are coming back with a positive result. . .but still. . .today, I learned that the new cases in the OC had jumped to 300, with 48 dead. Talk about a yoyo effect. . .the probability of contracting the disease appears to be a crap shoot. . .a simple matter of wrong time. . .wrong place.

A few days ago, in preparation for the small birthday gathering later this week (which I had hoped to attend), I went into our tiny village to buy token gifts for my group of gal pals whose birthday parties I had missed over the past months due to my personal perspective regarding the safety of such gatherings, and was strangely comforted by the structure offered there. I saw nobody without a mask, plastic screens separating customer from vender, credit card only transactions with set-ups requiring no communal touching of the card or use of pens, and plenty of social distancing. How could it be that only a couple of days later, our local bank had to close due to COVID?

I went to the internet for information about the Wells Fargo closure, where I found. . . nothing. Well, not really nothing, but practically so. What I found was a message in red that read, "Branch temporarily closed." Nothing else. I can't imagine any other reason. . .banks don't just choose to close. . .even temporarily. Although there was nothing definitive on the website, even that speaks volumes. Surely, if a bank were to close mid-week for maintenance, repairs, or for *any* reason, that would be disclosed. . .probably in the weeks before. No, this appears to be a sudden closure. Troubling, to say the least. . .

DAY 193

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23

OMG! We are more than two-thirds of the way through the month of September. Where has it gone? No doubt, most of September has slipped in to that place where April, May, June, July, and August have fled. . .that foggy haze of an existence so full of insignificant daily content, that the moments, hours, days, and weeks which made up those months, simply disappear into oblivion. It all runs together, with not much to hang a memory on. I don't really mean for this to sound so bleak. . .it's really not. . .just lacking in color to the extent that daily experience comes and goes without leaving much impression. This condition is simply one of those gloomy outcomes (less severe than many, I'll admit) of our new COVID-ridden environment—our new life. . .our new world.

Yesterday, when I saw the surge of positive cases of COVID in the OC, I wondered if we were beginning to experience the resulting upturn expected from the Labor Day Weekend, which began more than 14 days ago, and now should be in full swing. But today, the count was back down again to 181 new cases, 22 deaths. And further, a nearby county, San Bernardino, was moved out of the Purple Tier (the place none of us wants to be), and into the Red (which includes some business re-openings). So are we in reality not going to have a surge. . .or are the numbers simply back-logged, as they were after the Memorial Day holiday weekend? I'm sure we'll find out soon, whether we want to or not.

Why I'm still trying to figure this out, I have no idea. It is incomprehensible! Last night, I watched an equally mystifying program on Nova called, "What's Living in You?" focusing on non-human bacteria, viruses, and fungi living in us and *on* us. . .all the time! Wow! Although interesting and informative, this program made one wonder if the cure is worse than the malady. Apparently, when we treat the bad germs/bacteria, we may eliminate the good ones. . .those that are essential to the smooth operation of the human body. So in protecting ourselves, we may be creating a more serious imbalance. It's not like I hadn't heard this, or understood it. . .to

some extent (that's why anti-biotics which used to be had at the drop of a hat, now are prescribed sparingly), it's just that this microscopic view made it much more graphic!

Yes, knowledge is power. . .but a little knowledge is dangerous. Currently, I'm not sure if I should mentally devour everything I can find on bacteria, viruses, and fungi, or just stick my head in the sand until it all goes away. Oh, yeah. . .I forgot. . .this isn't going away. . .anytime soon.

DAY 194

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 24

Today is my dear friend, Pauline's birthday. . .and there is to be a dual celebration for her and our Julie, whose special day will be on October 4. While I have missed three other birthday celebrations during this time of hunkering down, today, despite my trepidations, I've decided to throw caution to the winds (well, not really. . .but kind of. . .) and go. In saying this, I have to admit, that I had to wrestle myself to the floor in order to make myself actually *do* it. The psychological creeps up on us. . .and I decided that if I allowed myself to decline this one. . .I might never be able to make myself go out again! Talk about a yo-yo effect!

Earlier in the week, before the number of people taking part in this gathering expanded (my mistake. . .the number was always the same, just a convenient lack of perception on my part . . .remember when I wrote about the saying, "you don't have to believe everything you *think*?" Well, apparently, *I* didn't remember my own warning!), I had already gone to a favorite local shop to buy belated gifts for the 5 folks who were having, or who'd had a birthday during my hiatus, and an additional one for Terri, who was our hostess for the gathering, so I was all prepared. Now all I had to do was to make myself get in the car, and travel the 3 miles to Terri's house.

That sweet girl had called me the day before to let me know that all was set up in a socially distant manner (did I want to drive over to look at the set-up?), and that the take-out food care of Anne, would be individually packaged. Drinks would be just inside the patio door, and the bathroom was just inside another open door. It all sounded good. . .but, what if. . .?

Terri lives on the water in a beautiful part of Laguna. . .with several public beach accesses spaced here and there throughout the neighborhood. . .it can be pretty parked up during warm summer months, but as it was a weekday, and summer was officially over, I was surprised to see no parking anywhere close by. I drove around for 10 minutes or so, looking for a place to stow my car, without success. Maybe this was a sign that I just wasn't meant to be here, my overactive brain told me. No, I wasn't going to fall for that. . .I finally found a space on Coast Highway, about

a block away, slid my car into it, and with packages in hand, trekked to the beautiful Tuscan villa that was Terri's house.

Although I didn't immediately feel at ease upon entering (this, after all, *was* my first venture into polite society, or any society. . .for that matter, in over 6 months!), I could see that true to her word, there were two round tables, maybe 10 feet in diameter, draped with lovely spreads, and set up with service for three people at one, and four at the other. Terri shared her seating plan placing me at the table for three (with lots of space to back up if I felt it necessary, she explained), put a glass of Sav Blanc in my hand, and my forebodings dissolved. . .almost.

As the girls arrived, I must admit that I wanted to hug them all—it was so good, just to be included in something. . .well. . .really, *anything*. . .that felt so normal. As it turns out, it was a perfectly lovely afternoon, hanging out with my best ladies, sharing stories, and laughs, noting that they were all well, and relatively happy. Whatever I decide in the days to come about when and where I choose to go, I'm so very grateful that I made myself go through all the (apparently) necessary motions that allowed me to, if only for the afternoon, let go of the gloomy existence that is COVID-19.

While I know that every one of these ladies is worried about the measures to which I've gone to keep myself (and my family) safe during this time, I also know that they do so without judgment. But I'm truly okay. . .if a tiny bit depressed from time to time. While I know that I tend to overthink just about everything, I also know how to find psychological continuity. . . Mozart!

WEEK 29

DAY 197

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

For several months, I've noticed a growing perceptual change in the overall demeanor in people. . .well, really in the atmosphere.

Early on, I wrote about the stages I had identified, real or imagined, that I saw myself and others going through when this pandemic, and the new experience of isolation was foisted upon us. First there was the euphoria we feel when faced with the new and unknown, followed quickly by a survival mode as semi-reality sets in, and then comes a prolonged period of fear, resignation, and sadness as the truth of the situation finally becomes apparent.

During that first phase—euphoria, friends reached out to each other, sometimes more than once a day, dropped off little surprises at each other's doorsteps (which tended to scare the daylights out of us. . .who knew if the gift was germfree?), offered to help out by picking up necessities for each other if one of them should be willing to venture out, and sent funny quips and/or inspirational messages via text. We laughed about the irony of a pandemic. . .something that before that time we had only read about in Sci-fi novels. . .obviously without tuning in to the full import of the situation. . .and certainly without an inkling that it would last not only through that month of March, but reach far into the summer and then into the fall.

Once, the discomforts of living in isolation set in—the lack of availability of goods, and the fear of going out even if goods *had* been available (when we finally *did* get groceries, all items were carefully wiped off with disinfectant, before allowing them into our pantry—a damned if we do, damned if we don't effect)—those feelings of trepidation were closely followed by messages from the authorities that this situation, something which not even *they* understood, would be going on a little longer than we had expected (as if we knew enough to even set an expectation. . .), we still felt the natural optimism that has spurred the survival of human beings

for eternities . . .at least until the lockdowns began. As we watched the local beaches, hiking trails, parks, and businesses close all around us. . .our optimism began to wane. . . reversing only for a moment when just before Memorial Day weekend, we saw some re-openings. . .and then, the hammer fell once again; but this time, all of California was on lock down!

Keeping a finger on the pulse of the daily news, hearing the facts, sometimes conflicting from day to day, allowed for the dawning of understanding (however many blanks remained empty)—we finally got the message. Once we began to grasp the true nature of a pandemic, an attitude of pessimism set in. . .no longer did we believe that things would be okay next week, next month, or maybe even next year. We collectively began to feel hopelessness, suspicion, and fear. . .even those who have been unwilling to identify these emotions in themselves have felt some level of the same. . .albeit expressed in different ways. We are all submerged in the ambient stress that is a pandemic.

Now, after a prolonged exposure to the above, we go through our daily lives, no longer worrying so much about germs coming into our homes on items from out in the melee (we've heard that it is most likely that COVID is passed from person to person via saliva droplets, rather than from surfaces. . .which although not necessarily germ free, would be unlikely to carry a sufficient dose to cause one to become ill), just trying to keep our heads above the emotional tidal wave threatening to engulf us. Strangely, folks touch in less often (presumably because they too are busy with the task of emotional survival), there are fewer texts, and when small groups of friends *do* gather within their socially distant environments (always with the presence of masks, hand sanitizers, and lack of proximity reminding us that this gathering is not as it should be. . .as it once was. . .), it acts as only as a small bandage applied to the gaping emotional wound that has been collectively bestowed upon mankind. . .

Although we may win the battle of the moment. . .will we lose the war?

DAY 199

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

The state of California's county assessment is scheduled to be revealed each Tuesday, and today was the first opportunity that my county was eligible for reassessment after the three-week waiting period levied on those moving from one Tier to another—either up or down. Three weeks ago Orange County had moved up from the Purple tier, to the Red. I was almost sure that today, we would be moved up our state's ladder (comprised of the necessary enumerated recovery statistics) from the Red to Orange tier, which would allow for the additional re-opening of businesses (and, which would act as an apparent indicator that the presence of COVID in our midst is waning), but alas, apparently, the county didn't quite make it.

It seems that although continuing to keep the numbers just inside the necessary range of new positivity cases per 100,000 people (our positivity rate falls between 3.1 and 3.9%, needing to be between 2 to 4%), it is our new case rate that keeps us in the Red (the OC case rate fell from 4.7 to 3.6%, and needs to be between 1 to 3.9%)—the state assessors' concern being the up and down pattern—high one day and low the next. Hopefully, this see-sawing effect is a result of the Labor Day weekend surge that was expected. . .or maybe, we still really are in the throes of this horrendous battle that is COVID-19.

I suspect that the answer lies somewhere in between the two. Yesterday, when talking with my niece, a Massachusetts MD whom I have mentioned before, I was alarmed to hear that she doesn't see this beast of a germ disappearing any time soon. . .even into 2021! How quickly can the euphoric bubble of hope be pierced!

Yesterday, I was speaking of a willingness to take a calculated risk. . .today I'm again wondering if I'm bloody crazy! Such is the nature of a climate of fear and imbalance. Up one day and down the next.

I keep hearing from other, freer thinkers, that we can't let ourselves live in fear—that we can't allow fear to win. . . and I do get that. Only. . .in this case, it seems that what we are in fear

of. . .is doing the winning. So, do we throw caution to the winds and continue to take calculated risks, living on hope. . .or do we skulk silently back into a life of isolation, living in fear?

Again, I suspect the answer lies somewhere in between. . .certainly not a black or white, easily determined solution. For us, there is serious respect for the fact that COVID *is* something real, that it is out and about, and that we would be crazy *not* to fear it. Even knowing this I still think that taking on *some*, highly-calculated risk is healthier than the alternative. We will pick and choose. . .we will go about with our guard up. . .but we will go about. . .at least, until further notice. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. . .hopefully not one of those grisly twists that sci-fi novels are famous for!

DAY 200

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30

This last day of September 2020, also marks the 200th day since our lives were so instantaneously and dramatically changed. . .since the privilege of personal decision was wrested from our control. . .since we had the power to come and go without concern. . .since we've been allowed to see so many loved ones. It is truly unbelievable to me that we are farther into a year of this, than is left of that year. Truly, if I hadn't been recording some sort of happening, feeling, or new data, virtually every day since it all started, I'd have had no idea myself!

Tomorrow, a new month will begin—October! What will it bring? Will there be a ray of hope for a semi normal holiday season. . .or the harsh reality that family celebrations steeped in tradition, will for the first time ever, not be happening? Will we be seeing ghosts and goblins streaming up and down neighborhood streets, before dipping their little hands into communal candy bowls for a treat? It seems unlikely, and further, with the possibility of the phenomenon of COVID remaining in its current state (truly, perhaps *probability* is a better word choice in this instance), and with the outdoors less available for safe, socially distant gatherings, as we move through fall and enter the winter months. . .it feels like the answer to my question is already out there. . .this year of 2020 may, very well, bring a less than merry holiday season for us all.

Current news places the number of possible COVID-19 vaccines being tracked by the World Health Organization (WHO), at 170, most of which are still in a pre-clinical stage (animal testing to see whether an immune response is triggered). Only a few companies have ventured onto phase 2 trials where a few humans receive the vaccine, or phase 3 (hundreds of people receive vaccine), or phase 4 (thousands of people are vaccinated), after which the results are observed for safety and effectiveness.

It's not difficult to understand why clinicians must be so careful when working with developing a vaccine which by its very design mimics the disease in question to the extent that when injected into the *healthy* systems of humans, it is able to trigger a protective immunity in

the recipient—an obviously different process from developing a therapeutic means to treat a malady already within the system of an *unhealthy* individual.

This process of creating a new vaccine typically takes years and years of testing. But according to the WHO, we could expect a safe and effective vaccine sometime in mid-2021! This is truly amazing. . .considering the necessary caution.

So there is hope on the horizon. . .albeit a far horizon. . .much too far away to effectively shield us for the coming holidays. In all probability, there will be no trick-or-treaters on Halloween, we'll all be eating our turkey on Thanksgiving, and opening gifts during the December holidays, without the healing stimulus of those we love surrounding us. On the other hand, there is always ZOOM. . .not a cure-all (no pun intended), but better than nothing!

DAY 201

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1

Tonight, we moved our regular “Thursdays in the driveway with Anne,” out of the driveway, and into our backyard. We reasoned, that we could, by arranging the chairs usually surrounding our 6-foot round table into a wider circle hugging the perimeter of our brick patio, keep the environment just as socially distant as we do on our driveway (provided that the gathering was a party of 6 or less).

Although, we have been quite thankful for the size, shape, and angle (a slight upward tilt from street level) of our driveway—all of which allowed it to serve as an outdoor alternate to a party room during months which otherwise would have seriously limited our ability to connect with the outer world during this time of isolation. . .and to enjoy the humans in it—the space is seriously lacking in privacy. I mean, really, who entertains in the street? On the other hand, these driveway gatherings have become so regular in a time of irregularity, that people who don’t even know us (but who apparently walk up and down our street repeatedly), stop to ask where we were last night, if we dare to miss a Thursday or Friday night on the party scene!

Even considering all that, it felt good to return to the privacy of our backyard, with the music flowing, and the hummingbird flying.

Gary takes readily to his role as host, so, for him, even in this world of new and different social customs and restrictions, it is difficult not to pass around the food and drinks. That being said, in deference to COVID, he has accepted his fate, and relaxed into the new role of music director instead. He keeps a tight rein on the playlist, often pulling up a favorite song with preliminary instructions for all to listen carefully to the meaningful lyrics. Most of the time, our guests are tolerant, and listen attentively, many even enjoy the process. . . I’ve heard it all before, so I tend to be less than tolerant. . .much to his chagrin!

Geoff and Julie, who have been dear friends of ours for several years, and who knew Anne professionally for many years before *we* met them, joined us this week. . .so, it was a party of

five. All appeared to be in good humor, arriving with their food and drink in hand, and settling in for a visit. . .sprinkled with plenty of music, which turned into an evening of several hours.

These small gatherings have truly become a lifeline which keeps us tied, however insecurely, to the slender thread attached to what *was*—what used to be standard in a world which was more stable, less restrictive, and. . .Well, just more fun!

I will continue to be thankful for the small, and sometimes infrequent, moments in time which are joyful. . .holding on to them for dear life, rather than sacrificing them to a feeble attempt at wishing for what cannot be. . .in a world such as ours.

WEEK 30

DAY 205

MONDAY, OCTOBER 5

Oh, my goodness. . .what a wonderful, dreamless sleep I had last night! I vaguely remember turning over once or twice, but other than that, I slept all through the night without waking! Why is this noteworthy? . . .Because I almost never have an unbroken night of sleep—at least not since COVID has descended. Ordinarily, I fall asleep pretty much immediately, awakening only a few hours later. . .almost always in the dead of night, just after the midnight hour, to lay wide-eyed while I replay the stresses of the times. . .the months. . .the weeks. . .the days. . .the hours. . .the minutes. Not all that healthy. . .but nonetheless, my current sleep pattern. It is only when it is almost time to get up, that I eventually fall into a deep sleep—a state that invariably leaves me unready to meet the coming day when I must.

The restorative nature of sleep had almost been forgotten until this moment. The idea of waking to a feeling of peace, nearly full energy level, with a clear brain, and stable emotions had been shelved, in favor of (well, not really *in favor*. . .more likely as a point of censure) a bewildered lack of zest, a dazed and scattered brain, and a light, and yet still debilitating sense of doom.

Why is it that when we need it the most—when we are stressed to the max, overly physically exhausted, brain dead, and emotionally spent—sleep becomes evasive? Of course, the answer is: for all of the above reasons. How simple!

What is not simple is turning it around. I've always admired those people who are able to escape through sleep—when they are stressed, they go to bed, fall asleep immediately, and rise in good spirits. Problem solved. . .at least for them.

I wonder if this is a learned skill. . .or if one must be born to it, like temperament, or eye-color. If it's a learned skill, where can I get lessons? I've tried all of the recommended remedies:

I go to bed at the same time almost every night, limit my alcohol intake, try different methods to bore myself to sleep. . . which are all helpful to some extent. But in the long run, none are failsafe . . .and I balk at the other alternative: becoming dependent on chemical sleep aids.

So that leaves me with one good night of sleep. . .every so often—when the moon is waning, the night air temperature is a perfect 62°, family members are emotionally stable and happy, there is little going on in the outside environment of our world to create personal havoc, when all is well with friends. . .and on, and on. That pretty much leaves out consistent sleep as an option anytime soon.

Even knowing this to be true, I will revel in this current moment of peaceful regeneration, reaping the available benefits, rather than clouding the day with apprehensions of the night to come.

DAY 206

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6

Today we were treated to a true happening. . .at least during times such as these, it felt like a true happening. Damon and Jen came by for lunch. I ran out to get Chinese take-out, and arrived back home just as they arrived. Although I had to slap my own hand so that I wouldn't reach out upon seeing them, it was still wonderful to have them here once again.

Gary had arranged the backyard so that there would be more than ten feet between couples, and we all had our masks handy. I had wrapped a fork, and soup spoon in each cloth napkin, so that we all had a personal serving spoon for the variety of savory choices, and left an individual-sized bottle of hand sanitizer on each side of the table. . .just in case.

What a lovely afternoon. We just chatted. . .Damon talked of his experience of working out of his home. . .the differences, ups and downs, the contract they had received from the government for maintenance of his airplane—the C-17. He talked of the high stress of working with fewer employees, and higher expectations. . .but also of being thankful for still having a job when so many others were out of work.

Jen, a United Airlines flight attendant, spoke of how hard hit the airlines were; she had thought, as a fledgling attendant in 2001, that nothing could surpass the stress of getting through the 9/11 crisis, but this was much worse! At least the terrorist attacks were over after that fateful day (if the fear evoked, lingered on), with COVID-19, there was no apparent end in sight. She also shared that because the airlines are taxed so severely, that the loss of that income affected the health of the whole economic structure. She, after 22 years on the job, was just on the cusp of those who were too junior to continue on the job—luckily she retained her position. . .over 33,000 other flight attendants from United and American Airlines were either retired or furloughed. I hadn't really thought about how much the loss of air travel would affect the national and maybe even world economy. How far reaching are the tentacles of this virus. . .

And we all talked about what we are doing to alleviate the stress, the yoyo of emotions. What we are doing with leisure time; how we can keep ourselves safe and still enjoy a break from

solitude. They have been more social than we have, albeit with small groups and outdoors. But that being said, even we have ventured out a bit more into the social world. . .

Greg has started to travel once more, two weeks ago he and Molly traveled by car north to the Bay area and the central valley of California where he was able to schedule meetings with clients along the way. Last week he traveled by air to the South, and this week he has gone to the east coast. We worry about him with this professional need to be here, there and everywhere, when there is such danger lurking about. . .and we also worry about Molly left alone to wait it out.

We can only hope that we all get through this scourge, healthy and relatively happy. Peace would also be nice.

DAY 208

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 8

Once again Orange County didn't measure up to moving forward on the State of California's ladder to recovery from the voracious beast that is COVID-19. The numbers of positive cases are not actually surging here, just displaying a slow, but steady upturn. Last week the state assessment revealed that the county was at 3.1% positivity rate per 100,000 people, which apparently has remained the same this week. It is the current daily case rate that continues to demonstrate instability. In the former assessment period, the OC finished the week at a 3.6% (per 100,000 people) daily new case rate (which was below the state required 3.1—3.9%), but had been see-sawing erratically up and down for several days before, which acted as a red flag to those making the judgment. This week we finished up at 4.4% case rate . . . a definite uptick. So, once again, we didn't make the grade necessary to move into the more favorable Orange Tier.

I wondered if schools reopening had created the wavering numbers, but according to one article, it doesn't appear to be that. Instead, it seems to be people (mostly young folks) partying. . . essentially making the choice to carry on as if all is normal; these individuals seem unaware that we are in a world-wide health crisis. . . or perhaps just uncaring of the rest of us. Either way, I find this to be unconscionable behavior at such a time.

While most of us continue to semi-isolate, or at the very least follow the rules to strictly adhere to social distancing if we should allow ourselves to leave our safe bubble of existence, or allow another into *our* carefully guarded outdoor space, the race to find a safe and effective vaccine continues at an almost incomprehensible speed—truly break-neck!

Currently 4 drug companies are nearing the last stages of testing and assessing the resulting data which precedes a vaccine's availability (most likely to health care workers, first responders, and the elderly, as front line receivers). Pfizer BioNTech, a U.S. company (Pfizer) partnered with a German company (BioNTech), appears to be the front runner, with trial results expected by mid-October, followed by Moderna, another American company, with results in late

November to early December. Johnson and Johnson is next in line, in late December. And finally, AstraZeneca, a British company, which has apparently finished the last stage of U.S. trials but which, at press time, has no projected date set to reveal the results of the data collected.

All of this gives hope. . .but, also gives rise to doubt. With such haste and with a minimum number of required test results (30,000 volunteers per prototype: half injected with the vaccine; half with a placebo), along with the speeded up version of data analysis, is it possible that less widely experienced risks and side-effects will become apparent to researchers before the possibility of such is rained down upon unsuspecting participants? And further, will there be enough data for us to know that we will truly be protected. . .or will this just be another in a long line of calculated risks? These are questions that come to mind, when I hear that the elderly (the most vulnerable) will in some ways be the Guinea pigs for the rest of America. Although I find it difficult to even think about that category as relevant to me and my life—it is! Outcomes become ever so much more personal when the indicators are pointed your way.

DAY 209

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9

On my birthday, January 2021, wouldn't you just know it. . .my driver's license expires. If there is anything I don't want to do, during this year of the Pandemic, it's to stand in line at the DMV office! Well, really. . .it's not only within the current reality of today, but anytime, any year, which can be challenging when dealing with the notorious California Department of Motor Vehicles.

So, with my on-site aversion to this process neatly tucked into the seams of my thinking, I explored the DMV website to see if on-line license renewal was available. It was. . .and a tiny obscure, line somewhere in the midst of the jargon revealed that most people over 69 years of age are eligible for this service. Yippee!

Nowadays there are so many more services available on-line than in the days of yore. . . and I guess during this time of techies and gurus, that's good news. . .but in this house, I am the techie guru. . .and I use this term loosely. . .very loosely! Gary, has made a conscious decision not to fritter away the hours (however little is going on) relying on technology for entertainment . . .he has no computer, no iPad. . .most of the time he doesn't even carry his cell phone. . .which by the way was foisted upon him by me, as a safety measure when driving. . .or wherever. He carries it only with great animosity. So that leaves me. . .a virtual neophyte when it comes to the mysteries of technology, to deal with these wonderful new services.

So, imagine my misgivings when faced with dealing with the DMV's on-line service. . .I was quickly to find, my fears were not without reason. And, I thought the on-site process was frustrating!

My first task was to register for the on-line service (the folks at the DMV were sorry. . .but everybody had to reregister after February, 2020). Okay. . .well, at least that sounded easy. I began to fill out the form. E-mail address, telephone number, driver's license #—yes, I knew all of that (interesting that somehow amongst all the millions of others in their system, they had my name and address without my telling them. . .I shudder to think what virtually *everybody* knows

about everybody else nowadays through the wonders of technology!). Then I got to the place where I needed to verify my telephone number with a six-digit number which the form said. . . had been texted to me. . .only I had given my land phone number. So, no text. I tried to enter a cell phone number, but was told (via one of those highly anticipated pop-ups) in bold red print, that the time had maxed out for the entry of the pass code. In a huff, I cancelled.

After waiting a few minutes, I re-entered my data, using my cell number this time. When I got to the part about the texted number, I checked my phone. . .no text. I clicked on the resend button. Nothing. . . Frustrated I jotted down the phone number to call in case of technical problems. . .when the phone connected on the other end, a mechanical voice said cheerfully that my wait would be approximately. . .42 minutes. OMG. . .

I went back online telling myself that I've got this. . .there must be some minute detail that I'm missing. Once again I filled in my personal data. . .and moved to the page with the information saying a text had been sent. . . No text. I cancelled.

Fifteen minutes later, I heard my phone beep. . .I had a text. Quickly I brought up the DMV form, filled it out, and gleefully entered the six-digit number: 11161. The beautiful red lettered pop-up box shared that this was an invalid number. Just then another beep. . .oh goodie, a new number. . .also invalid. I'm still waiting. . .two hours later!

Maybe, I'll try again another day. . .when the automated DMV system is in a better mood . . .or when I am! The *good* news is that I have several months before my license actually expires; the *bad* news is that it'll probably take me that long to get registered. . .and when I'm finally successful, and they have me in the system, a pop-up box will likely appear to let me know that I'm one of those not eligible for the service. By that time, it will, no doubt, be too late for me to get an appointment for an on-site visit!

WEEK 31

DAY 211

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11

Occasionally, one of the members of our ladies' chat group finds an interesting article pertaining to some aspect of our joint experience of living within a virus ridden world, and sends it on to share. Today's article, sent by Teri, was focused upon a new training program for dogs—sniffing out COVID-19! When dogs were merely pets, we just revered their very well-developed tail-wagging ability. . .and their warm smiling faces and liquid eyes denoting an unconditional love for their humans. But now. . .some of them, apparently, will be taking on jobs which could rival that of a CIA agent!

I *had* heard that Canine Unit police dogs were being trained to sniff out electronics (who knew that electronics could have their own special smell?), as in a hidden memory stick which may contain incriminating information. . .with potential to close the case! But sniffing out a virus . . .who thinks of these things? Reading on to find that every virus has its own distinct smell, and that a dog's scent system is actually 10,000 times stronger than a human's. . .it makes sense. . . kind of.

The article went on to say that in Finland, these virus sniffing dogs are already in use at the Helsinki International Airport. . .with the idea that dogs sniffing out the positive COVID cases is much faster than waiting the 15 minutes for each person's test to reveal whether travel is a yea or nay on that particular day. What a weird world we're suddenly living in. Just imagine the scene, dogs roaming around a crowded airport lounge, sniffing at the folks who are awaiting a flight, when suddenly they get the scent. . .corner a person, and the authorities move in to escort the offending person out of the building, while isolating all of the people who have come in contact with her in the last hour.

What a great plot for a dystopian novel. And yet, here we are, living it. . .a life which becomes more and more unbelievable—even ludicrous—as the weeks and months swirl by—with daily events so preposterous that they appear to have been conjured up within someone’s overly active imagination, before being shot out to the news waves for airing. This is all reminiscent of Orson Wells’ 1938 radio broadcast of “The War of the Worlds” which threw many American citizens into a frenzy of fear believing that the dramatization was an actual report of an alien invasion. . .Only our drama, however equally other worldly, is true. We are experiencing an alien invasion. . .a war with an enemy which can’t be seen. . .but which apparently, *can* be smelled. . .if one is a dog!

DAY 213

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13

Today, when the state's reassessment opportunity came, once again Orange County failed to meet the current standard necessary to move into the next tier (Orange—which designates moderate spread of COVID-19), and is therefore stuck in the Red level (substantial spread) for the two-week waiting period required before the next opportunity—which means we move into November. So disappointing! Moving into the next tier not only provides a sign that the folks within that county are doing what they need to do in order to flatten out the spread of this disease. . .but, also allows for the re-opening of additional businesses. . .and/or increases indoor service options to those businesses already opened.

So. . .it looks to me like our county's continued failure to surge ahead in this race against the germ, pretty much stands at humans—0, germ. . .1. . .which essentially means that we're not doing the job necessary to make that score into germ—1, humans, 2!

What is it that is so hard about wearing a mask, washing our hands, curbing our social activities, and staying slightly distant from others in our midst? This morning I received a little gem of a video (from Teri, my personal video guru) that outlined the many national obstacles placed before one who had been born in 1900, as compared to one born in 1985. It spoke of wars (4: WW1, WWII, Korean, Vietnamese, to say nothing of the Red Scare!), pestilence (the Spanish Influenza. . .and let's not forget Polio), economic crisis (the stock market crash, and resulting economic depression), hunger, and more. All of this in a lifetime—with millions of lives lost along the way. . .many of which were willingly given by those venturing out into the field in an effort to protect those of us left at home.

This video went on to say that for the majority of those born in 1985 (or later), the amount of discomfort, loss (economic and otherwise), war or national crises, hunger, and genuine fear is minimal by comparison. All that these people (including those who insist on continuing daily life as if all is well!) are being asked to do is to stay close to home (where there are, by the way, all of the conveniences of twenty-first century American daily life), choose wisely about going out;

weighing carefully the elements: the when, why, where, and with whom, in order to determine risk, and to wear a mask in public and stay 6-feet away from buddies when they do decide to go out (I'll eliminate frequent hand-washing since I'm hopeful that this is not a new skill). This should not be so difficult to adhere to when considering the alternative. . .however, that being said, I must acknowledge that in order to take precautions against an enemy, one must have risen to the level of awareness that the recognition of an evil lurking in the crevices of our lives is a given. I'm not sure that is the case with all of us. . .otherwise why do we still see whole families out on vacation. . .without masks! . . .And the COVID numbers continue to stall just outside the area necessary toward success. . .

The careful vs. the careless, as one journalist puts it, have caused a spike throughout much of Europe—a second wave. Some say European nations, which were less hard hit initially are simply experiencing what America has already experienced as a result of Memorial Day, the 4th of July, and Labor Day weekend crowds. . .in Europe the culprit is the August holiday (a tradition wherein major cities simply shut down while families go on vacation for the month of August, many of them to the same seaside resorts), currently resulting in as many as 9000 new cases in a single day (France).

What I get from this news is that, even if *we're* over it, *it's* not over us, and may not be for many months to come. . .the governor of New York City announced that he expects it'll be at least another year before we can bid the novel Coronavirus adieu. I guess we'll just continue to adapt to a smaller social bubble, and a more restrictive existence for the time being.

DAY 214

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14

Today, towards the middle of my 50 minute, thrice-weekly swim, I spied a honey bee mid-lane, struggling to extricate itself from the sparkling aqua blueness that is the expanse of pool water. I swam towards it, scooped it onto the plastic lane divider, and went on with my swim. On the next pass, there it was again. . .back in the water. What the heck? That stupid bee, so small and vulnerable, was simply not willing to comply with me—someone larger and more capable in this instance—even to ensure its own safety. I “saved” it once again, placing it into the center of one of the ball-like structures that acts as a float along the divider rope, with the hope that more securely ensconced, it couldn’t just haphazardly fall back into the pool before its wings got dry. . .allowing it to fly away. Then I treaded water and watched. . .as it crawled around and allowed itself to be swept away by the temptation of the sun shining on the water. . .a sparkling surface that was so attractive that the bee apparently couldn’t resist the invitation. . .even one that was headed towards disaster! I decided to let nature take its course—sometimes one can’t rescue another in distress—only that creature can rescue itself.

Oh no! I feel an analogy coming on. . . Yes, you guessed it. . .like that bee, some folks out there in Coronavirus-land seem to feel compelled to allow themselves to be lured by the glitter of the social world, appearing unaware of the dangers lurking there in the cesspool that is this COVID menace. The larger body, in this case, the state of California and the leaders therein, have created parameters designed to keep us all as safe as possible during this time, and yet, with stubborn tenacity, these carefree spirits (to state it kindly), continue to leap into the melee, without thought for their own safety. . .or, it appears, for anyone else’s!

With these disturbing thoughts in mind, and with the knowledge that this was one of the many worrisome elements in life that I have no control over, I decided it was high time for a mental health day. For me that means, doing nothing that is less than pleasurable. . .all day long (it’s a good thing, I had already made the bed, or we’d be climbing into a rumped mess come bed time!).

After showering, I curled up the chair in my “office” (really our spare bedroom), and cued up my 99 Mozart sonatas, symphonies, and concertos, to simply sit back and soak up the calm beauty therein. Back in the 1980’s there was much talk about the fact that classical music acted as a stimulus for specific areas of the brain. Mozart’s specialty was the mathematical/analytical part of the brain. So, in an effort to stimulate the developing brains within the population of my classroom, classical music of all kinds was always an audio backdrop. Nowadays, I just find it calming. Even if I’m not really listening, it somehow seeps into the crevices of my being with warm and healing vibes. Often I turn on Mendelsohn rondos or violin concertos as background when I’m reading or writing. It’s strange that other noises act as a distraction, while classical music creates flow.

All and all, even considering that bee’s lack of self-control, it was a good day. . .right down to the oatmeal, raisin, and walnut cookies I made. . .just because I had a yen!

DAY 217

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17

. . .And the Pandemic rages on! Just when Californians were beginning to feel a bit of respite from quickly rising COVID case counts (although we're not out of the woods, evidenced by some minor instability, the current numbers show no major swings either up or down), those same case numbers have begun rising in many other states within America (throughout the mid-west, Dakotas, Montana, and elsewhere), as well as, in European countries (Italy, Belgium, Germany), and Asia (Japan, South Korea). . .some places are reaching peaks not seen since July, others are peaking for the first time. While all of this is going on, California has been cited as having done a decent job of curbing the virus, and yet people around us complain about online schooling, and other types of restrictions which have been placed upon all of us. . .even as we are watching what is happening elsewhere as a result of opening up too quickly. It's not rocket science. . .the Coronavirus is not just simply going to disappear. . .it is still here lurking in the shadow of our discontent; if we let down our guard, it will attack any one of us. . .it is not choosy.

The truth is that this pandemic has made fools of us all. We thought we knew what was important in life. . .we knew nothing! We flitted through our lives, lured by the content of distraction. . .the superficial. . .the unimportant.

Today it seems clear that much of what actually *is* important, is now unavailable to us. You know what they say about the absence of something in our lives, to make us crave it! Now I am wishing for clean, fresh air. I want to gulp it into my lungs, feel it rushing over my skin, and through my hair. . .I want to exercise without a mask. I miss the old air. . .unencumbered by the fear of contamination.

I am wishing for the freedom to go where we want, do what we want, see whomever, eat what and wherever we want. We are currently shackled by limitations never before felt, at least within my lifetime.

I want my family around me; I want to hug them, kiss their cheeks, and lounge on couches and chairs together, gather around a table to listen to music, play games, and share food and drink without wondering where each of them has been lately.

I would like to meet with close friends (even mere acquaintances), to visit, eat, drink and play Rummy Tiles. . .to spend a day lunching or shopping (or something equally absent of basic need).

I hunger for a life without fear (we have become suspicious and wary, like one in an unfamiliar environment. . .a dark place that is potentially full of shadowy evils); I'd like to be anxiety-free in a world of semi-certainty (is that possible?).

Okay, I'll admit it. . .I have allowed myself to focus on the down side of this pandemic. . . a brief indulgence—a bit of a whine. . .but also a revelation! I am alive and relatively germfree, a little too well-fed, I have my beloved significant other by my side, I can chat with friends and family members via text, telephone, or Zoom—even in person occasionally, a few at a time (if we follow the rules), I have my technology to keep me connected, movies galore, and I am surrounded by a garden full of flowering plants where the birds and butterflies are as free as we once were. But best of all. . .I have learned another of life's lessons. . .even when the current moment appears to contain something less than what we have grown accustomed to. . .it must be valued; looking for the beauty therein. The proverbial silver lining, so to speak, may just be worth the exploration. . .think of it as a treasure hunt!