

## Corona Chronicle

Week 25

Wednesday, Sept. 2<sup>nd</sup>

7:30 AM

I tried to get up early enough this morning to have some quiet before the workers who are gutting and rebuilding the house to the left of us (almost a duplicate of our house in its architectural structure) returned to start up again with their sawing, hammering, and loud wood-stapling. But no such luck. At 7:15 they were already back. However, I don't mind terribly. It is a good thing that the house at 529 Walnut Street is being renovated – almost completely rebuilt, really, except for its outer walls, inner weight-bearing beams, and roof – for, since it is certainly a “sibling” to our house (originally built in 1886), I know that its bones are sturdy ones, and that it will make a pleasant home for whoever eventually moves into it. (It is being renovated by a real estate company, so its future occupants cannot yet be known). I am also in great admiration of these hard-working builders, who are accomplishing a great deal very quickly. Many of them speak Spanish; I don't know which country they are from (perhaps not all from the same one, of course) – but yesterday afternoon while I was working outside digging weeds up from between the cracks of our sidewalk and driveway, I quite enjoyed hearing the Mexican guitar-and-vocal music they were playing on their boom box.

And we have benefitted from their endeavor! Yesterday the doorbell rang, and it was one of the project's “landscapers” (as they called themselves) asking if it would be okay for them to come in to our side yard so that they could trim our side of the hedge that has grown to a ridiculous height since the previous inhabitant's relatives stopped taking caring of the place. (Josephine, who had lived in this house since long before we moved in next door, had gotten too old to take care of it herself, and finally she had to be moved into a nursing home.) In any case, my answer was “yes!” It was a great boon for us to have this hedge trimmed back, and then some more work done at the back of our yard which I paid them for, – and so quickly, and with admirable clean-up afterwards.

It seems like all of a sudden things all around me (and even things that are *part* of me, like my wrist) are breaking down and having to either be replaced, mended, or renovated. In July I fractured my wrist; in August our refrigerator/freezer broke down and had to be replaced; recently Mark's desk top computer had to be

replaced (he is still waiting to pick up the new one); Lev's laptop is "in the shop" now for a mechanical repair on the keyboard; then my desk top computer started dying on me – turning on, but giving me only a blank screen. I was able to resuscitate it several times, but yesterday I took it in to Best Buy to have them back up all the data on an external hard drive, and also to pick out a new machine (which won't be ready for at least two weeks, but at least now I know my data is safe). Thus this morning I sit on the couch typing on my laptop, which I am so grateful to have! On Sunday I drove to Westport to take a hike, and on the way back the brake light came on in my car – my 2002 Honda Accord with 218,000 miles on it. Happily, the brakes seemed to work fine, but one doesn't want to take one's chances with brakes, so yesterday I had my mechanic look at it. All it needed was more brake fluid – whew! But it wouldn't surprise me if before this pandemic is over I will be having to replace this old machine as well.

Might all this breaking-down and rebuilding (or in some cases, replacing) be emblematic of what our nation is going through at this time? Of course the now over 180,000 lives that have been lost thus far to the coronavirus cannot be mended or brought back – and there is so much *loss*: businesses, jobs, careers in the arts, a "normal" childhood and school-experience for millions of children and college students. I cannot begin to inventory all the loss! One detail I heard about that sticks in my head is that of newborns whose parents had to wear masks over their faces for the first two or three weeks of their baby's life. I suppose these must have been parents who were either infected or suspected of having been exposed to the virus...but just think of that addition to the list of what has been lost (at least temporarily) for these newborns: the pattern of the human visage, a pattern that has been wired into our DNA for aeons, perhaps the first pattern a baby recognizes.

Thankfully, many of these are indeed temporary losses – at least to society at large. But for babies and children, a loss of something critical to their development for a few weeks, or worse, one or two years, the loss of something that is supposed to occur at that precise time in their lives – can this be made up? Mark and I have decided to have Lev learn remotely for this, his senior year, at Durfee High School. We are lucky that Lev is so good with computers and is an extremely focused, conscientious student – at age seventeen, this isolation from his peers and his only being able to talk with his teachers online will probably not significantly hinder his development (which is in any case neurologically unique). But just think of a first-grader whose parents are afraid to send him/her back into the classroom. Think of all the important building-blocks of development that are supposed to happen at

that age! But then look at the rate of infections that are happening in schools all over the country now that children are going back in the classroom – many schools have opened, only to close within a week. And what about the lives of the teachers and their families?

These are such difficult problems – no one knows how to repair or mend this situation...it looks as though we will keep wrestling with it, mostly unsuccessfully, until a vaccine for the coronavirus exists and is available to all. But there is something to the saying *necessity is the mother of invention*. Many businesses or other types of institutions that have had their workers work from home have learned that this is something that *can* be done – thus saving many hours of commuting and who knows how many tons of carbon emissions from being released into our atmosphere. The Democratic National Convention, held exclusively online (except for the fireworks over a parking lot at the end), seemed *so* much more watchable – really a great improvement over the old-style convention where thousands of people gather in a huge stadium and the speeches drone on and on. Think of all the money that was saved that can go instead to help needy families or to other good causes...though of course during normal times a big convention helps the economy of the city where it is held. There are always tradeoffs – or, as my beloved teacher Reb Zalman would say, even good things have a “shadow side.”

For the past many weeks I have been writing about the struggle for racial justice, which has been a major recurring issue during this pandemic, at least since May, if not before. It *was* an issue before, but not quite as noticeable by some, in that the death rate of African-Americans and Indigenous Americans who caught the virus was showing itself from the beginning to be much higher than that of the rest of the American population. Since the killing of George Floyd and the ubiquity of demonstrations in support of racial justice, however, this issue has become impossible to ignore.

It seems that the time is ripe for our whole nation to do a *cheshbon ha-nefesh* - a deep soul-accounting. It was just last year that our nation marked the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first known Africans brought to the English-speaking American colony of Virginia (in fact, to Hampton, my hometown – a fact I never learned in school as I was growing up). It is something to realize that these first Africans landed (*against their will*) on North American shores more than a year *before* the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts! Thus in some respects many of us in this country were already wrestling with this more accurate, less “upbeat” version

of American history during 2019, when the *New York Times* developed the “1619 Project,” and dedicated one of their Sunday Magazines to it. And of course the Black Lives Matter movement began back in 2013 as a response to the killing of a black youth, Trayvon Martin, in Florida, and later, the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who had gunned him down with impunity, supposedly under the protection of Florida’s “stand your ground” law. Although the movement was looked upon skeptically for a number of years by mainstream America, it subsequently had so many similar killings to protest that gradually its grievances garnered more sympathy.

Until we come to today. Whether it was because of our already-increased awareness of racial injustice from before the pandemic hit, because of the current phenomenon of cell-phone-armed citizens who do not hesitate to record what they see happening in their streets, or because of the stresses of this coronavirus-time (anxiety about contagion, record-high unemployment, closed schools, etc.)... whatever the reasons may be, we seem to be living through an era of reckoning. Could it be that, as with the house next door, much within our society will need to be *gutted* – ugly wallpaper torn off, old plaster smashed, rotting wood removed – that we may need to be stripped down to our still good, weight-bearing beams in order to rebuild our understanding of ourselves as a nation?

Our nation’s first era of Reconstruction was not very successful, giving birth to Jim Crow laws, over four thousand incidents of lynching (between 1882 and 1968), and the Ku Klux Klan. In that instance it was as if we just went into a rotting house, put up some new dry wall over the old crumbling ones, and slapped on a thin coat of white paint...but underneath this façade, the house was still crumbling, and if left alone, would be doomed to fall. We have to get down to the *root* of the problem, to get rid of the rotten wood and noxious molds in order to rebuild our home into something that will be sturdy and healthy for all its inhabitants.

This will not be easy; it can cause a backlash of fear in some who stand to have taken away what they have come, wittingly or unwittingly, to take for granted (white privilege). That was why the first Reconstruction failed. But now, more than a century later, surely the dial of white prejudice has moved: otherwise we could never have elected an African-American to be president of the United States for two terms. It has become common to encounter people of color in the roles of teachers, doctors, authors, broadcasters, talk-show hosts, police officers, firefighter, senators, representatives, and more. It is time. Time we realized that we are *all* better off trying to work for that “more perfect union” – rather than

struggling to keep up the status quo of a divided America – an America that has not yet lived up to its promise of “liberty and justice for all.”

As we draw nearer to the new Jewish year of 5781, and to the reopening of schools here in Massachusetts (in various cohorts of those in the school building every day, those there some of the time, and those who do all their learning remotely), we feel painfully how abnormal this time is. And yet, despite all the pain of this time, I can’t help but feel that there is something *good* in our being forced to deal honestly with a kind of plague that is much older than this pandemic – one that goes all the way back to the foundations of this nation. I believe that we will prevail – both over the coronavirus, and over the plague of racial injustice...and while the sun may currently be behind the clouds, I see glimpses of it shining through.



*Sunflowers in the “pick your own flowers” field at Young Family Farm, Little Compton, RI.*