

Corona Chronicle

Week 33

Tuesday, October 27

Only one week left to go before the election – although that statement feels a little inaccurate now, since so many people have been voting already for weeks, and it may take several weeks or more *after* the official “election day” to finish counting all the mail-in ballots around the country, and also those from overseas. Before we know what the fate of our country (at least in terms of leadership) will be. The death count from the coronavirus as of today has reached 226,000. I read in the paper this morning that many colleges – even the most well-endowed, such as Harvard – are struggling to stay afloat financially, and are having to give professors early retirement and close certain majors altogether. Lev is due to begin college next fall, and he is busy researching various schools, filling out applications for scholarships and federal aid, as well as the Common Application that can be sent to multiple colleges.

Even when we know who our next president will be, that will not tell us what our fate, or future, as a nation will be. Will the vaccines now being tested be successful? Will college kids, and all students, be able to have a “normal” school year next year? The last time we went through something like this as a nation was in 1918 with the so-called “Spanish flu” – but there was little expectation for the average American to go to college at that time. According to a website I just found, “Safe and Civil Schools,” the percentage of students who graduated from high school between 1919-1920 was only 16.8 %. In those times there were many more people who made their living through manual labor, I suppose; and even men (yes, I do mean *men*) who made their living via more “white collar” jobs had not necessarily gone to or graduated from college (one famous one who never completed college was Harry Truman). Well, the world is quite different now; but it is worth mentioning that there have been quite a few ultra-successful personalities even in modern times that also never finished college: Bill Gates, Ted Turner, Ralph Lauren, Oprah, Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, and Ellen DeGeneres – just to name a few.

Personally, I loved my four years of college as an undergraduate – not for the “social scene”: I went to an all-female college (Smith), where there was (thankfully) no sorority culture, and after one “mixer” my freshman year, I ruled that form of socializing out. I loved it for the learning, the access to our professors

(it was a small college with less than 2,500 students), for the library that was open until 11 PM seven nights a week, for the beauty of the campus, for the access it provided us to free cultural events like classical music recitals, dance, theater, the Smith Art Museum, for the liveliness of the town of Northampton, and for the cultural/educational richness of the so-called “Five College area” which Hampshire Valley offered. During my senior year, I took classes at Smith, Amherst, UMass, and Hampshire College (the only one I neglected was Mt. Holyoke, which I presumed to be not that different from Smith).

Now I certainly have not put my education to use towards becoming wealthy – at least not in a financial sense. But I find that my ability to read, write, appreciate culture and care passionately about the events of the day – all abilities that were formed in a crucial way during my college years – are at least as important to my happiness as any particular amount of cash in my bank account. In these important ways I feel wealthy, privileged – also, I did not graduate from college with tens of thousands of dollars in loans to pay off, thanks to my parents’ ability to pay for my schooling, and to the much more affordable cost of college in the 1970’s.

I see now how even the years I spent after college working with Laotian refugees and for Pine Street Inn (a Boston homeless shelter) – often earning just enough to pay the weekly rent for a boarding house where I lived in Dorchester – how even these years of living so “close to the bone” were made possible by the cushion of privilege I grew up with. A person coming from a working-class background would be more afraid of poverty, knowing what it could bring: depression, substance-abuse, unaffordable medical care, and a vicious cycle of borrowing and debt. Those of us from comfortable backgrounds who “played” at poverty (some of my Boston friends involved with the Catholic Worker Movement used the phrase “voluntary poverty”) were able to *romanticize* poverty in a way that would never occur to someone from a blue collar upbringing.

All I am saying here is that I would like our son to be able to have access to a similar experience that I had in college; to have the opportunity to enrich himself with learning, personal relationships (both with peers and with professors), cultural experiences; and to imbibe during the college years intellectual tools and a good start on emotional maturation that will stand him in good stead throughout the rest of his adult life. Not that this will necessarily bring him financial security. There is no guarantee of that at all. But it is hard for me recognize any “happiness” that does not include those intangible things.

Well, that's my prejudice. You don't necessarily *have* to go to or finish college to acquire these things (Oprah standing as testimony against that idea); but it is a wonderful opportunity to drink deeply at the wells of learning before being ejected into the harsh world of "earning a living" that will constitute much of the rest of one's life.

All of this "philosophizing" about what a college education is good for may seem trivial in the face of this virus that is decimating so much of our population and our society. But isn't philosophy, after all, the contemplation of what makes life worthwhile, of how to live the life most worth living? It is not enough to simply be able to pay the bills (although at times in my life that has seemed an enormous achievement). I have always wanted to know what my life was *for*, how to make my life *meaningful*. At one time in my life I assumed that that desire was universal; but now as I write I can hear my mother saying to me: "You always think that other people think just the way you do; well, I'm telling you, *they don't!*"

Perhaps other people have the talent to just love those around them, take joy in the moment, and pride in making their way in the world through whatever means they can find. And I am all for that. But I always had a deep hunger for *meaning*. That certainly doesn't "elevate" me above others. Perhaps this hunger is a weakness, or an effete appetite only available to those of privileged backgrounds. I don't know. But it seems to me that in this nation, and in this world, there has to be some percentage of the population that applies itself to thinking about the definitions of things like happiness, human rights, justice, fairness, freedom, etc. Our nation would not have come into being or persisted were it not for the consideration given to these principles by our founding fathers and by many who have come after them. Our whole system of law and government rests on their having hashed out these ideas together and recording them in our Constitution and in the Bill of Rights, and in all the laws that proceed from these documents.

As of today we have a new Supreme Court justice, the Honorable Amy Coney Barrett. What will come of this new addition to the highest court in the land? So many are rending their garments, fearing the worst – and maybe they are right in their predictions about how "out of whack" the Supreme Court will become. Is it just "magical thinking" on my part to hope that this deeply religious Catholic will somehow begin to see things from a broader perspective when she is confronted with the dilemmas of the "real world"? (She has been up till now mostly cloistered in the worlds of either academia or of her intensely religious community, the "People of Praise.") If Justice Barrett is religious enough to have committed herself

to a lifestyle that has deprived her of so many of the enticing things and activities that her contemporaries enjoyed during their youth – well, perhaps she is “religious” enough to pay attention to the concerns of both the Hebrew Bible and of the New Testament: justice, mercy, care for the poor, the stranger, and the most vulnerable members of a society. If that is the case, she may in the end surprise those who are counting on her to rule a particular way.

Oy, I think I wrote very similar words a couple of weeks ago – well, I am not yet giving up hope. The Bible is replete with stories of people who came from unlikely backgrounds and did amazing things that no one around them expected from them. King David was descended from a very sketchy if not scandalous encounter between Boaz and a Moabite woman on a threshing floor...and Boaz himself from the even more scandalous union of Judah and his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar (disguised as a cult prostitute). Harry Truman was a college dropout! God (or life, if you prefer) can surprise us. Sometimes, alas, in a bad way.

We are all ready to be surprised in a *good* way. This is my prayer. (Amen.)



Smith College campus seen from the bridge to the athletic fields, fall 2020.