

Corona Chronicle

Week 40

Wednesday, Dec. 16th

Rosh Chodesh Tevet, Seventh Night of Chanukah

Have I opened this way before in these chronicles, quoting Dickens – “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times”? If not, I have surely thought it many times. If you look at the fuller quotation from this famous opening from *The Tale of Two Cities*, it is quite remarkable how well it captures our present moment in history:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--in short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

This week the first Americans began to receive vaccinations against the coronavirus; this week the Electoral College certified Joe Biden’s election to the highest office in the land and the Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell finally recognized Biden as the president-elect (one day *after* Vladimir Putin sent his congratulations!). And also: we are now hovering around 3,000 deaths a day *of those that are being counted* as the results of this virus; this week our total has surpassed 306,000.

It is alarming how numb we are by now – except, of course, for the families who have lost one of their own. It has been nothing like the horrible day of September 11th, 2001 (also a day when we lost 3,000 souls) when we watched the Twin Towers come down in horror and disbelief. That day stunned the whole nation as if we had been knocked out in a boxing match that we didn’t even know we had entered, taking the wind out of us and making us see stars. This long drawn-out process has crept up on most of us (unless you live in one of the most dramatically hit places like New York City), cooking us little by little, so that most of us don’t feel it – except for the restrictions.

According to today’s *Fall River Herald News* our own town is one of the hardest hit urban areas in the state. The *Herald News* writers speculated that it is not because of “defiant” personalities in our town (i.e. those who insist that the whole

thing is a hoax, or who feel that mask mandates are anti-Constitutional) – but rather because of “pandemic fatigue.” People want to see their friends and their extended family members, and think that if they gather “just this one time,” nothing bad will happen. We are probably now experiencing the result of so many people having gone to be with relatives and/or friends outside their home “bubble” for Thanksgiving. Will people take heed and refrain from doing the same for Christmas and New Year’s?

We in the Jewish community are lucky indeed at this time that Chanukah does not have the heavy import for us that Christmas has for even the most nominal of Christians. (Of course Passover is another story – if only we are all vaccinated by then!) It puts me in mind of that classic Jewish joke where a long line of people are cued up outside a butcher shop in the USSR – they have heard that the shop is going to get a delivery of fresh meat. A Soviet official comes by and announces to people that there will not be enough meat for everyone, and gradually, hour by hour, he tells various groups that they should leave – they do not qualify to get the meat. At the end only card-carrying Communist Party members are allowed to continue waiting. The first group that had been sent home were Jews. Finally, the official tells everyone left to go home – the meat, after all those hours of waiting, is not coming after all. Those who were left waiting the longest curse to themselves: “those damn Jews get all the breaks!”

For Mark, Lev and myself, however, this winter is proving to be a very “cozy” time. Thankfully, the three of us get along together very well (most of the time!). We have enjoyed lighting Chanukah candles together every night. Last week we celebrated my birthday, and last night Mark’s birthday, both with special dinners. We gave Lev just two modest gifts. In spite of the fact that the YMCA is still open (or was, at least, up until last week), we have not gone back since March. We try to walk almost every day – sometimes solo, but often together. I am pleased that Lev seems to prefer the “hikes” I take him on to simply walking by himself on Highland Avenue. I don’t expect Lev to take the same degree of comfort from nature that I take, but I trust that just exposing him on a regular basis to forests, beaches, riversides, meadows and lake-view walks has got to be good for his body, brain, and soul.

This afternoon Lev and I walked on one of our most-frequented routes, along Wilson Road and across the causeway at North Watuppa Pond. The sky had already gone grey (snow is expected tonight), and the “sights” were mostly unremarkable: the colors around us were almost all brown and grey. The forest

looked somewhat devastated by recent high winds – so many dead trees knocked down; you could see much further into the forest than you usually can – but despite that, hardly an animal soul stirring! But there was one bit of excitement: we saw – or rather, I *thought* we saw – a loon on North Watuppa Pond. The Mass Department of Conservation has recently reintroduced loons to our region, and I have been on the lookout for one for months now. I took a picture (rather fuzzy -like all those photos one sees of the Loch Ness monster) with my camera’s quite rudimentary zoom lens – but just now, comparing it with the pictures in some of my bird books (inherited from my beloved bird-watching mother), I see that it was no loon, but instead a common merganser. Still, not a bird one sees every day. But not, alas, a loon.

On Sunday, which at one point was up to 60 degrees, Lev and I walked on the “heart-healthy” paved walking path at Horseneck Beach. It was nearing sunset, and I had hoped that we might see the emergence of the lights of Jupiter and Saturn, which are due to almost-align on December 21st. The astronomers tell us to start being on the lookout now for this once in an 800-year or so occurrence (the last time they aligned this closely was in 1226!), as each night they will appear more closely aligned. But there were clouds at the horizon (we are supposed to look to the southwest horizon about an hour after sunset), and so far the conditions have not been optimal for viewing this event which some are calling “the great conjunction,” and some the “Christmas kiss” (since the two planets will not be completely aligned but more like “kissing” one another).

An article in Wikipedia tells us that Jupiter was, as “the sky-god... a divine witness to oaths, the sacred trust on which justice and good government depend.” Saturn, on the other hand (according to the online version of *Encyclopedia Britannica*), was the god of sowing or seed, and he was associated with abundance – but he also had a “cult partner goddess,” named Lua, whose “name is connected with *lues* (plague or destruction).”

One can’t help but marvel at the themes wrapped up in these names and of their coming together at this time: trust, the sacred nature of the oaths that those in government service take, the need for “good government”; then there is sowing and seed – which could relate to agriculture or, more importantly, to the deeds we sow both in terms of human society and in the way we treat our environment, leading possibly to abundance, or, alternatively, to plague and destruction.

Of course it is our human way to read ourselves into the stars – or into tea leaves, tarot cards, the number of petals on a daisy, the *gematria* (numerical significance) of Hebrew words...but most of the time we are not so much trying to learn what is or what will be based on these forms of divination. Instead, we are reinforcing what we already believe is true by grasping onto patterns we find that seem to bolster our beliefs.

Will we make it out of this pandemic era limping and ravaged, with our government transformed into something barely recognizable? Or will we rediscover the importance of honesty and transparency in government, in policing, and in all forms of state and civic power? Will we recognize the destruction that lies in our future if we do not heed the warnings that Nature has been giving us through rising seas, more frequent storms, wildfires, longer droughts, hotter temperatures, etc. – and recognizing them, change our ways of living and doing business on this planet? If we do so, might we see a new era of abundance – not just for some one-percent of the planet’s population, but a *just* abundance which is enjoyed by all, so that even those of “low degree” (to speak in old King James Bible-English) may have clothes, a roof over their heads, enough material sustenance to be “sufficient to their needs”?

Somewhere recently I read about a contemporary thinker who believes that humanity cannot progress without war – that war (and I suppose other forms of competition as well) drives people to invent, to innovate, and allows them (through the wealth they gain via exploiting and plundering other peoples) to invest in extravagant ways in their own society’s culture. War brought us the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*; conquest of the “promised land” made possible the culture of the ancient Israelite/Jewish people (and the Bible); Roman conquest of most of the Mediterranean world brought roads, bridges, aqueducts, and many other forms of public works and also some semblance of order in lawless places (but also slavery, cruelty and the famous Roman “iron fist”). And of course the European/Anglo-Saxon conquest of North America brought us, eventually, the form of government which we still think of as the “best” form of government – even if, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, it is only the “least bad” out of all the possible forms that can be. So many have dreamed of (and failed at putting into practice) utopias – of humanity *finally* figuring out how to share and to live together justly, fairly, peaceably, and *contentedly*. It’s as if we think there is some secret key. We keep looking for it, we keep working towards it, we keep trying to be worthy of it – of bringing about that day when oppression and injustice will be no more, when we

will all be able to recognize what we are here for...and, as we say in the *Aleinu* at the close of every Jewish prayer service, *on that day God will be One, and God's Name One*.

Whatever that means...isn't God already One? Something in us, I guess, feels that God, along with our world, is somehow fractured, not quite whole, not quite the way it is all meant to be. But someday...it is in our nature to keep believing, keep hoping. Perhaps that day will never come. Perhaps it is only a state of mind, an attitude of our hearts, a disposition.

What it comes down to is to love and appreciate the world and others while we are here; to be honest, just and kind; and to keep believing, keep hoping, and keep striving towards *that day* nonetheless.



Sunset as seen from Horseneck Beach on December 13th (fourth night of Chanukah).