

Corona Chronicle

Week 41

Tuesday, Dec. 22nd

Yesterday marked not only the Winter Solstice, but the Jupiter-Saturn “Great Conjunction,” which I wrote about last week. Earlier in the day the sky was cloudy, so I thought we would not be able to witness this celestial event, but then right around sunset, the sky grew completely clear, and we were able to see it right from our back stoop; and tonight I saw it again (the distance between the planets being a little greater than last night). Not really as visually exciting as a solar or a lunar eclipse, or as one of the more dramatic meteor-showers – but apparently rarer, for what it’s worth.

Let this “star of Bethlehem,” as some media outlets are calling it, be a harbinger of *hope*, of the promise that this year of sickness and death, of isolation and hard times for so many is drawing to a close! I am very aware that our little family here on Walnut Street has been very fortunate compared to so many families in the country. Mark and I have been able to keep working throughout the pandemic, and Lev is at an age where doing all his schooling remotely has not been too much of a burden on him (or us!). He is great with technology; and since he has no sibling in the house, there have been no conflicts over who is on the computer, having enough bandwidth for more than one student, etc. I really can’t imagine how difficult this must be for households with multiple children.

But to judge by the columns I have been reading in the papers and elsewhere, many people feel they are reaching the end of their rope with all this isolation and restriction – especially those who have young children. It is so hard for them to learn the basics – reading, writing, math, etc. – remotely, not to mention the important social skills that are part of school in the younger years. And their parents are worn out from being part-time teachers while trying to do their own work from home as well (if they still have jobs!).

Perhaps it is the fact that this is the holiday time of year... Thanksgiving and Christmas are so laden with family traditions and nostalgia; it makes it hard for some people to stay home in their immediate family “bubble.” Yes, those of us who do not celebrate Christmas are lucky, in a way, not having this conflict. But many of us have our own “un-Christmas” traditions, like meeting up with friends in a Chinese restaurant, for example. One year here recently at Temple Beth El we

had a movie afternoon on Dec. 25th with an intermission-break for leftover Chanukah latkes. I remember how cheerful and cozy that was. At least Mark and Lev and I have each other. For the past several weeks we have spent Sunday afternoons on the couch watching movies with a big bowl of hot popcorn.

But the repercussions from Thanksgiving-travel have been overwhelming, bringing on the worst spike in coronavirus cases since the pandemic started, and the death rate is still picking up speed (today we have passed 323,000 in total deaths). Nevertheless, a significant number of people are still traveling, flying around the country to be with loved ones for Christmas and New Year's. I hope they and those they are traveling to be with live to see more holidays. I suppose if they have been holding back from seeing their loved ones all the way from the start of this pandemic, they may really have reached the end of their patience – they just can't hold out any more. I am lucky that those most important to me (with the exception of my daughter and her husband who are in North Adams) are all under this one roof.

Thank goodness medical personnel are beginning to get vaccinated with the new vaccines that are just starting to be shipped out! It is not fair for them to get sick on account of people who just won't heed the advice to stay home during this season. The stress that all this has put on medical personnel and others who work in hospitals has been severe, with some of them being afraid to hug their own family members when they come home. And of course some of them have contracted the virus themselves and have died.

I read somewhere recently that stores are running out of antacids! The whole country has heartburn. Somehow it is comforting to know that I am not the only one.

Wednesday, December 23, 2020

After so many months of wrangling with each other, the two parties in the Senate have finally approved a Covid-Relief package (which also contains a federal budget for 2021); all the senators and representatives left Washington for Christmas, and although not everyone was pleased with everything in the package, we all breathed a sigh of relief that finally our two major parties were compromising on things and getting something done in Washington again. The papers had told us to expect the money from this deal that is supposed to go out to

every American making less than 75,000 dollars a year to show up any day now in our bank accounts. But this morning I turned on the TV news to discover that the president has made a statement in a made-for-Twitter video that the bill is a “disaster,” and that he would like Americans to get checks not for \$600, but for \$2,000! This surprised everyone – especially the Republicans! Everyone is wondering what the president is doing. He had for weeks been so wrapped up in challenging the recent election results that he had not participated at all in this bill that Congress was getting ready to bring out. Then suddenly this: no one suspected it, not even his close advisors. My own suspicion is that President Trump, hoping to run for president again in 2024, is trying to weaken his own party so that the Republican establishment will not have the strength to get in his way in the run-up to the 2024 election.

Cabin fever. Yes, we walk, we take hikes (and I recently went cross-country skiing in the woods near North Watuppa Pond); we take drives on the back roads across the picturesque countryside of Westport, Dartmouth, and Little Compton. But we do not go far enough away that one would need to stop for a meal in a restaurant. We certainly do not get on planes to cross the country or go overseas.

I am dreaming of travel...a walking tour for Mark and me across England’s Lake District, a family trip by train through the Canadian Rockies, a trip either for the whole family or just for Mark and me to Israel (we have never been there together). Yet this morning’s *New York Times* includes a front page headline: “The Mutant Virus Is Loose. Travel Bans Won’t Stop Its Spread” about a new, “possibly more contagious coronavirus variant identified by Britain.” Will the new vaccines stamp out this virus mutation just as well as the original virus it was designed for? No one knows yet. Will Lev be able to attend technology camp this summer (something he could not do last summer)? It is his favorite week of the whole year, and this summer will be the last year that he is eligible (by age) to be a camper – however, I do cherish the hope that in future summers he might serve at one of these camps as a *counselor*.

We do not know how soon it will be before most residents of this country and of other developed countries (Europe, Britain, Israel, etc.) will be fully vaccinated. We do not know for sure that the virus will not “out-smart” our vaccines (horrid thought!). And what about the *developing* world? One expert I heard speculated that some nations would not be close enough to fully vaccinated to bring their populations to the point of “herd immunity” until 2024. And although some might point out that it is unfair for the wealthier countries to use up all the vaccines on

themselves before distributing them to the developing world, in my gut I feel that the battle against this virus is similar to a defensive war. Yes, of course you defend your own nation first, that is only natural. Nonetheless, it is important that the developed countries make it a priority to fund vaccination campaigns to *all* nations around the globe as soon as they get their own outbreaks under control. Not only is this the morally right thing to do, but it is also for our own good. If left on its own to fester and mutate in poor countries, some variant of this virus may return to attack us again in the future.

In bleaker moments I wonder if life as we have known it – a life where travel and adventure is possible, a life where one could make plans, visit friends and relatives, go to the theater or out to eat, or gather for worship – is gone forever. Surely this cannot be so! Common sense tells us, “this too, shall pass.”

In more buoyant moments, I imagine/hope that this year of sitting at home and watching, waiting, contemplating what many of our human ways and habits have brought the world to (not just the virus, but all the environmental devastation and the racial injustice we have witnessed during this past year) may *change us for the better*. If only we might come out of this era having learned to take care of our world, and of one another, with greater compassion, more wisdom, less greed, more magnanimity for future generations!

I am not sure what the point of human life is, or why God created this world, but I *am* sure that any God who went to the trouble to create it all would want us to learn these things.



Female cardinal perched in a tree in our backyard after the recent snowstorm.