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Welcome to New York City, COVID-19 Capital of the World

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Times Square, New York City, New York April 22, 2020, Courtesy Pearl Weisel

Welcome to New York City, COVID-19 Capital of the World

— Linda Weiser Friedman and Hershey H. Friedman

May 28, 2020

We write to you from the epicenter of the United States coronavirus pandemic, New York City, more specifically from the deadliest zip code in Brooklyn, where we are “sheltering in place”

although, being New Yorkers, we prefer to call it “lockdown.” New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo likes to say we are on PAUSE, an acronym for Policies Assure Uniform Safety for Everyone. Thank goodness, an acronym. We’re in good hands.

The first COVID-19 death in New York City was reported on March 1st. In the ten-day span between March 16 and March 26, the day we went on PAUSE, New York City saw a 5000% increase in confirmed cases (from 463 to 23,112), while in the same period we watched as deaths rose from 7 to 365. In fact, by March 26, New York City had about 28% of the 81,782 confirmed cases in the U.S. We didn’t know it at the time, but the horror was yet to come.

Life and Death During the Pandemic

Our own personal experiences begin with what we might call the Stage of Denial. During the early part of March 2020, we thought there was nothing much to worry about. After all, we’d heard catastrophic warnings before. The City University of New York (CUNY), where both of us are on the faculty, switched all its offerings to distance learning on March 11. Then over the next couple of weeks there were small breaks ordered by CUNY (1) to allow faculty some time to create online course materials and (2) to help give students the time to get up to speed with the needed technology; sadly, our scheduled Spring Break took a hit. However, many of us still thought that this was an overreaction by the Chancellor and the Governor, and that all would return to normal at some point during the semester.

By March 26th denial gave way to horror. By March 28, we found out that a very close family member, who had been in excellent physical shape, passed from this illness. In our neighborhood where we were, thankfully, able to work from home, the siren call of ambulances sounded practically non-stop for several weeks. In shout-out porch visits with our closest neighbors, we discovered that every one of them knows at least a dozen people who perished from this pandemic. Oh, and here’s a fun activity we never did before: sit on our porch and have a loud socially-distanced conversation with our neighbors.

We all discovered that we could have events – like weddings and funerals and birthday parties – using Zoom. It turns out that weddings really do not have to cost anywhere from \$30,000 to \$230,000. And, for those of us who no longer need to go to work in an office or to weddings or other events, we are now also spending less on clothing – except maybe pajamas.

As the April holidays of Passover/Easter/Spring Break were approaching, the number of deaths was skyrocketing all over Brooklyn. The disease went through our daughter’s large family – happily all survived – and our son-in-law was hit especially hard to the point that it was not at all clear that he would pull through.

For a while there was absolutely no traffic. In New York City! What was typically a 50-75 minute trip (Brooklyn to Manhattan) took us 20 minutes. While, some residents managed to escape the city, tourists knew better than to come visit, and with us locals sheltering in place, New York City had become a ghost town.

Community Response

Government tried to do its job, with varying degrees of mostly moderate success. However, it was at the community level that we really saw impressive response to this catastrophe. The community was fighting back. We have an excellent local volunteer ambulance group. We didn’t even realize until this crisis how excellent it actually is. This group of volunteers

arranged for donations of oxygen tanks and oximeters that they delivered to those afflicted. They even arranged for home doctor visits, rather than forcing patients to hospital emergency rooms. Hospitals had quickly become overwhelmed and, sadly, during those first weeks, hospital protocol was to immediately intubate COVID-19 patients and place them on ventilators without checking their oxygen saturation levels.

If you kept up with the news coming out of New York City, you saw that the bodies were piling up, sometimes to overwhelming proportions. Hospitals used refrigerated trucks as temporary morgues. Some funeral homes simply couldn't handle the sheer number of bodies brought to them daily. They had to bring in refrigerated trucks just to have a place to store the bodies. In our own community, the funeral homes put out a call (by word of mouth, WhatsApp, and social media) for individuals with SUVs to help out by bringing the dead to the cemeteries for burial. Twenty burials in one day was not unusual during this critical period.

People were out of work and they needed basic essentials for their families. Of course, we had heard of the long food lines during the Great Depression but we hadn't seen it ourselves until now. Just a few blocks from our home, there is a soup kitchen, now closed due to the state PAUSE order. Still, each day, a long line of people waits patiently for the offerings from that organization – food pantry items, as well as meal vouchers for local takeout shops. The line, which follows social distancing rules, often stretches across two city blocks.

There were organizations bringing food to people's homes. Food to shut-ins was boxed and delivered under sanitary conditions. Our own daughter, during the time that her family was dealing with the illness, woke up one morning and found a huge case of food delivered anonymously in advance of the Passover holiday. She still doesn't know where it came from.

Since all places of worship were closed, it was interesting to see how people dealt with their need to participate in prayer services. Many religious services and classes all over the city were switched to Zoom, much like education. Throughout the neighborhood we saw "porch prayer groups." Those who wanted to participate stayed on their own porch, in front of the house, or even in the road (there were very few cars on the road much of this time). Many wore prayer shawls. This was a sight to behold.

The Takeaway: What We Learned

New Yorkers love to complain and both of us are true New Yorkers. However, writing about our experiences in what has been termed the epicenter of this pandemic (yes, New Yorkers have to be the best), we have come to realize that the biggest takeaway for us is gratitude.

Teachers. All over the country, of course, parents suddenly became appreciative of their children's teachers. Turns out it's hard to keep working, even if you are in the enviable position of still having a job you are able to do at home, when the kids are supposed to be Zoom-ing their classes too, and they need your help.

Volunteers and health workers. All the individuals and organizations who provide essential services, whether or not they get a paycheck for doing so.

A place to shelter in place. We have learned to be grateful that we have our own home with a porch and backyard so we can enjoy the world from within in our own property line.

Family and friends, even if we can only see them on screens. Each of us is grateful that we live with someone else. People who live alone have been alone for over two months now. We know someone who simply fell down and couldn't get up. He was stuck in his apartment on the floor for two days before someone found him.

Jobs. So many people had great jobs and are now out of work. Industries that were booming before – hotels, travel, retail, real estate – suddenly took a nosedive. We are grateful we are among those who are able to continue working from home. Also – great commute!

And perhaps the most important lesson, for all that we complain a lot about this lockdown, is to be grateful for life itself.

Lessons that Society Should Learn but Probably Won't

Every individual should have a disaster cushion – savings available to live on for one year. We live in a society in which consumption is stressed and, unfortunately, many people live paycheck to paycheck. This is a disaster in the making, no matter how large that paycheck is.

Every organization – health, education, government – needs this cushion too and, in addition, must have a disaster plan in place for future pandemics, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, etc.

Compassion and caring for others. No man is an island. Where would we be without our online retailers, delivery persons, mail carriers, food producers/packers, and all the other essential services that remained open during the crisis? No matter how wealthy you are, you found yourself relying on others who might have been risking their own lives to save yours.

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