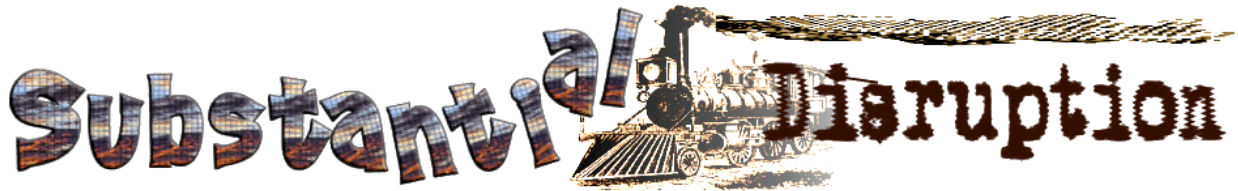


Substantial Disruption



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My COVID Diary

By Mike Tully

Invincibility

I've untethered myself from the illusion of invincibility. Watching my odometer turn milepost after milepost severed the cord. And don't get me started on the somatic soap opera that is my medical history. The only consolation is the soap opera has not yet been canceled.

Nonetheless, I swam onto an island of invincibility: COVID immunity. Not only because of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and its progeny. I believed my well-worn immune system somehow conjured up advanced natural immunity. My delusion was not without factual basis. Kris and I traveled with our daughter, son-in-law, and grandson to Hawaii over the holidays in 2021. All three of them came home with COVID. We did not, despite the close contact imposed by air travel. Invincibility, right?

Then I got sick this past Easter. It felt like a severe allergic assault, if not an over-achieving cold. The malaise visited Kris the next day. On Tuesday I called our doctor and the receptionist who scheduled our telepointments advised us to take COVID tests. The reason? The shape-shifting virus had learned to mimic allergies. The dreaded second red line flashed like neon. So much for invincibility.

The Ocean of Mystery

COVID's immediate consequence is isolation. You are free of, or at least severely limited in, human contact. That's not a problem in the short term. Long-term, it can lead to madness (more on that below). I settled into my own personal Biosphere II and got to know Grub Hub. Kris shared our cozy medical cocoon for nearly a week until she tested negative and was unbound. Her benefactor: the drug Paxlovid. It cleaned out her infection like a Phoenix homeless camp.

I, on the other hand, bravely fought the virus on my own, without drugs. Medicine? Don't need no stinkin' medicine. My superior immune system (see above) and, oh yeah, all those Pfizer-B shots, would get me through. Okay; I lied. The truth is Paxlovid and a drug I take are mortal enemies that would go all Sudan in me if I got them together. I enjoyed COVID nearly four times as long as Kris did.

How did we get COVID? We don't go many places, being retired. We usually eat out for lunch, but few restaurants are as crowded for lunch as for dinner. Beyond that, occasional shopping, socially distanced but rarely masked. Frequent use of hand wipes. Low risk.

What got us was breathing. Like all humans, we suck from and expel into a vast ocean of air. The ocean is impure. All the currents everywhere all at once are inhabited by things unseen and still unseen. They are tiny particles, mere wisps of existence, and they dance and crash about like a mad ballet. They venture in and out of communities, buildings, homes, and lungs. We suck from the ocean and know not

what we invite into our lungs and tissues. Some particles are spit from cars. Some leap from plants. Others were shed by animals, domestic and wild. Countless microbes, including viruses, swim the currents. Numerous particles were expelled by humans. Every gulp of air was somebody else's mouthful. I breathe you and you breathe me.

We should take better care of what we make each other breathe.

A World Gone Mad

The COVID emergency is behind us, at least in a formal sense. It will take time to realize how deep a footprint it left. The virus, while reduced, still dines on us. In the U.S., 361 people died of COVID on New Year's and the daily numbers are still high. We lost five people to COVID in Pima County over the last week and 633 of us caught it. Millions of Americans still wrestle with long-term COVID.

Medical consequences deepen the footprint less than social consequences. I don't think we understand, much less know how to handle, the latter. Some social consequences are beneficial. Food delivery would not enjoy the market share it does without COVID. I'm glad to see people standing a bit farther apart in lines and I welcome a gratuitous bottle of hand cleanser. I think the trend toward working from home, at least part-time, is a good thing. It reduces the need for office space and lessens the burden on our roads.

But COVID did something else to us. The U.S. has lost more than 1.1 million people to COVID so far. Death leaves trauma in its wake and COVID bequeathed us trauma times a million. That's a lingering shadow. Solitude was the national symptom of COVID. Too many people tragically died alone. The guilt oozed over their survivors and left a stain. People drank alone and too much. Some turned to drugs, or ventured more deeply. Many drivers accelerated beyond the speed of life. Kids fell behind in school. The whip of hate cracked as local, national, and social media lashed isolation-damaged minds. As the COVID sun began to set, those caught in its shadow got angrier and angrier.

Recite the symptoms of our social distemper: We are more divided politically. We declared war over social issues, drawing battle lines over things (woke) we can't even define. We scraped racism from society's crevices and sprinkled it on the lawn. Many covet hate so much they invent reasons for it. Drag performance, an ancient practice, is denounced. Texas bounty hunters prey on motherhood. Legislatures torch rights and dignity. The Second Amendment has become a suicide pact. Traitors blur into heroes through hate-blinded eyes. Books are banned and soon will be burned, as diversity, fairness, justice, and humanity are tossed onto the pyre.

I think these things are happening because COVID stripped us of the resilience needed to hold a society together. Humans who are alone tend to marinate too deeply in their humanness. When they're hooked on their own fumes, nothing is left for the angels. Not even the better ones.