Pandemic Diary, April 2020

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — May 5, 2020

Once again, from the frontline of COVID-19's war on the elderly, a follow-up diary covering recent thoughts of two of our seniors. They are heroes in their own way.

DAY 1 Was it just last winter when we left the New Year's Eve party in a snit because we couldn't dance to the music selected by the "younger group" living in our retirement community? What kind of New Year's Eve is it with everyone jumping around the dance floor? Bring back slow dancing to the big band sound. We went home early. With our midnight champagne, we mused about the state of the world: rogue leaders holding nuclear weapons, whole populations on the move to escape violence, a warming world flooding and burning and our fractured country split by political party, class, ideology, you name it—what a mess.

And then it got worse, way worse, unbelievably worse. I search for the way to picture this new virus in my head. Is it a slime oozing over the world wiping out the life we knew or a black cloud eclipsing our happiness or an invisible, capricious orange-red flower that jumped from a bat to a man, multiplied and jumped onto his jacket, onto a plane and into my community and someone's lungs and now maybe mine?

Suddenly our senior community became a "hot-spot," one of the first in the country. People died, too many, and the press showed up, and the news spread, worrying our friends and family scattered across three continents. Some thought we might have already died and contacted our
kids.

Then an amazing thing happened. By the time I had sent a reassuring group email describing our quarantine, the whole world was hunkered down at home just like us. The supposed remedy had spread faster than the virus.

DAY 2 A community like ours is not just about food and shelter for the elderly but an entire program to encourage healthy aging. Researchers track our involvement in cultural programs, lectures, art classes, and fitness. Slackers are encouraged to participate fully. Now, suddenly this involvement model of aging is disrupted by mandated separation. Socializing, a key to cognitive health, is forbidden. So, in addition to delivering meals, the staff hustles to substitute virtual content on the in-house TV. Classes resume on our individual sets. The quilters quilt separately at home. The art club plans a virtual spring show. The ukulele club members practice on Zoom. Even the drama club puts on a two-person show from their separate cottages. This COVID time will be the asterisk to the research report on aging well. I hope it includes kudos for a dedicated staff.

DAY 3 After four weeks of incarceration, it is clear the reprieve from the governor is not arriving anytime soon. We must summon any coping skills we have developed over the years for being happy, alone, together. It seems to me that with no activities or social obligations, this is a dream come true: sleep when I want and wear what I want. My husband, on the other hand, strictly adheres to a schedule. You could set a watch by him. If he's pouring his cereal, it must be 7:20 AM. His purpose is to be productive every minute. Mine is to - well, I'm not sure, but after 63 years of marriage, we've accepted our differences. In the fifties, the advice was to marry the man you could picture wallpapering the bathroom with on a Saturday night. From now on, the guidelines should be, is this the person with whom you could shelter for weeks? Months?

DAY 4 We neighbors ask each other, at a safe distance, how do you spend your time? The newspaper can take all morning, but it is hard to concentrate on a book. We've watched so much TV lately the pixels on our ancient set are separating and sliding down the screen. I hear from friends of their great cleaning tizzies, polishing furniture, sorting closets, starching and ironing blouses, and lots of baking. There is a national shortage of flour. My city friend tells me everyone in her apartment building is exchanging home-baked muffins and cookies. Does Dr. Fauci know about this?

DAY 5 If it weren't for the sudden increased use of Skype and Zoom, one could get by with a lot less clean laundry and fewer shampoos per week. There are ways around this I'm told. Always keep a baseball cap and a clean T-shirt by your laptop.

DAY 6 The word spreads in our community about a "gratitude parade." Decorate your car with signs expressing your thanks to the hard-working staff and meet near the front gate at 11:00 AM. We are there on time, and already thirty cars are lined up. A dozen pull in behind us. We wave to friends we haven't seen for weeks but obediently stay in our car. We circle the campus tooting our horns. The cooks, the masked couriers, even the CEO stand in front of the Community Center and wave. We circle the Health Center, and although people are dying inside, the horns continue to blast. Some of the staff have printed their own signs of encouragement. Some are crying, even the CEO. As we circle back through the community, cars peel off and pull into their driveways or
return to the garage under the apartment building.

But my Tom does not. He heads for the highway. "We're breaking out of here," he shouts. No one follows us. We drive out along the ocean and stop to watch the surf. We stay in our car. We contemplate stopping in a convenience store for a take-out sandwich, but remain true to our promise not to "break the bubble." It only takes one person to spread the virus through our community. We’re all in this together. So we return home for lunch and maybe the rest of our lives.

**DAY 7** Images of friends gone but not yet formally mourned and residents we know, alone in the nursing home with no visitors allowed, are never completely erased from my head. All praise to the health care workers but also to those who divert us. An amazing camaraderie of people around the world has developed on the internet: an international team of artists, especially musicians, and comedians of all sorts, especially cartoonists who keep us cheered up. Who are these clever people who keep us laughing in the valley of the shadow of death? Will the laughter outlive the virus?

**DAY 8** Ruth, who used to live on the second floor with Sam until he died last year, phoned to give me her cell number because she now lives with James on the third floor. I know this, everyone does, but I pretend it's news to me. Ruth is an old-timer, but James moved in just a month ago. They were having lunch early in March when rumors were flying that we could be locked down like Italy, but no one really thought Americans would stand for such a thing. "Want to hunker down together?" James asked.

Ruth called her daughters. One said, "You're 94, Mom. You can do whatever you want."

"Go for it, Mom," said the other daughter, and she did.

Ruth, who is not the gushing type, gushed about how sweet James is, what fun they are having, the art in his apartment, his water-view, and on and on. "There's just one problem," she said. She didn't know how long this would last, and she didn't pack enough clothes, and she can't get back to her apartment on the floor below. Even with a mask and gloves, she is afraid of germs in the elevator, and she's dependent on her walker, so the stairs are impossible to navigate. Not to worry, when she needs a new outfit, she orders it online along with matching accessories, and they are delivered to James' apartment.

**DAY 9** At first, combating this invisible enemy looked easy. I quit shaking hands. Nobody mentioned the cheek brush or even the yucky mouth kiss when greeting friends, but I gave that up a long time ago. I sang Happy Birthday twice when washing my hands until Boris Johnson demonstrated singing "God Save the Queen." On second thought, that didn't work out so well for him.

**DAY 10** The face mask is a challenge. I have a couple in the car that I lifted from a doctor's office, but they are for one-time use only. Masks were sold out online, and I have no other way to shop. The cut-a-bra-in-two method assumes all bras are alike, but a padded one tied tightly could suffocate you, and an underwire could take out an eye. The *Times* had a pattern for a no-sewing mask made from a T-shirt cut in two layers with a paper towel in between. It wasn't my look. Then some nice ladies with sewing machines delivered masks in colorful prints. I took the one with
license plates leaving Tom with a dog print. Now our governor says we must wear them in public, but the President says he isn't going to bother. Then along comes Nancy Pelosi with the perfect solution for the woman of a certain age: a lovely Hermes silk square that goes with her suit and her lipstick, tied in the back like a bandit. When she speaks, she pulls it down just below her chin, fetchingly giving cover to aging jowls. No wonder she is the most powerful woman in America.

**DAY 11** Today is Mabel's 100th birthday. She must be disappointed that her family can't join her for a celebration. I give her a call. She reminds me she was a nurse for many years, and nurses are needed now, but she can't go out, and she doesn't have the energy she once had. But she wants to help so each day she calls at least five people who are also alone.

**DAY 12** Is spring mocking us? While the ground was still cold, the pageant began with the crocuses in the lead, as usual, followed by new arrivals each week and now the ornamental cherry trees. According to the ornithologists, the birds are singing new songs this spring because the air is cleaner. It feels to me like the birds are gloating because, in the age-old contest of man versus nature, nature is winning. All civilization is disrupted while the new virus, a powerful force of nature, continues to circle the globe.

**DAY 13** Our management says that although other parts of the country are opening up, our campus is still in an epi-center, we are vulnerable and must remain self-quarantined. So even when spring ends with the great unfurling of the green canopy in the woods, we will still be confined to this apartment. The thing is I don't really mind; I'm getting used to it.

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