

# **Epilogue**

## **Pandemic: Before and After**

# Chapter 25

## Pandemic: Before and After

Was there a before? Yes! I remember! I yearn for what was. Movies, theater, jostling at the Crab Fest, Garlic Fest or art fair. So many people. Waiting in line, shopping and oh,—dinner out. Crowded entranceways at PF Chang or Seasons 52. Meeting friends for ice cream at Kilwins or strolling along Atlantic Avenue watching dogs in carriages and girls in six-inch heels.

Friendly visitors, hugs, days at the beach or at Lion Country Safari are fleeting memories. Queuing up at Blaze Pizza to split a pie or design your own for a quick lunch; hanging out at Carvel, sharing a two for one sundae with my grandson, Nate, bar-be-cue at the crowded beach house with our Canadian friends and dips in the pool for just a few laps are all “before.”

I don't want to forget. Those wonderful encounters that all seem so distant now, they are experiences that we took for granted as part of everyday life. This mandatory rift now forcing us into virtual hugs. Not the same. We are sharing cooking skills over Zoom, FaceTime or text instead of stirring and chopping and laughing together while making banana bread, matzo brei, nut clusters, or grandma's potatoes. Cooking together has always been a joy. Jake's steak, Matt's mushrooms and Nathaniel's “Chopped” contests were important bonding times for “Mimi and the boys.”

I give instruction via computer. “Yes, slice carefully my darling,” I'm not there to turn your fingers under, or hold your knife, hand over hand, to protect you. I'm watching carefully, not side by side but via modern digital technology. Cooking virtually will never replace the laughing, touching or jostling for space at the chopping block or stove that was “before” this epidemic.

The first time I heard the word “epidemic” was 1955, when Nancy didn't come back to school in fifth grade. She was home recovering from Polio. There was an epidemic, and children around the New York area were becoming paralyzed or seriously ill from this terrible disease. Some were unable to breathe and succumbed to the virus, others had withered arms or legs that were forever useless. We had heard about someone unable

to breathe, without help from a big machine called an “iron lung,” surrounding their whole body. Polio snuck up on children and produced devastating effects that lasted a lifetime and were virtually untreatable at that time.

Parents around the city were trembling with fear for their little ones. We thought it was only kids, but later learned that even someone as old and as important as our former president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had developed Polio; he lost the use of both legs and was indeed paralyzed from the waist down.

But we were the lucky kids, because a new vaccine had been developed and was coming to schools in New York City. We lined up in the gym, quietly waiting for the white-coated personnel to arrange their tables under the basketball hoop in the space where my dance class met while practicing the Highland Fling for our exciting debut on local television.

Class by class we marched up to the front of the line to get our shots. It was the Salk vaccine, recently made available to the world as a solution to the scourge of Polio. We didn't really know what went into the development of that miracle, only that all the adults in our world believed it. We bravely held out our arms, said, “Ouch!” and moved on, inoculated and reasonably sure that we were now protected from the horrors of Polio, as indeed we were. No parent would ever have to worry about their child being paralyzed by Polio.

So here we are, 2020. Epidemics have been popping up here and there over the last 50 years. We've had SARS, MERS, EBOLA and now Covid-19. We have all learned what an epidemic is and how it turns into a Pandemic. And now we wait, wait for that magic bullet which like the Salk and Sabin vaccines all those years ago can turn a terrified panic into “we have a solution.”

While we wait, we worry that we have many who fall into the category of “at risk.” The grandparents — Ira turning 80 with a prior heart attack, stents, prostate cancer; me just a little younger with liver disease, both of us at that overweight ceiling. Our children, with cancer, lung disease and prior pneumonias are in the high-risk category. So, we all stay at home wanting to minimize that risk.

We once wanted to be sure that it would always be easy to get together for birthdays and holidays. We made a decision years ago; to remain on the East Coast and not relocate to Hawaii. Why? Flights were plentiful and it was only an hour or two from Florida to the New York Area or Chicago where children and grandchildren all reside. We could, and did, hop to Newark or O'Hare at a moment's notice; grab a suitcase and a backpack and hugs were soon close at hand. Even Tank, the family dog, in Barrington, Illinois, was always glad to see us.

We've had glorious birthday celebrations; getting together at The Metuchen Inn, New Jersey, La Pecora Bianca, New York, and Tosca, Arlington, Illinois. We found favorite restaurants in Chicagoland, New York and New Jersey for weekday dinners. We took in grownup movies and all the Avenger Flics with the kids. We watched horseback

riding at the arena and fed the horses apples and carrots. Occasionally, we lounged at home while the kids went racing or paint balling, giving the grownups some quiet time together.

But Ira's 80th birthday celebration; a week in New York City with theater tickets and a family party, was reduced to a virtual dinner (totally delicious) with candles blown out simultaneously at various locations. Not the same. No hugs and kisses no after dinner cuddles, no lingering reminiscing.

Now we meet online, helping with math lessons, doing crossword puzzles, bingo or just getting updates on the latest doings at the barn. Family checkin, all together, is at least once a week.

How thankful I am to have a fine space to be locked up in. We are thrilled that last year our reconstruction was completed, giving me a kitchen that is a pleasure to cook in each day when going out to eat is prohibited. A place for everything and everything in its place (almost). It makes me love playing with the features I never had before; a steaming and crisping microwave is a joy; inductions stoves that behave like gas. I can simmer all my favorite soups, asparagus, butternut squash, and mushroom barley with total control of the temperature, immediately turning from boiling to simmering. I haven't cooked so much in 20 years.

I love my floating ceiling, my lights, my Alexa, my shades that respond to voice commands and my sofa with a built-in charger for my phone and iPad. I cherish the recliner feature of the sofa. It feels comfortable and luxurious to have music at the whisper of a command; (any album you wish.) There's Matt's recommendation of "American Idiot" and my impetus for learning Italian, Andrea Bocelli. Solitude has its great virtues, but for me it has always thrived as a counterpoint to our mostly social lives.

Oh, and that big TV with a zillion channels and Apps installed with Netflix, Prime, Peacock and YouTube. Now we have seemingly unlimited access to old movies, shows, and news. We can catch the French, British or American versions of the same shows or old movies remade three times in the last 50 year and, of course, the news. OMG too much news!

"Before" and "After." Yes, it would have been a quick 15 minutes in the morning, maybe a half hour at night. A quick catch up to add some news or opinion to the New York Times dropped at my door. Check out the weather, what's doing this weekend? Now incessant 24 hr. NEWS. Angry nonsense, Ira yelling at the TV. Good thing there are three TV's at our house, and only two people. We cannot avoid the curves, exponential details or flattening, the testing problems, the PPEs and all the details of the "after".

How lucky we are to live in a beautiful place where strolling along the Marina or looking out at the boats and intracoastal is an acceptable form of exercise and an easy way to keep social distance? Watching the kayaks, paddlers and Jet skis go by adds a sense

of normalcy to life in lockdown. Our balcony provides a calming respite where fresh air and sunshine can buoy my spirit and provide hours of amusement as I lounge, book in one hand, drink in the other; glancing at the sailboats, yachts and dinghies cruising by. Fluffy white clouds show as a backdrop to the baby blue skies. They move by so slowly these days; they seem to be setting the pace for life in quarantine.

Sunsets are still magnificent. Dinners outside on the balcony provide a sense of luxury and calm away from TV and the talking heads. Virtual dinners, meetings, menus planned ahead with shopping dropped off by the mysterious hands of a low paid but essential worker who isn't allowed to pass the sealed front doors. Our virtual dinners have a bitter sweet quality. Diane and Ira, our cousins, live less than two miles away. We have routinely had dinner together. Now sitting on our respective balconies, we watch the sunset together but separately. We marvel at the color of the sun, the orange beauty that turns to purple and red streaks as the sun sets. The silent clink of glasses is our toast to a better time. We catch up on the kids, each with their own treacherous stories, including a medical doctor in Israel, all the while lusting for the scent of good food in the crowded space of a familiar restaurant.

I contrast our peaceful lives with my childrens'. Sueanne's scares me the most. I'm watching the boats in Florida, she living in the horrific environment of New York City. Our conversations are punctured by an endless array of ambulance sirens in the background. The streets seem deserted there except for the sound of those ambulances. Her little one has announced that he will no longer leave home because it's too dangerous out there. What does fear do as it creeps into our very being? Sueanne now works from home as Nate tries, with varying degrees of success, to engage with teachers via online classes. As an only child he doesn't have the advantage of playtime with siblings. He seems to think that his mother has become his primary play pal.

I worry that my children and grandchildren's lives are forever changed by this quarantine. When will we all stop putting on pajamas as if they were clothes? Will everyone forget polite conversation and face to face social skills? Socialization requires continued face to face interactions. Getting up on time and three meals a day seems quaint. How many hours of TV and computer time will change our brains? My heart breaks, especially for all my grandchildren whose being, relationships and livelihoods may be forever altered by this catastrophe.

We watch the Governors of the states our children live in to catch the latest news . Nothing is good. Stress is high for everyone. Depression is setting in. Sadness and emptiness. I hear it in their voices. Will life ever be the same? What is normal? Worries abound. Occasional panic creeps up unexpectedly. What will happen to the big real estate deals they are in the middle of? What about income? What if they become ill? Anxiety shows up in heart palpitations, vision problems, nightmares. We sit 1,200 plus miles away thinking of ways to help. What parents aren't trying to make it better, but can't really make a difference? We send little gifts from Amazon back and forth

across the country, fruit, chocolate, cookies, masks!

We live in alternate universes in this county. Where and who you are completely colors the experiences you have. Those essential workers who are out there in the hospitals, delivering foods or driving the buses worry daily about going home to their families and infecting everyone. Those who can't work for whatever reason are doomed to panic when the rent bill arrives or the pantry runs empty. Food lines are miles long for people who just a month ago had good jobs. How devastating is it to look at your child and think you might not be able to feed him? So many heartaches.

Yes, we are relatively lucky, but the nagging commands of "Stay at Home" and "Social Distancing" are emotionally painful to the extreme as we hear of the passing of a dear friend. Just an "normal" death, of pancreatic cancer. He was without family visitors in his last days. Having finally passed away he was denied a proper funeral not allowing family and friends to appropriate to grieve for him. All those lost in the "after" are cheated of the dignity of a last goodbye. Children denied the chance to travel and support a dying parent, or worse yet parents unable to comfort a dying child. Unfortunately this heartbreaking scenario repeated tens of thousands of times over the last few weeks throughout the world.

Yes, there is a before and after. I want my family to have their lives back. To stroll in the parks in Greenwich, to play in Central Park, and to ride the horse trails in Barrington. I want their anxieties to subside and the smiles to return to their voices. We are all coping with the "after" hoping not to completely forget the "before," and waiting for what's next. The new 'after' after the after.