

A Journal of the Plague Year

The Panic

Things begun getting real for me around early or mid-March. There were already several news reports of confirmed cases across the nation; even deaths. The stock market was already tanking and people were taking notice. The grocery stores were getting unusually busier with people stocking up on hand sanitizers, essential foods, bottled water, cleaning products, and toilet paper. Lots and lots of toilet paper. Store shelves begun to look barren, conjuring up images from an apocalyptic movie. I got a little bit frustrated and worried. My roommates have a three-year-old son with a feeding issue, causing him to eat only certain foods. Many of those foods were gone. And when it came to get diapers, they had to drive around going from store to store looking for the right size.

Because of the increased demand on certain products, many stores placed limits. A simple trip to the store became a strategic mission to avoid the panicked crowds and to get around the limits on much needed items like milk, eggs, and ground beef. One morning, we went to our neighborhood Fry's at 6am, right after they opened, and they were busier than the day before Thanksgiving but only this time the shelves were laid bare. It was a nightmare come reality.

At my work, we had several requests for hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes. Some even bought several cases. We'd silently poke fun and make comments about those spending hundreds of dollars on so much hand sanitizer at my work. It got so bad that the company placed a limit of 4 per customer. By then however it was too late. We were already sold out. We had some pallets of boxed merchandise in the back, and the DM had instructed my store to find and pull any and all health products to the front for a display. The only thing I could find were a few packages of tissues and some pain relievers/fever reducers. No sanitizers. The next week, the company reduced the limit to just 2 per customer but the only sanitizer we got in were the scented foam spray and the children's ones which don't have the CDC-recommended amount of alcohol.

The Shutdown

This same week the company reduced operational hours due to several localities across the nation closing schools, affecting some workers' ability to find child care. Around this time, I begun to receive local news notifications on my phone that school districts in my area were temporarily closing down as well. It seemed they were dropping like flies. One night, we had friends over who both work at different schools, and I remember the look on their faces when I mentioned all the reports of schools closing. The uncertainty and low-key fear were palpable. The next evening while at work, I got the notification that all Arizona schools would be closing. Most schools were on Spring Break at the time. It still hit hard though with some of my employees who are mostly still in high school.

While this was happening, my company instituted a high-level cleaning list for the store which meant cleaning all frequently touched items in the store. This included the pin-pads, touchscreens, door and cooler handles, and of course the shopping carts. We had just hired about six new people, all but one being in high school. A great majority of their duties were to just clean, clean, greet the customer, clean, clean, and clean.

It was the week of March 17 when things got really serious. State governors across the nation began instituting stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders. News reports showed nations like Italy were forced into quarantine. My company made the final decision that we'd temporarily close our doors until April 1; our final day of business being March 19. Pretty much all of our employees called off before then due to concerns of getting sick. Us managers and three of our adult employees came in on the 20th to run some freight and complete some sets so when we did open on the 1st, it would be a strong open.

The Compassion

Although the company was closing for two weeks, us managers and full-time employees were still going to get emergency pay for that time. Before leaving work on that last day, my store manager allowed for us to take some store supplies home. I took a roll of paper towels and a small bottle of hand sanitizer. The day before, I had picked up a big case of baby wipes from Sam's Club. My store manager desperately needed some for her grandson who had heart surgery not long ago, so she gave me some oatmeal, which my roommates desperately needed for their child, in exchange for the baby wipes. I had also mentioned to my cousin Rachel in California about not being able to find oatmeal for my roommates' child. She had found some and shipped it out to us that week.

And that's how it was—people looked out for one another and bartered essential supplies to survive. I even came across this valuable Facebook group called "Finders & Seekers of Supplies in AZ" where people, mostly in the greater Phoenix area, post what they are looking for, what supplies they have found, and where they found it. I say it is valuable because I have referenced it several times before going out to get essential supplies like paper towels, hand sanitizer, and toilet paper, which had become extremely scarce. I myself have even posted in there of my findings at stores and have received many responses of appreciation.

One critical supply that is hard to find are face masks. Since the CDC reversed their recommendation on homemade masks and face coverings, people have been making dozens of masks and donating them to hospitals. My half-brother's mother made several dozens of them to give to my brothers' works, which is in the essential food and restaurant industry. My brother even gave me a mask. I also ordered several bandanas by bulk so I gave some away.

I began making daily phone calls to my Abuelita, which I never did before. She's in her mid-70's. As the shutdown was occurring, she was visiting my aunt in Corolla, North Carolina. The county announced they were locking down the island, closing it off to all visitors. I guess she was worried she would be stuck there, unable to leave so my aunt booked her the next late flight back home. I picked her up at the airport, picked up some Jack-In-The-Box, and spent the night at her house. Earlier that day while checking on the house, my mom had locked the laundry room door from the inside because she worried about thieves coming in to steal her abundant supply of toilet paper. My Abuelita doesn't have a key to that door so before going to bed, I spent a good amount of time watching YouTube videos on how to open a locked door with two credit cards. It worked.

We slept in a bit the next morning but she needed to do some grocery shopping since most of her food went bad while she was out of town, so I took her after picking up some medication for her at Walgreens. It was there when my manager called and broke the news about us closing until April 1. At Walgreens, I bought myself a Brita filter water jug since bottled water was hard to come by. Although pretty expensive initially, it was well worth it. After Walgreens we went to Sam's Club for bulk toilet paper, paper towels,

produce, rice, beans, and meat. Neither rice, beans, or pork were in stock however. And there was very little beef. At checkout, we noticed the family in front of us had half a cart load of pork. The cashier told them the limit is two per member. The family said ok, take all but two off, to which the cashier responded, I don't know which ones you want off. Of course, she was inquiring about this because meat is packaged in different weights and thus varies in price. This didn't matter to the family which tells me they were simply intending on hoarding all that meat, not even considering anyone else. My Abuelita and I of course took two of those meats that were put back.

After leaving Sam's Club, we stopped at Food City. I didn't want to leave my car because we had all this food and supplies loaded in clear view. I feared someone would break in to steal it all while we shopped in the store, so my Abuelita went in alone. As she shopped, it begun to rain very hard so I called her to check up. She was checking out so I pulled the car up, loaded the groceries, and we went back to her place. The shopping was a success and more than enough for just her so she split some of it with me. This was March 18.

The Quarantine

State governors across the country issued shelter-in-place or stay-at-home orders. People were not allowed to leave their homes unless it was deemed essential to do so, like making a trip to the grocery store, pharmacy, bank, or essential workplace. Many businesses deemed non-essential like bars, salons, gyms, spas, and so many others were shut down. Parks too were closed, including beaches.

Arizona Governor Doug Ducey seemed to take a more sensible and gentle approach. His stay-at-home order was pretty broad in its definition of "essential activities". Bars and restaurants were still able to provide service at an order/pick-up or to-go capacity. Absolutely no dine-in option. Some hair & nail salons were even allowed to stay open for a few weeks so long they had no more than nine people inside. Golf courses too were even considered essential.

I went hiking at Dreamy Draw with my very good friend Brit, her dog Kyle, and some girlfriends of hers on the first morning of my leave from work. It was a nice, beautiful morning. Traffic was noticeably lesser than usual and the air was clearer. After that hike though, I figured I would do my part to stay home.

I would stay up pretty late journaling, coloring, watching Hulu, or looking into the metrics of the virus. I would also drink my colon cleansing teas at night, which sure cleanses me out the next morning. I would get up around 11am (at the earliest) with my stomach hurting, needing to cleanse. I then would eat a light breakfast with coffee followed by a workout session in my bedroom while watching either the White House Coronavirus Taskforce briefing or a press briefing from Gov. Ducey. By then, it would already be four in the afternoon. My roommate would make dinner and then we would congregate in front of the living room tv. Around 10 or 11pm, I would head back up to my room, call my Abuelita (if she didn't call me first), and then resume my late-night routine. This was pretty much the schedule for my first two and a half weeks in quarantine.

It was first recommended by the White House Coronavirus Taskforce for everyone to stay home for two weeks in order to slow the spread of the virus. I think that was the foundation of most state governors' stay-at-home orders. Two weeks. That's how long most businesses, including my company, anticipated. So, I figured I could manage two weeks. And I did but it got pretty monotonous. When the White House

Coronavirus Taskforce extended their guidelines until April 30, states followed. I knew I couldn't stay home for that long.

On top of the monotony was the uncertainty. My manager called me on March 31 to formally inform me that I was to be furloughed effective April 4, and that I would have to claim unemployment. I am a skilled and experienced American worker with a college degree so never in my life did I think I would have to rely on unemployment for income. And what is scary is that the State of Arizona only pays out a max of \$240 a week. That is about half of what I make per paycheck. Certainly not enough to live off. Thank goodness for Congress adding an additional \$600 to that, as well as throwing in a onetime stimulus payment of \$1,200 for me. If it wasn't for those, I'd go broke. Instead, I actually earned more money than I did working normally. I plan on utilizing the funds to pay off the remainder of my student loans and credit card debt so I can begin saving real wealth.

In early April, my dad invited me out for a hike with some of his friends in the Phoenix Preserves off 36th Street & Lincoln Drive. It was a beautiful evening, perfect for hiking. It triggered in me a desire to hike more often. And I did. I would hike about five to six times a week. I love the great outdoors and there is no better social distancing activity than hiking. I still wore my bandana around my face in case I did cross paths with other hikers or mountain bikers. I noticed quite a few other people wearing their facemask or coverings too. One day on Two Bit Peak, I overheard two girls ask another hiker if she could take a picture of them with one of their phone's. She was very hesitant and said, "I don't want to touch your phone, but I'll take a picture of you two on *my* phone and send it to you guys!" I think little things like this is an example of how things are going to change in how we socialize with one another. Another example of such change was when I declined a hug from my own dad.

The changes in how we socialize were not only noticeable on a personal level but also on a societal one as well. For example, grocery stores installed plexi-glass barriers between cashiers and customers. Some stores have face mask or covering requirements, and even implemented reduced capacity limits in their buildings. People are hesitant to shake hands upon meeting someone new. The phrase, "We are in this together," is often repeated over and over again on tv & radio commercials and over grocery store intercoms. That part to me is strange and unsettling. It reminds me of that scene from the movie *Hot Fuzz* (2007), directed by Edgar Wright, where a group of mysterious, cloaked figures speak of "the greater good" and constantly repeat the phrase anytime it is said. It also reminds me of the maxims of *Animal Farm* and *1984* by George Orwell. Just constant bombardments of, "We are in this together," followed by CDC recommendations on hygiene. I fear this is only the beginning of a brave new world where a technocratic elite condition society into submission through fear, and drive us into a state of less freedom, individual liberty, and privacy.

Opening Up America Again

President Donald Trump aspired to have the nation back on its feet by Easter, but that of course was only wishful thinking. For the most part, I would say Easter this year was canceled. Many churches held online services, families didn't travel, and gatherings of ten or more people was for the most part illegal. My Easter included meeting my brother James at the canal for a bit of fishing, and then meeting Brit and Kyle at the Preserves for a sunset hike up Two Bit Peak. It was that meeting at the canal when James gave me that face mask his mother made.

I believe it was the following week protests across the nation at various state capitols began to spring up. Many of the protesters clamored for states to reopen immediately. Here in Phoenix, protesters even stood up against nurses and other healthcare workers. It was a sad sight, knowing full well these healthcare workers are putting in double overtime and risking their lives to keep people infected with the virus alive. The purpose of the shutdown was to slow the spread of the virus to ensure the healthcare system wasn't overwhelmed. Our state government had a working plan to slow the spread and increase healthcare capacity, and it was sticking to that plan. In my opinion, these protestors were impatient and behaving immaturely.

The State of Arizona's target date to reopen the economy was May 1. Gov. Ducey modified the stay-at-home order by gradually allowing some sectors of the economy to reopen with modifications. For example, hair and nail salons would reopen the first week of May with certain procedures in order, nonessential retail stores could reopen the second week but fitting-rooms would have to remain closed, and bars and restaurants would reopen for dine-in services the following week. I think the mentality of a staggered reopening like this is again to slow the spread. If the virus is still active and deadly, the healthcare system won't be slammed all at once. In my opinion it is a smart and safe move by the governor.

This announcement of course meant I could return back to work. My manager called me one day while I was out fishing. She gave me the details about the first week in which we would be providing curbside service only. However, we wouldn't be working at our own store because the development had placed a lock on the doors for missing rent. It's the same property management of the other stores so I guess the company had thought there was an understanding on rent payments during the shutdown. I'm not entirely sure of those specifics but it meant that we would have to help out at another store for a bit while it was worked out. I can only imagine all the other hiccups occurring across the economy as businesses work to reopen their doors.

Going back to work also meant I would lose my unemployment benefits which sure did pay me better than working full time as a retail manager. I was pretty bummed about that. Nevertheless, I was eager to get back to work, producing fun goods and services for my community. I had just started my job in mid-February and was excited to learn and grow into a new career. The plan was to have me trained up to able to take over my own store by August or September. The virus set back that plan to early next year, so long there isn't another flare up and shutdown.

And here I am, the night of May 11, 2020. I lived and am still living through the plague year. So much has happened and is happening. People have died, many still dying, yet many more have survived. New challenges will come but life will prevail. I suppose there are many lessons to take away from this sickening hardship. The human experience has overcome many obstacles in the past and will overcome this one as well. We mustn't let fear become an all-consuming virus too. As creepy as it sounds repeated over and over again, there is still truth in the phrase, "We are in this together."