

2020: A Year of Learning

I believe that 2020 has been a learning year.

Disease, death and economic concerns have forced most Americans to reassess their priorities and lifestyles. Many have come to abrupt and unforeseen conclusions.

Essential Services: As 2020 has progressed, people throughout the world have reconsidered how they discriminate between the *essential and peripheral (non-essential)* elements in their lives. The tangible threat of an early (and ugly), choking death has prompted humankind to distinguish between those humble occupations that are clearly essential in society (providing sustenance, safeguarding our personal health, safety, and comfort) as opposed to those that are peripheral and can be foregone.

Hopefully, these epiphanies have fostered a renewed appreciation for those who labor to provide seemingly unassuming services, such as food production, mail delivery and refuse collection. In retrospect, we might conclude that the respect, as well as the salaries and benefits awarded to those who provide our truly *essential* needs, have never matched the centrality of their respective contributions to the welfare of society.

Shopping for food, clothing (or just about anything) no longer requires primping, dressing and venturing outside one's living quarters - at least, for those who are fortunate enough to have both broadband internet access and sufficient financial resources. A increasing array of new providers have positioned themselves to faithfully and rapidly bring whatever a payee might be willing to purchase to his/her very door. Even the kitchens of our (residual) favorite restaurants have reorganized to promptly prepare and expedite delivery of your favorite indulgences.

While many inveterate shoppers mourn the loss of their treasured mall and retail store outings and personal experiences, it appears that an even greater number have been seduced by the benefits of on-line shopping. Comparison price shopping plus avoidance of the inconveniences associated with dressing, driving, parking, and joining the (partially masked) queues at checkout lines, not to mention *'free' home delivery* are irresistible benefits.

And with each new on-line purchase, it seems ever more likely that our dinosaur malls and their expansive parking areas will ultimately be repurposed into green spaces, parks, outdoor recreation centers, community garden plots, or at least, more agreeable refuges for our growing armies of nomads, homeless and displaced.

Travel: Throughout the world, citizens, governments, and businesses have reassessed the need for, as well as the economic effectiveness of, local and long-distance travel. Air travel for face-to-face business negotiations, oral presentations, technical conferences, family reunions, sporting events, tourism,, has declined dramatically. Luxury cruises to European and Caribbean destinations are now regarded as more dangerous than desirable.

Owing to business closures and job losses, school closings, working from home, telecommuting, and, simply, sequestering in place, long-distance travel by private motor vehicles has significantly decreased,. This has not only literally cleared the air in many benighted cities around the globe but, at the same time, emptied most airports, ships, hotels, bars, and restaurants that cater to tourists.

The evolving practice of *working from home* has been a welcome boon for many white collar workers - diminishing the time needed for and costs of commuting and parking.

A longer work day, but shorter work week, is emerging for 'on-site' (now, often, part-time) workers.

An environmentally beneficial by-product of reduced travel appears to be a substantial decrease in drilling, fracking, and fossil fuel consumption.

Mass Gatherings: Mammoth stadia and sports venues have become our sports-obsessed nation's new white elephants. In anticipation of the return of fans to major sporting events, television cameras are now aimed at cardboard cutouts of former attendees, some of whom may now have passed due to old age and the coronavirus. The burden of serving the immense debt on these beloved behemoths promises to further cripple the finances of many communities, wealthy investors - and universities.

Many churches, theaters, concert halls and classrooms, even office buildings, sit empty or are experiencing gaping vacancies. Losses in rents, revenues, and contributions have eroded their incomes and are creating financial pressures that are already forcing closures and abandonments. Oddly, for many, the closure of these venues has meant significant financial savings that have been redirected toward purchasing pizza and beer while watching the similar events on television.

Universities: Higher educational institutions appeared to be particularly challenged by the changes wrought by the age of pandemonium. Highly regarded as critical to the advancement of societies and civilizations, centers of education have long provided '*avenues*' for remunerative employment and social '*upward mobility*'. Despite their high regard, these institutions, as currently structured, may be more readily thrown into disarray than many other elements of a prosperous, progressive society - largely, because there may be lurking, disruptive alternatives to attract the next generation of would-be scholars.

As in grade and high schools, teaching in college has largely been organized around concentrating gaggles of students into lecture halls where lecturers exhort and, hopefully, inspire their mentees to return to their (often, rented) living spaces to work and study independently.

This system could change radically. Tomorrow's learners may opt to remain in their family enclaves in an effort to conserve financial resources. Many students may find it is more time-efficient to cultivate their ability to learn independently using existing and newly-emerging instructional media. Those who can adapt to self-education resources may then become tomorrow's independent *scholars*.

The danger of such a transition, should it occur and take root for the long term, will be severe for almost all institutions of higher learning. For one thing, independent scholars will no longer be tethered to single institutions which, possibly, lack faculty strength in major disciplines. Increasingly, such scholars can expect to have broad access to the many of the world's leading authorities. These extraordinary benefits might come at lower (or no) cost for tuition and lodging. In an effort to avoid crippling institutional educational costs, tomorrow's independent scholars may be happy to forego the peripheral entertainment and social access provided by major universities.

Disciplines (engineering, medicine, dentistry, ...) requiring specialized laboratory and research facilities might be little affected as the liberal arts face continuing decline.

Newspapers: 2020 has also left many readers of print newspapers and magazines to wonder if print media is still necessary. On-line (electronic) versions of such *stalwarts* as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* magazine not only provide more colorful and readable content, but their editors now skillfully embed audio and video clips, giving them enormous advantages over their static twentieth century print forbears.

Staring at glass is replacing staring at paper.

Obviously, we all continue to learn. Daily, we observe the evidence of change around us even as we adjust our habits and lifestyles. We intuitively know there is no path to return to a past '*normal*' in the future.

However, we cling to hope for a better tomorrow.

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