

Virus in America

When the coronavirus pandemic hit Italy but had not yet appeared in Germany, a message from my native country arrived on my phone's WhatsApp:

In 1551 Nostradamus predicted, there will be a twin year (2020) from which will arise a queen (corona) who will come from the east (China) and will spread a plague (virus) in the darkness of night, on a country with seven hills (Italy) and will transform the twilight of men into dust (death), to destroy and ruin the world. It will be the end of the world economy as you know it.

The message was in German, but you'll find it in English by googling Nostradamus. If you doubt, as I do, that a 16th-century writer would conjure a "world economy as you know it," and if you dig a little deeper, you'll learn that Nostradamus, a French astrologer, poet, and mystic liked to speak in riddles and parables. He supposedly predicted every event of significance from the mid-16th century on. Credible sources have ascertained that his writing does not include the prophecy of a queen that brings the plague, which means this meme is a modern hoax.

Why do people buy into hoaxes? First there's numerology, the belief that a mystical relationship exists between a number and a coinciding event. At the y2k scare in late 1999, survivalists headed for the hills, fringe groups preached an impending apocalypse, and the

technologically challenged convinced themselves, on January 1, 2000, computers from mainframe to PC would crash and obliterate their data. Second, it's hard to get incensed at a virus, but a malevolent Chinese queen permits an emotional response. Americans who blame COVID-19 on "the Wuhan virus," "the Chinese virus," or our president's, "the Kung flu," are examples.

In retrospect, the y2k scare can be laughed off. The Nostradamus hoax can be laughed off. COVID-19 is another matter. Deforestation and wildlife poaching, and the "wet markets" who sell the illegally-harvested animals, are causing ever more dangerous new diseases, for the environmentally-destructive practices drive pathogen spill-over from animals to people. The HIV virus jumped from monkeys to humans, the avian-flu virus known as H5N1 originated in birds. SARS is the scariest—it, too, was a novel coronavirus that killed quickly after it jumped from bats to humans. "We were warned," says Ali Khan, the former chief of the Center for Disease Control (CDC), adding, "A disease anywhere is a disease everywhere." An ominous warning.

I am scared, and so are the people in the German village in which my WhatsApp message originated. Mid-March brought an email from my cousin who lives there, a municipality of less than 2000 that boasts a well-designed home for the elderly. *Haus Schönblick's* 90 assistants and healthcare workers reside in the village to care for its 190 residents. It happens, last December Cousin Edith and I visited a former schoolmate of mine in *Haus Schönblick*. Stricken with Alzheimer's, Helene was barely able to talk, yet she did convey thoughts that centered on graves.

"Yes." said Cousin Edith. "Last spring I saw you at work on a grave at the cemetery."

Graves are a cherished commodity in densely-populated Germany, for laws exist to demolish them after twenty-five years, when bones go into a mass grave. Crosses and

gravestones are returned to surviving family or else discarded. People get around the 25-year edict by burying later descendants on top of the previously deceased; thus, headstones bear empty spaces for names yet to follow. Graves are tended like miniature gardens—not a weed is to be found among profusions of flowers. Headstones of marble and polished granite abound. Crosses of wood adorn more modest graves but even there, the flowerbeds are lovingly tended.

I thought of the eighteen months that the village of Neibsheim was home to my family, a miserable time for me at age eight to ten. Back then Helene was a comforting presence, a lovely light. In contrast to our black-headed classmates, Helene's reddish-gold hair was augmented by a profusion of freckles. The golden hair and freckles persisted over the years, as I noted on my once-a-decade visits to my cousins. During these, classmates who long ago despised me (on prompting of Catholic parents and teachers, I now know) organized impromptu class reunions in some beer hall or pub, where everyone ordered brats and beer and celebrated with drinking songs and shouts of "Long shall she live!"

When an April phone call from my cousin informed me that my childhood friend had succumbed amid 120 infected, of these more than 45 staff, Edith and I shared sadness and alarm. Neibsheim and *Haus Schönblick* were safe places just last December. Frightening times lay ahead.

I must learn all there is to know about the virus, I decide while speaking with my cousin. Surely the U.S., with its technical capabilities and scientific know-how would not allow Helene-type tragedies to happen here? Italy, Great Britain and Spain were slow to respond to the crisis, but we won't find such missteps in America, right?

I was horrified to witness a mid-April weekly pandemic show in which President Trump

advanced the idea of injecting disinfectants as cure or preventative for COVID—for no better reason than someone demonstrated to him how chemical household cleaners are efficient virus-killers on countertops. The sad thing is, some in his TV audience actually heeded him. Poison Centers reported twice the traffic normal for this time of year. None of the people died who experimented with Lysol and other readily-available chemical substances, but that doesn't make proffering the notion any less reprehensible. And this was but one of Trump's harebrained "solutions" to the pandemic.

In my current home state of Wyoming, many residents deem it their right not to wear face masks, taking their cues from a president who refuses to do so even as White House staff turn up infected. Nevertheless, Wyoming's per capita caseload is low because, unlike neighboring Nebraska and Colorado, it doesn't host a meatpacking plant. Ever since the president's April order compelled a re-opening or stay-open of these plants, the states with such facilities have seen horrid rises in infections and deaths.

The JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado, less than twenty minutes from the Wyoming state line, employs 6000, primarily workers of color—some legal residents, many undocumented ones. The plant has become one of America's hotspots. It closed in early April amid too many sick but reopened two weeks later, although only about a thousand employees had been tested. Its COVID caseload shot up immediately. A Weld County public-health official, torn by too many conflicting demands, resigned. "Dr. Wallace was kind of our Dr. Fauci," a member of the Latino Coalition of Weld County lamented.

A friend of color who actively helps in Greeley filled me in on the details. "Only the supervisors got tested," she said. "The rest of the employees were given questionnaires that

asked, among other things, whether they or someone in their family experienced fever and cough. Whoever answered ‘Yes,’ was either terminated without health coverage or sent back to work without being tested.” Colorado Public Radio reports, the JBS Greeley facility reopened without testing all employees despite promises from the White House and plant management to do so.

“The scene in Greeley is beyond description,” says my friend. “People who are sick have lost their jobs. Their children go hungry. No one has health coverage.” The Northern Colorado Immigrant Alliance, along with Quakers and Unitarian Universalists, have devoted their resources to help; what is needed, of course, is much more: focused efforts by state and federal agencies. Sadly, these have not been forthcoming.

JBS is one of those multinationals beloved of politicians. A majority shareholder of Pilgrim's Pride Corporation, the second-largest poultry company in the U.S., the mega-corporation is based in Brazil and has operations in the U.S. and Mexico. JBS® USA represents the North American arm of JBS® S.A., states its website.

Another such corporation, Mountaire poultry company, is similarly known as a brutal employer. Founded in Little Rock, Arkansas, Mountaire owns meat-packing plants in five states and reportedly generated more than \$2.3 billion in revenue last year. Because it is owned almost entirely by Ronald Cameron, who is one of the president’s top donors—in 2016, the Mountaire owner gave nearly three million dollars to organizations supporting Trump’s candidacy—the company’s public profile is virtually nonexistent, writes Jane Mayer in “How Trump Is Helping Tycoons Exploit the Pandemic” in *The New Yorker* July 13 issue.

The gulf between Cameron’s spectacular wealth and his workers’ desperate circumstances is hard

to stomach. As Mountaire's revenues have risen, wages for poultry workers have fallen. Mayer reports that in 2002, workers were paid 24% less than the national average for manufacturing jobs; today, they are paid 44% less. Simultaneously, a shift evolved at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the division of the Labor Department that's supposed to enforce workplace safety. Congressional Democrats pushed the agency to issue an emergency rule forcing businesses to comply with the CDC pandemic guidelines, but the Labor Department refused. By July 7, OSHA had received more than six thousand COVID-related workplace complaints but had issued only one citation—to a nursing home in Georgia. OSHA's job has turned into protecting corporations.

Government statistics show that poultry and meat-processing companies report more severe injuries than any other industry, including coal mining and saw-milling, and the jobs at Mountaire rank among the most dangerous and worst-paid in America. Unlike meatpackers, two-thirds of whom belong to unions, only about a third of poultry workers are represented by organized labor—and those who are unionized face mounting harassment. Mountaire increasingly replaces unionized employees with contract hires, often immigrants or refugees technically hired by temp agencies, which relieves management of accountability if documentation is lacking. Haitian workers (likely undocumented climate refugees) have been denied bathroom breaks and had chicken entrails thrown at them. When their translator complained, he was fired. Dominated by multinational corporations such as Mountaire, the industry grows increasingly concentrated, ever expanding its political influence. Having accepted millions in political donations from some of its most powerful figures, the Trump administration made haste to weaken federal oversight of the industry.

“We Are Living in a Failed State” comments Staff Writer George Packer in the June 2020 issue of *The Atlantic*, a lengthy analysis of the roots of our troubles. The one legislative victory our president celebrates, one of the largest tax cuts in history, has funneled billions to the corporations whose CEOs patronize his resorts and line his reelection pockets. It also blew a \$2.3 trillion hole in the federal budget. “If lying was his means for using power, corruption was his end,” writes Packer. The CORVID crisis demanded a swift, rational response; instead, we got a president’s “willful blindness, scapegoating, boasts, and lies” along with conspiracy theories and miracle cures. “A few senators and corporate executives acted quickly—not to prevent the coming disaster, but to profit from it.” A case in point is the billions of emergency aid doled out to hospitals that already had big cash reserves. The money went to executive pay and bonuses even as employees were laid off or had their hours cut.

There’s worse. States and cities are forced into bidding wars for masks, tests, and equipment, trying to keep ill-equipped hospital workers healthy and their patients alive, while the president withholds supplies from states whose governors have displeased him. We have become a beggar nation, writes Packer. “Russia, Taiwan, and the United Nations sent humanitarian aid to the world’s richest power—a beggar nation in utter chaos.”

It is July in Wyoming. City halls, courthouses, and libraries have reopened with directives for social distancing and face-mask requirements. Retail stores have blue tape on floor space to ensure social distancing, and door signs requiring face coverings. Cultural and social clubs have resumed meeting.

Then came the Slater Women luncheon in the local community hall. As before, two members prepared the main course while everyone else brought salads and desserts. Attendance

was down to twelve with plenty of space for social distancing but when I arrived, members clustered in small groups with no keeping distance. Only I myself wore a mask. One woman had a mask beneath the chin, but that was it.

Since I brought dessert I sat through the meal. Then I slipped my mask into place, rose from my seat, and spoke up. After thanking the organizers for the luncheon, I said,

“I have a hard time tolerating people who refuse to wear masks. You all wear masks when you shop at the grocery store, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t,” said a neighbor from whom I’d heard belligerent remarks before.

“Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t,” said someone else.

Most of the women are oldsters like me. Practically all have health issues, but I know their ranching and farming families to be rooted in tradition and adhering to conservative values.

“You gotta do what’s right for you,” said someone.

“It’s not what’s right for you,” I countered. “If you’re a carrier and don’t know it, without mask you’ll be infecting others. You can be a carrier for an entire week before you notice any symptoms, yet you’d be contagious.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said the neighbor.

“Last week I was at an outdoor Guitar Society meeting in Cheyenne. Everyone wore a mask. Ever single person, participants and visitors.” I pressed on. “Two days ago at a bat walk in Laramie, it was the same. Everyone’s face was covered, even though it was an outdoor walk.”

”We’ve heard it all before,” said the neighbor. Her word carries weight since, in more financially-secure times, her family donated time and money toward community-hall upkeep.

I wanted to say that COVID is no walk in the park. A friend mentioned, her forty-year-old

nephew in another state had recovered only to be left with a heart condition that's going to persist for the rest of his life. Lingering neurological problems aren't uncommon. The infections spread throughout the body and attack numerous organs, including the brain—autopsies of COVID victims show the spread in stark detail. Social-media communities speak of people who continue to suffer months after they were infected, with everything from chronic fatigue and “brain fog” to chest pain and recurring fevers. They complain that the media has focused on fatalities, overlooking people who didn't die but don't recover. A study from Germany followed 100 recovered patients, two-thirds of whom were never sick enough to be hospitalized. Seventy-eight showed signs of cardiac involvement and sixty had ongoing cardiac inflammations. U.S. patients with the condition have come to be known as “long-haulers.” These things I tried to mention but fellow Slaters were impatient for me to quit. What could I do but pack up my left-over dessert and leave?

Two days later a member emailed a pro-Trump video. It was, of course, not the president speaking but some PR guy holding forth on what a great COVID manager the president has been. I replied—after changing the subject line to “Natrona Couple's Ordeal”—with the following. (Ann Robinson's quotes and the newspaper headline are in boldface, as is my own

Black Lives Matter.)

Dear Slater Friends,

This is an extension of what I said in our meeting on Thursday. A few days ago (Sept. 5) the *Casper Star-Tribune* printed the story of Ann Robinson, a former state legislator, and her husband Marv under the headline,

For one Natrona County couple, the coronavirus is no hoax.

And they want you to know.

As a result of their ordeal with the coronavirus, Ann Robinson is stricken with a neurological disorder that makes it hard to recall words, while her husband continues to suffer breathing problems. Surviving doesn't mean a coronavirus infection is no big deal, says Ann. **“Surviving means you didn't die, but it doesn't mean you're not going to have problems for the rest of your life from it,”** she is quoted in the paper.

The conclusion quotes Robinson's advice to the public, which is the same as that of the daughter of her friend who died. **“Pray for the sick and those who will get sick. Wear masks. Wash your hands. Stop acting like it's not real.”**

You may read the entire article online—the *Casper Star-Tribune*, like all news organizations, makes COVID-19 information available to readers without charge.

One more thing you may already know: in keeping with the precepts of Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne, I support **Black Lives Matter**. Our congregation includes a Muslim couple I have befriended whose daughter was our choir director before she enrolled at University of Colorado. Last month a UUCC virtual service shared a music video the young woman had put together that left me in tears—I'm sure many others reacted as I did. It originated as a violin tribute to a young musician, Elijah McClain, who died as a result of a spurious arrest in Aurora, Colorado, as he walked home after shopping, minding his own business. Lots of tributes to the young man are posted on youtube, some in musical form.

Two weeks later an email arrived from the neighbor, who was in charge of the following month's luncheon. The event has been cancelled, she wrote, due to a COVID outbreak in the Wheatland school. Even though Wyoming is one of the states in which the COVID caseload has been rising of late, most Wyomingites still shop without masks, which has been denigrated to a political statement—or, as someone quaintly put it, “a fashion statement.” It is neither. Mask-wearing is a common-sense measure to protect others and oneself.

On another matter, my eldest son's employer, Texas A&M in College Station, recently deployed him as part of a Veterinary Emergency Team to an East Texas town hit hard by a tornado. Team members wore surgical masks and gloves; the people they served used bandanas

or tea towels. “We saw unbelievable destruction,” said Walter. “Naturally, we treated their animals for free. These people don’t have money for their own care, let alone for their pets.” The first day he and colleagues visited people’s homes; after that, they worked in the emergency clinic set up in a park to which owners brought their cats and dogs. Everywhere he heard harrowing accounts of barely surviving.

What struck Walter is the chasm between America's rich and poor. The town lies near a lake where Houston’s wealthy keep second homes and the locals subsist in RVs and trailers. The sturdily-built lakeshore homes remained standing while the locals’ flimsy living spaces were razed or damaged beyond repair. Walter mentioned a man saying he had no homeowners insurance on his destroyed mobile home; he couldn’t afford it. Where is this man going to take his family? This is what homelessness looks like.

This is what the virus discrepancy looks like. The wealthy post images of yachts and golf clubs and mountain homes; the poor can’t afford the internet connection—let alone laptops—that would permit their children to stick with schoolwork at home. Infections and deaths in African American, Latinx, and Native American communities are multiplying at a dizzying rate. L.A. County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer comments that people who live in areas with high poverty rates have COVID death rates up to four times higher than people in areas with low poverty rates. Four times! Entrenched inequities have long plagued communities of color. Lack of access to quality health care and economic opportunity, plus decades of discriminatory policies like the school-to-prison pipeline are just a few of the disparities. In Wyoming’s prisons and jails, dire COVID statistics play out.

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres is shaken by another kind of criminal

negligence, the sharp rise in domestic violence during lockdowns. “For many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest — in their own homes,” he said. “We know lockdowns and quarantines are essential to suppressing COVID-19, but they can trap women with abusive partners. Over the past weeks, as the economic and social pressures and fear have grown, we have seen a horrifying surge in domestic violence.” Governments around the world must address the issue to lessen the effects of the pandemic, he urged. Fat chance this’ll happen in the U.S., what with Trump the molester calling the shots. What of the country’s social services, more needful than ever in this time of growing inequality? Where are the emergency teams that tackle these problems? If a university can call on its professors to save pets hurt in a tornado, surely our society can lend a hand to women and men caught in catastrophe?

In mid-May Dr. Rick Bright, recently fired by the president as Director of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority, told Congress that, without a strong federal response, the coronavirus threatens to make 2020 the “darkest winter in modern history.” The window is closing to address the pandemic, “because we still do not have a standard, centralized, coordinated plan to take our nation through this.” Already his warnings have come true. Coronavirus deaths continue to rise in a “darkest” summer.

Social media complaints abound. tYhe president and his top aids are getting tested every day, yet the vast majority of Americans have no access to testing because, as Trump told *The Wall Street Journal*, testing for COVID is “overrated.” He has repeatedly blamed the rise in coronavirus cases on testing, despite evidence that the virus is leading to increased hospitalizations. At a reelection rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he appeared without face mask, Trump announced, “I said to my people, ‘Slow the testing down, please.’”

Following stinging criticism over his mishandling of the pandemic, in a May 11 Rose Garden press briefing, Trump claimed that U.S. numbers were on par with Germany's. "Germany and the United States are the two best in deaths per 100,000 people," he said. It was a baldfaced lie. FactCheck reports that as of May 11, 2020, the U.S. had 24.66 deaths per 100,000. That's more than twice Germany's 9.24 deaths per 100,000. Not only that, but the U.S. also has the 11th highest rate out of the more than 140 countries tracked by Johns Hopkins University.

The coronavirus crisis exposed our president for what he is, "a self-satisfied moron who hawks snake-oil solutions," writes Eric Alterman in his May 4 column in *The Nation*. He begins with, "The catastrophe that is the Donald Trump presidency exceeds human imagination." It wreaks destruction in so many directions simultaneously, he opines, any attempt at a reasonable account is well-nigh impossible. What baffles is "Trump's compulsive malevolence—the need to destroy what he cannot bend to his will." How does the man retain the fealty of roughly forty percent of adherents, Alterman wonders, plus a significant portion of the media, and one of our two major political parties? The advent of COVID-19 is a crisis, to be sure, he concludes, "but even more so is a political culture that has produced a coronavirus-presidency, implacably infecting and destroying what remains of our ailing democracy."

Fifty years ago I sat for citizenship exams. As an equal-opportunity American, I am outraged at a president who calls developing countries shit holes and brags of grabbing women by their genitals. I am even more incensed that the testing mess in the U.S. is as unresolved as ever. To make matters worse, Trump plans to close 13 federally-funded coronavirus testing sites in five states—Colorado, Pennsylvania, Illinois, New Jersey, and Texas. Both state and federal critics warn that the test-site shutdowns is a dangerous idea—infections are surging and testing

opportunities remain scarce; indeed, the president's decision came the day after Texas, where seven of the sites are located, halted reopening plans amid unsustainable spikes.

Germany's response has been very different from that of the United States. For one thing, Chancellor Merkel is a scientist. With a doctorate in quantum chemistry, trained at the Academy of Berlin and at Leipzig University, Merkel worked as researcher until she entered politics in 1990, when a divided Germany reunited on the collapse of the Soviet system. As regards the coronavirus, Germany gained the upper hand within weeks. While cases continue to accelerate in the U.S., German health experts watch with increasing concern. Many wonder why the advice of scientists is ignored, notes Rick Noack in a June 19 *Washington Post* article that highlights comments from abroad. "Many scientists appeared to have reached an adequate assessment of the situation early on [in the United States], but this didn't translate into a political action plan," Thomas Gerlinger, a professor of health sciences at the University of Bielefeld in Germany, is quoted.

As before, the U.S. response to the crisis is disconnected from American scientists' findings—publicly available findings—yet their research informed the actions of European governments, particularly in Germany, writes Noack. He quotes Karl Lauterbach, a Harvard-educated epidemiologist and well-known member of Germany's Social Democrats, who has advised the German parliament on the pandemic. "A large portion of [Germany's] measures that proved effective was based on studies by leading U.S. research institutes," says Lauterbach. He refers to the work of Marc Lipsitch, a professor of epidemiology at Harvard University, whose work helped Lauterbach convince Germany's chancellor of the right approach to the pandemic. Regarding the effectiveness of face masks, Lauterbach says, "we almost entirely relied on U.S.

studies.” By contrast, President Trump has mocked scientists and staffed his coronavirus task force with people lacking leadership skills. True, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the expert on infectious diseases, is on the task force also, but he was sidelined early on. Fauci was never empowered to coordinate a national response to the threat, as he once did in response to the AIDS calamity. Marc Lipsitch, the Harvard epidemiologist mentioned above, says he presented his research to the White House group in the early stages of the U.S. outbreak, to no avail. “I think they have cherry-picked models that at each point looked the most rosy, and fundamentally not engaged with the magnitude of the problem,” he is cited in the *Washington Post* article.

Germany’s population is about one-fourth that of the U.S., which means, had the U.S. followed its scientists, our death toll would have been around 36,000 during the period of time we tallied 120,000. Our curve would have flattened like Germany’s. Instead, Republicans dance to the tune of a president who has no interest in containing the virus and thinks “it will just disappear.”

“It really does feel like the U.S. has given up,” Siouxsie Wiles, an infectious-disease specialist at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, is quoted in Noack’s *Washington Post* article. The country suffered only a handful of new cases over the month of June; its citizens have returned to their pre-coronavirus routines. “I can’t imagine what it must be like having to go to work knowing it’s unsafe,” says Wiles. “It’s hard to see how this ends. There are just going to be more and more people infected, and more and more deaths. It’s heartbreaking.”

If it’s heartbreaking for people outside the U.S., how much more for us who must live with the needlessly-imposed anguish, upheavals, and deaths. It’s a never-ending nightmare of reports from people desperate to save the lives of loved ones. “I am haunted by that phrase,

‘preventable deaths’,” Dan Rather tweeted @DanRather. “To say the words is still not to fully grasp the meaning. Especially when the tally is in the several tens of thousands. Each represents a web of human connections that will never be the same. So much sadness. Preventable sadness.”

Cousin Edith calls, worried about “what’s happening in America.” In Germany, schools reopened in June. “Everyone wears a mask,” she says. “Teachers keep classroom windows open. Weddings, funerals, and worship services are held outdoors.” It’ll happen here eventually, I tell her, but I’m not holding my breath.

Will a silver lining appear for the hard-pressed American workers? *The Atlantic* reported in May that appreciation for essential workers may change their future. As it stands, low-income workers (those who still have jobs) labor in close quarters with others and are at tremendous risk of exposure to the virus. Many workers now considered essential were among those treated as disposable before the pandemic began. Meatpackers, farmworkers, grocery-store cashiers, warehouse clerks, janitors, nursing-home and home-health-care aides—all these positions offer some of the lowest pay, flimsiest benefits, and least job security of any occupation hereabouts. Studies show that in the past, pandemics have triggered positive changes for workers, Ronald Brownstein points out in his *Atlantic* write-up. Congress has laid the groundwork for this potential new economic reality. Recent emergency legislation requires many employers to provide paid sick days and paid family leave through the end of this year, and it covers gig workers and other independent contractors through unemployment insurance. These measures are temporary; to be sure, but they represent the first openings in the previous resistance from congressional Republicans, the Chamber of Commerce, the business community.

A Cheyenne friend tells me that her “Biden for President” signs have disappeared from

her lawn. “Do I hate Trump signs? You bet,” she says, “but I don’t snatch them.” She wrote a letter to the editor about the theft but the next day, another sign had disappeared. This one read:

We believe
Black Lives Matter
No Human is Illegal
Love is Love
Women’s Rights are Human Rights
Science is Real
Water is Life
Injustice Anywhere is a Threat to Justice Everywhere

She concluded that Trump fans reject even these fundamental human values. What kind of world have we come to inhabit, she asks. I can’t offer an answer.