

In the Time of Coronavirus:

A Diary by Ethan Casey

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And the days went by like paper in the wind.

Everything changed, then changed again.

- Tom Petty

March 3, 2020

Seattle

On July 1, 1997, the much-anticipated handover of Hong Kong from Great Britain to China took place. Every journalist based in Asia (except me) seemed to be there, along with many who had flown all the way from London to stenographize and commentate on the predictable round of ceremonial flag-lowerings and throat-clearings and ass-coverings. All of which duly happened. And then all the dignitaries and journalists flew back to London and history continued to happen in Hong Kong and everywhere else, Francis Fukuyama notwithstanding.

At the time, I was a freelance journalist based in Bangkok. Within days of the Historic Hong Kong Handover, that same first week of July, two other events happened that even then seemed to me more significant, and still do. One was the decision by Thailand's finance minister to remove the peg of the baht to the U.S. dollar that for many years had kept the Thai currency reliably, and artificially, within a narrow band very close to 25 to the dollar. That rate had come to seem like something God-given and normal, and it had helped fuel the Thai boom that had initially been an unseemly byproduct of the Vietnam War. It had also fostered a bizarre and unjustified boom in high-rise construction, obviously based on vast sums of laundered money, that rendered Bangkok ever more congested and disgusting for those of us who lived there (a Canadian friend joked that anyone who could survive there should qualify as an evolutionary missing link called Bangkok Man), and that created an urban Thai middle class that thrived on *sanuk* (fun) and *mai pen rai* ("It doesn't really matter"), until they didn't anymore because the baht crashed 20 percent in one day, from 25 to the dollar to 30 (later that year it would bottom out in the mid-50s), and their BMWs got repossessed en masse and suddenly, and spookily, Bangkok's notorious traffic was a lot less bad.

The other event I witnessed that first week of July 1997 was the coup d'état in Cambodia. I just happened to fly from Bangkok to Phnom Penh the day before troops loyal to Second Prime Minister Hun Sen ousted First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh. I wandered the streets in the coup's immediate aftermath, ventured behind the lines with an intrepid moto-taxi driver, had a loaded rifle aimed at my chest by a Hun Sen soldier when I strolled a little too near the corner of the street Ranariddh's residence was on. I flew back to Bangkok from Phnom Penh's burned-out airport eleven days later, when commercial flights resumed. During those eleven days a lot of things seemed up for grabs, until a new status quo took hold. That new status quo was not

what the liberal West that had imposed a concocted \$3 billion election result on Cambodia had hoped for. The new status quo was that Hun Sen was now in charge – as he still is, 23 years later – because he commanded more guns and tanks and was more ruthless than Ranariddh. And that coup in ostensibly faraway and unimportant Cambodia taught me something I learned again in Pakistan in 1999, and that I’ve never forgotten: that military takeovers take place in a country when civilian politics and institutions have broken down.

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Today is so-called Super Tuesday, the day fourteen U.S. states hold primaries to award delegates that will go a long way toward deciding who will be the Democratic Party’s nominee to, so tens of millions of us fervently hope, drive a wooden stake through the heart of the Trump regime. I get that it’s a big deal. I believe that ridding America of Trump is an indisputably important thing that needs to be accomplished. But anymore, there’s so much else going on in the world, so many things in so much flux, that it almost seems fair to wonder whether an American presidential election, even this one, is really as important as we suppose it is, or whether it’s more a symptom of Americans’ impregnable self-regard.

Yesterday, Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar (both destined for footnote status in the eventual history books) dropped out of the presidential race and made a coordinated point of endorsing Joe Biden. The idea seems to be to try to keep Bernie Sanders from winning the Super Tuesday primaries and the nomination, by circling the wagons around the candidate whose very career has been to be an avatar of the American liberalish status quo for half a century. It’s hard to avoid the feeling that they’re badly missing the point, which is not even that Sanders is better

than Biden (which he might or might not be), or that socialism is better than capitalism (ditto), but something more radical than either of those manufactured binaries: that there already no longer exists a status quo to shore up, or for which to make excuses. Things are falling apart, and the center is failing to hold. The question of who should be the next President of the United States is being overtaken by events.

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My friend Dennis Rea, here in Seattle, is egging me on to “write about the coronavirus.” Those weren’t his exact words, but that’s the gist. These were his exact words, in a March 1 email: “BTW you should start writing about this unfolding scene NOW, if you haven’t already – serious eyewitness stuff, and you’re the man for the job.” When I wondered aloud back at him what I might have to say that others didn’t, he replied: “Well, your proximity to the outbreak gives you valuable perspective, for starters. And you’re great at getting people to talk about their experiences and concerns. Also, you can place things in a global framework based on your vast experience, especially in Haiti. Wish I could offer more concrete suggestions, but I think it’s just important to at least jot down your observations as things unfold, for they could prove very useful if this thing gets out of hand.”

No pressure, except for that stuff about a global framework and vast experience, and this thing getting out of hand. I let Dennis’s suggestion simmer for about 48 hours, during which I tried to push it away by remembering the very real and pressing obligations I have to existing and ongoing projects: a book about a wildlife veterinarian and other local people in the Eastern Cape of South Africa on the front lines of the fight against poaching of endangered white rhino;

a revisiting – morally if regrettably not in person – of Indian-occupied Kashmir, where I made multiple visits in the mid-1990s, documented in my book *Alive and Well in Pakistan*; a memoir I'm ghostwriting for a survivor of the 1978 mass murder-suicide in Jonestown. These are all important stories and subjects, but they can also function for me as excuses, ways of escape from things I want to avoid or evade.

So yeah, I tried to excuse myself with the legit point that I already have more than enough work to do and not enough money coming in. But yesterday I brought it up to my wife, and she was gently encouraging. Jenny observed, correctly and helpfully, that my favored writing m.o. is to wait for the need to write something in particular to declare itself to me in the form of a familiar feeling of restlessness and urge to scribble notes, and she suggested that until that happened I could take Dennis's urgings under advisement but with a grain of salt. But then I woke up early this morning and found myself scribbling six pages of notes before I had finished my first cup of coffee.

Later in the morning I talked it through on the phone with another friend, John Singleton, who lives in Texas. John reiterated what Dennis had said about my ability to bring a global context home to myself and to readers. I pointed out the irony that, after moving here fourteen years ago, part of what I came to cherish about Seattle was that it seemed remote and set apart from the wider world, tucked away as it is in the northwestern corner of the USA. After moving here I continued to travel a lot for work, around the country as well as back to Pakistan and Haiti and to Africa, and Seattle was the refuge I came home to. "There's no such thing anymore," said John this morning. "There's no 'away.'"

I knew that whatever I might write “about the coronavirus” – a phrase that compresses worlds of human suffering into three inadequate words – would have to be modest, provisional, and episodic. I would need to resist my go-to impulse to compose fully-wrought 5,000-word essays. The important thing was not to produce any particular textual artifact, but the habit itself of paying attention. I told John that I was thinking of keeping a diary and eventually publishing it. He talked about Anne Frank, and he said: “The thing that makes good diaries good is that the writer is an unknowing object of the moment. The important thing is to write in a state of free-fall.” But I knew too that I didn’t want to write a blog or tweets or any such digital ephemera. Maybe I would put some of my diary out there along the way, but what the world didn’t need was me adding to the pervasive miasma of “hot takes” and opinion pollution. Everybody and their grandmother was already doing that, like so many BMWs and motorbikes in a Bangkok traffic jam.

There were models for what I felt I should be attempting. Unable to travel during World War II, George Orwell contributed a series of “London Letters” to the *Partisan Review*, as well as writing a whole lot of other things – the four volumes of his *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* made quite an impression on me a quarter-century ago, when I discovered and devoured them while traveling around India. Albert Camus similarly, in his case anonymously out of necessity, wrote many articles and editorials for the Resistance newspaper *Combat* in Nazi-occupied France. What both taught me was the importance of showing up when called on, and that it’s not necessary to travel in order to report. “Who cares whether you’re the perfect person to write this story?” said John Singleton. “The story’s got to be written.” And I’m here, in Seattle, just across Lake Washington from the Life Care Center of Kirkland, where most of the

first nine coronavirus deaths in the United States took place. Wherever you go, or stay, there you are.

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Jenny has more than once told me, lovingly I think but with exasperation, that I have a bad habit of egging other writers on to write books that I think they should write. A couple months ago, around the beginning of 2020, I cooked up the idea that Simon Sellars, Melbourne-based author of the mind-blowing and uncategorizable memoir *Applied Ballardianism*, who had been tweeting passionately and urgently about the Australian wildfires and the Scott Morrison government's criminally pathetic response to them, should write a nonfiction book on that subject that, surely, would read a lot like a J.G. Ballard novel. Because the thing was, and is, that the history we're all experiencing now from one week to the next is so weird and unpredictable that it's no longer necessary for anyone to write dystopian or speculative fiction, as Ballard did. All Sellars would need to write would be the actual, nonfictional truth.

But shame on me for presuming to ask another writer to do work that I should be doing myself. Here I am now, in Seattle, right in the thick of a burgeoning crisis that's neither local nor national nor global but all of the above, and every bit as world-shaking as the Australian fires, which is saying a lot. And the rejoinder to the question of whether I can afford to, or should bother to, make the time to keep a "coronavirus diary" is: Can I afford not to? What might be the opportunity costs of not keeping one? What opportunities to notice and to understand might I never even know I had missed out on? In any case, if the economy collapses and/or we all end up in quarantine, I might find myself with nothing but time to sit at home and write.

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What are the essential things that I should be bearing witness to, in this place and time? The full answer can reveal itself only over time, which is another reason to write a diary rather than anything that attempts or claims to be definitive. But the task is to pay sustained attention, and not to squander attention on tweets and hot takes and talk shows. A cascading crisis like this one creates in all of us a felt compulsion to check the news multiple times daily, especially when *The Guardian* and the *Seattle Times* are both offering rolling live updates online, and – as I’ve been doing – to succumb to the ghoulish impulse to refresh the page¹ that has charts and graphs showing the latest numbers of coronavirus cases and deaths in a growing list of countries.

But doing those understandable things induces a kind of frantic paralysis that I don’t think is good for the soul. Jenny and I have two pairs of elderly parents whose health and wellbeing we have real cause to worry about. We have our own modest and uncertain living to make, and our own household to maintain. And we can assimilate, if we can even do that, only an arbitrary assortment of dollops from the unceasing avalanche of alarming new news that crashes incessantly into our home through our laptop screens.

And, of course, a word like “dollop” scarcely suffices for developments like Iran mobilizing 300,000 soldiers and volunteers against the epidemic, or the United Kingdom – under Boris Johnson, who weirdly is coming across as surprisingly statesmanlike, although I’m sure that’s because standards have lately been so severely eroded – drawing up contingency plans for rationing firefighting and police services, or the Federal Reserve under Trump’s appointee announcing an emergency rate cut. All on one random Tuesday. Meanwhile, as of this writing,

¹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

tornadoes have killed 22 people in Nashville. And America awaits the results of the Super Tuesday primaries.

Stay tuned.

March 5, 2020

Seattle

Every writer has a shadow CV of books he or she never got around to writing, or started but never finished, or wishes he could have written but ruefully knows in his heart he's not capable of writing. My favorite of the books I'll never write is a novel set in an alternate version of, say, the 17th century, when European explorers land at Botany Bay or wherever to discover that there exists a race of sentient kangaroos that have evolved opposable thumbs, large brains, tool use, language, culture, and other accoutrements of a highly developed civilization. The Europeans find themselves in a moral pickle: The kangaroos aren't human, but they are sentient and civilized. Is it okay to conquer or enslave them? Meanwhile, the kangaroos have their own ideas and priorities. I'm not proprietary about this idea by the way, so if you think you can write that novel, please do; I'd love to read it.

A book I had a more serious intention of writing was one I conceived as a near-future speculative novel, whose unnamed narrator would basically be me, trying to make sense of the collapse of American society in the wake of an unspecified apocalyptic disaster. Not an original idea per se, I grant, but it would have been – as such novels are – an exercise in extrapolating and in thinking things through. The narrator would have been, for some personal or circumstantial

reason, holed up in a mountain cabin in southern Colorado, sort of stranded in an eddy, sheltered from the main current of the ongoing mayhem of future America, maybe even cut off from media because, I don't know, maybe the grid failed. The scenario had a wish-fulfillment aspect for me as a virtual redressal of some personal regrets, and as a fulfillment of a craving I always feel but am seldom able to indulge, for privacy and leisure to do nothing but read and think. Stop the world, I want to get off.

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That book simmered unwritten for a few years, until it morphed into something I gave the working title *Endgame: An Essay in Personal History*. I still saw it as a novel, sort of, but the elastic subtitle now allowed me to tack closer to the actual present-day world, though still with the narrator (me) left unnamed. But by what token, other than the use of that coy device, would it have been fiction? That was a stumper I hadn't figured out, but I wasn't sure it even needed to be written or read "as" fiction. A phrase I wrote down in my notes was "the flotsam of a lifetime's experience in my mind." I had in mind Norman Mailer's claim (made, appropriately, in his late nonfiction book *Oswald's Tale*) that "there is no clear dividing-line between experience and imagination," and I saw my book as one in the vein of V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*: a first-person account of a human personality steeped in the experience of history. This version came to me while I was on vacation in Hawaii and reflecting how my people – middle-class American white people – had turned that wonderfully unusual and foreign place into an outpost of our chintzy tourism economy, and how it was that I found myself there, enjoying the fruits of imperial history, albeit to my self-congratulatory liberal credit feeling awkward about it. My

personal back-story might have served as representative, and what I might have put down of it from memory might have sufficed to help narrate a larger story. That larger story was that Anglo-Saxon middle-class culture had spread like a virus to locales as previously remote and disparate as South Africa and Colorado, Seattle and Sydney and South Florida. And I personally carried that culture with me, and made use of its advantages and presumptions, everywhere I went.

When I started reading Barry Lopez's new book *Horizon*, I came to see that my notional book wasn't needed; Lopez had done what I had in mind, drawing on his vast experience of living and traveling on this planet. But part of the story I wanted to tell was how a recent series of shocks to the system had ripped off the bland veneer in stages, like vinyl siding in a windstorm: the disputed 2000 election, the September 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti had hit me hard (not literally but personally; I was in Seattle on the day), because Haiti was where my education as a participant in global society had properly begun, at age 16 in 1982. In the book I published two years later² I wrote: "There are times – a lot of them, these days – when you get walloped by the realization that life can't go on as normal, or rather that normal life never was what you had been hoping it would turn out to be." But a lot of Americans didn't get it, at that time. You might remember how "giving to Haiti," and gestures like wearing hastily printed t-shirts signaling concern for suffering Haitians, became for a while a fad, like the hula hoop.

Well, now the latest in that ongoing string of disasters is hitting us right here in historically very middle-class Seattle. And it's already evident that while the coronavirus surely is a real and deadly thing (not just "the flu"), it's also a sociopolitical phenomenon. The sociopolitical phenomenon is, of course, accelerated and intensified by the Internet, and might

² *Bearing the Bruise: A Life Graced by Haiti* (Seattle: Blue Ear Books, 2012). The line quoted is from page 199.

well end up doing more damage to the status quo ante – which already doesn't exist anymore anyway – than the virus itself.

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In short, why write a fictional dystopia, when we're already living in an actual one? Rebecca Solnit's book *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* has helped me think about these things. Solnit shows how ordinary people on one hand, and established authorities on the other, have responded to natural and other disasters, from San Francisco in 1906 to New Orleans in 2005. There are exceptions in both categories, but generally speaking those in power respond to disasters by circling the wagons to protect their own interests (both institutional and personal) and by sending in the troops, not to rescue victims but to control and even criminalize them, whereas ordinary people often quite spontaneously rescue and comfort each other and assemble themselves into communities of mutual aid and support.

After the 1906 earthquake, for example, the citizenry in San Francisco organized and ran ad hoc soup kitchens, while the mayor and his cronies were busy scheming to relocate Chinatown from the prime real estate it occupied to the far southern edge of the city. The overall impression Solnit leaves us with is an optimistic one: that "just the way things are" is not really the way things are – that human beings are actually a much better species than we tend to give ourselves and each other credit for, if ever we're left to behave freely without coercion. The obstacle is a phenomenon Solnit identifies as "elite panic":

Elites and authorities often fear the changes of disaster or anticipate that the change means chaos and destruction, or at least the undermining of the foundations of their power. So a power struggle often takes place in disaster – and real political and social change can result, from that struggle or from the new sense of self and society that emerges. Too, the elite often believe that if they themselves are not in control, the situation is out of control, and in their fear take repressive measures that become secondary disasters.

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Another entry in my shadow CV of unwritten books would have been an oral history of the changes (good, bad, and ugly) being wrought on the urban landscape and local society by the boom that's been raging in Seattle for roughly the past decade. Seattle has been a city of boom and bust at least since the Klondike gold rush of the 1890s. Each boom has left its mark on the city, and so has every bust. In 1971, in the depths of a Boeing-based bust, two local real-estate agents famously hired a billboard near the airport and emblazoned it with the words "Will the last person leaving SEATTLE – Turn out the lights." In recent years, most of the period I've been living here, Seattle has been booming again, thanks to Amazon. There are many ways to tell that story – or rather, it's a story that no one person should presume to tell, which is why I felt oral history was the format called for. The spate of new building sites, announced by signs proclaiming NOTICE OF LAND USE ACTION, many of them peremptorily replacing quaint single-family houses or long-cherished local businesses (and for me not without worrying echoes of rah-rah mid-'90s Bangkok), has been at once exhilarating and disorienting, and people have

different angles of vision on it depending in part on how long they've been here, which varies from all their lives to since last week. The book I had in mind would have been a revealing mosaic of snapshots of a place in a moment, caught on the fly.

But how obscene might it be, now, to ask Seattleites fretting about the coronavirus to share their musings on the new high-rises downtown and in South Lake Union, or on those four-to-six-story apartment buildings (with mandated ground-floor retail and parking underground) intended to accommodate the huge influx of young Amazonians in designated upzoned neighborhoods around the city (including mine)? Is the Seattle boom, like the presidential election, being overtaken by events?

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Yesterday a tenth coronavirus death was recorded in Washington State, along with one in California. The California death was of a 71-year-old man who had been on a cruise ship that went to Mexico (and then to Hawaii, with many of the same passengers and crew) and is now being made to wait in international waters near San Francisco at least until coronavirus tests can be helicoptered to it.

Also as of yesterday King County, the county that includes Seattle, is recommending that “people at higher risk of developing serious symptoms” avoid groups of ten or more, and that companies allow employees to work remotely. *Seattle Times* political columnist Danny Westneat (whose job for a metro daily is a hard one to do well) wrote about how the coronavirus outbreak “has highlighted how America is suffering already from another crippling disease: the total politicization of everything.”

“Aren’t we all by definition on the same team when a virus invades?” asked Westneat. “... It’s really bad timing for a super bug to start going around, when our political system is already so sick.”

On a related note, the State of Washington offered some advice to citizens who haven’t yet voted by mail in our March 10 presidential primary. (All voting in Washington is by mail-in ballot.) Said Kylee Zabel, spokeswoman for the office of the state secretary of state: “We are recommending that voters, instead of licking their envelopes, they use a wet sponge or cloth to seal them.”

And Seattle University canceled its basketball games – believed to be the first coronavirus-related cancellations of sporting events in the United States.

And my wife just told me that her mother just told her that her Roman Catholic parish in Kitsap County, across the Puget Sound from Seattle, is temporarily discontinuing holy water at the door, drinking from the Eucharist chalice, holding hands during the Our Father (which Jenny incidentally informs me didn’t happen anyway back in the day, “not even in California in the seventies” when she was a kid), and shaking hands during the passing of the peace.

March 7, 2020

Seattle

Yesterday I went to the Fred Meyer supermarket in our neighborhood. It was somewhere between a routine grocery run and a half-assed exercise in panic buying. I had already heard

about Costco selling out of hand sanitizer but had not yet seen the video of those women brawling over toilet paper in Australia, which went viral later in the day (Seattle time).

I felt somewhat lame, halfheartedly hoarding a pretty ad hoc assortment of this and that: a couple five-pound bags of rice, four dented cans of black beans (there were no undented cans left), four cans each of peaches and pears. Jenny had asked me to pick up a container of Clorox wipes, but there were none on the shelves. Taped to the shelf where the wipes would have been was a notice:

Due to high demand and to support all customers, we will be limiting the number of Sanitation, Cold and Flu related products to 5 each per customer.

Thank you for shopping with us.

Fred Meyer

At Fred's I saw one person wearing a mask, and I had one distasteful encounter with a fellow customer. Opening a door in the freezer aisle to take out a pizza, I accidentally jarred the adjacent door, which was open because a man was taking something from that section of the freezer. I apologized, and he mumbled something in reply. I took whatever he mumbled to be something like, "It's okay, no problem." But then he closed his freezer door, slamming it kind of hard, and a plastic tub suction-cupped to the door fell to the floor, along with six squeezable plastic bottles of salad dressing. I said something like, "Golly, that was startling!" (not those exact words, but along those lines). The guy just looked at me, then turned around and walked away, probably correctly figuring that he would never see me again, so why bother giving a shit.

I couldn't manage to re-attach the tub to the suction cups, so I ended up setting it, and the salad dressing bottles, on the floor next to the freezer as tidily as I could manage.

When I related the tale to Jenny this morning, she downgraded my characterization of the guy from "sociopath" to "just rude." But the little incident left me wondering how my fellow Americans will behave when the coronavirus outbreak becomes a real crisis. It made me put a mental asterisk beside my endorsement in this diary's previous installment of Rebecca Solnit's upbeat assessment of ordinary people.

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A group of my friends gather every six weeks or so to do hikes in and around Seattle, for exercise and pleasure in each other's company in the great outdoors. Tomorrow the plan is to catch a morning ferry to Bainbridge Island, then walk from the ferry terminal to a trail that runs five miles through the woods. Yesterday there was an email thread discussing which ferry to catch, the possible implications for our start time of Daylight Savings Time (which starts tonight), and whether we could catch one or another form of motorized transport from the ferry to the trailhead (unlikely on Bainbridge on a Sunday morning). Then one of us raised a topical matter.

"I'll defer to the group on dining," he wrote, "but one rec I'd make since most of us like to smoke is bring our own – given that people can be asymptomatic, not a great time to be passing the communal joint, convivial as it is."

To that someone else – a longtime friend, but who can sometimes be pretty rude – replied: "Also bring several pairs of surgical gloves for each time you touch something other

than yourself when you cannot go wash your hands. Avoid any public surface of anything, and no petting dogs without those gloves.”

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Also yesterday I spoke to my brother in DC and my father in Colorado Springs. Both are intelligent and thoughtful men, and I’m not alienated from my family either personally or politically, which I gratefully acknowledge is more than many Americans can say. But both left me with a sense that they were strangely disconnected or remote from what, to me, feels like a truly alarming burgeoning public health crisis. I think part of the disconnect was the difference between being in Seattle right now and being elsewhere around the USA, although there are now known cases in Colorado and in Montgomery County, Maryland near DC, and later yesterday we learned that two people had died in Florida.

My brother asserted – wishfully, I thought – that the coronavirus will “abate,” and he tried to reassure me with the example of how China seems to have put a lid on its outbreak. Which was not exactly reassuring, given that what it took in China (if it even really was effective, which some of the experts I’m reading are calling into question) was the shutting down of entire cities much larger than Seattle by an authoritarian national government.

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One of my current projects is a memoir by Eugene Smith, a man who lost his wife, infant son, and elderly mother in the mass murder-suicide at Jonestown on November 18, 1978. Eugene

himself survived because he was in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, on the infamous day. A major theme of the book I'm helping him write is what it has required, in terms of character and other personal resources, for Eugene to survive the forty-plus years since then. On the most profound levels of the human soul, Eugene Smith's story is a success story.

Last Wednesday, during a three-hour phone session, we talked about the shunning and stigma that former Peoples Temple members endured for years in the aftermath. Many, including Eugene, felt their humanity was being denied or rejected. The way he put it to me was: "Instead of having the coronavirus, we had the Jonestown virus, and we should be quarantined." Which is similar to what Michael Prokes, the Peoples Temple's spokesman, said in his March 13, 1979 suicide note: "No matter what view one takes of the Temple, perhaps the most relevant truth is that it was filled with outcasts and the poor who were looking for something they could not find in our society. . . . No matter how you cut it, you just can't separate Jonestown from America, because the Peoples Temple was not born in a vacuum, and despite the attempt to isolate it, neither did it end in one."³

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Yesterday's Danny Westneat column in the *Seattle Times* was headlined "It's starting to feel like Seattle is being symbolically quarantined from America as coronavirus spreads." Westneat wrote: "Make no mistake – this is the start of Trump blaming us for the coronavirus outbreak. Sure here he's mostly targeting [Washington State governor Jay] Inslee. But his top economic adviser also counseled everyone Friday to 'avoid Seattle.'"

³ See https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=13683.

The sports section is where I go, especially this time of year, to escape the ugliness of the real world. When I went there this morning I read this headline: “Could coronavirus force the Mariners to play their season-opening homestand outside Seattle?”

March 9, 2020

There was frost on the ground in our back garden this morning, but it melted as the sun rose and the shadow of the fence along our eastern property line receded. The day is shaping up as sunny and very pleasant, with just a nip in the air, and the cherry trees are starting to blossom in earnest. Here comes the sun, after a long, cold and lonely Seattle winter. The weather was the same yesterday for our Bainbridge Island adventure. We all agreed that hiking 17 miles in the great outdoors was just what the doctor ordered. Much of our mileage traversed classic Northwestern woods dripping with moss, and we even saw a large coyote and a disused wooden outhouse whose entire roof was covered with ferns. And we saw a great many dogs, including a Newfoundland and a Corgi, and petted a few of them. My friend Eveline told the Corgi’s owner about the time she saw a Corgi romp through a snow field that was blocking its path on Mount Baker. The seven of us hiking together shared some gallows humor, but the best thing about a wonderful day out was how remote we all felt from the coronavirus and how little we discussed it.

Then soon after I arrived home, just before 9 p.m., Dennis sent me an item reporting Kitsap County’s first “presumptive positive” case: “The person who tested positive for COVID-19 is a resident of Bainbridge Island in their 60s.” I’m 54 and had major surgery six months ago; Dennis is 62. My elderly in-laws live in Kitsap County, although not on Bainbridge Island.

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As I write this, Jenny is starting an online training session to learn how to use a videoconferencing program that's part of the University of Washington's system of digital teaching tools. Her job of 15-plus years is teaching English to foreign students. In mid-January, before any of us outside China knew to fear the coronavirus, Jenny was given notice that the university's powers that be were considering axing her department at the end of this summer. Now, on top of that, on Friday morning she received an email announcing that, until further notice, all University of Washington classes would be conducted online because of the coronavirus. Other institutions have since followed suit, starting with Stanford and now including (just according to what I've heard anecdotally) Rice University in Houston and Seattle Central College, where my friend Jeb Wyman teaches writing.

The news about UW going all-online has been a disconcerting instance of the kind of media reverb that can happen when an event that turns out to be globally momentous takes place close to home. Jenny and I learned the news Friday morning, via that email sent by the president of the university. A couple of hours later I saw it as BREAKING NEWS on the *Seattle Times* website. Then my friend and colleague John Singleton, who works at Texas Christian University, said to me on the phone that afternoon: "I assume you've heard about the University of Washington?" Indeed I had. And then I saw it reported again, prominently in the *Guardian's* ongoing global coronavirus coverage.

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I was supposed to make a week-long campus visit to TCU, as part of my work, March 16-20, flying from Sea-Tac to DFW on the 15th. I had several important meetings set up that week to do with multiple ongoing and prospective projects, to keep my freelance career ticking over so that, among other things, I can continue to pay the mortgage. The week after TCU, I would have been speaking at the wonderful Princeton Public Library and visiting Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. For good measure I was going to fit in personal visits with a cousin and his family in East Texas and with friends in Philadelphia.

I haven't yet definitively cancelled that trip, but I almost certainly am going to. What helped concentrate my mind on Friday was learning that the South by Southwest festival was being cancelled. The nature of this diary is that its composition is, and surely will remain, perpetually and unavoidably behind the relentless cascade of new developments. Since Friday many other scheduled events have been cancelled worldwide, including (just one that caught my eye) the Indian Wells tennis tournament in Southern California, often informally thought of as the "fifth Grand Slam," with obvious implications for the likely cancellation of the Miami Open and possibly even the French Open and Wimbledon.

So naturally, Jenny and I wondered whether the concert we'd bought tickets to months ago, featuring singer-songwriter Colin Hay at St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood, would go ahead on Saturday evening, March 7. We kept checking relevant web pages, fully expecting to see an announcement that began, "Regrettably, due to the coronavirus ..."

But there never was such an announcement, and the concert went ahead, and it was terrific. We had seen Colin Hay once before and had been charmed by his quaint accent, his

jokes and stories, and his songs. And this show was extra-special because of the circumstances. I just hope no one in the crowded cathedral caught or passed on the coronavirus. Colin Hay is 66 years old. When he walked offstage at the end, I saw him elbow-bump a stagehand.

“This reminds me of when I was in church,” he said to start the evening, then paused a beat and added: “– that one time.” Then he said: “We won’t bother addressing what’s going on out there. We’ll just have our own little cocoon here, for a couple of hours.”

And we did. Near the end he told some of his personal backstory of overcoming alcoholism and career doldrums. “People ask me, ‘Why do you keep going on the road, going on tour?’” he said. “And the simple answer is, it makes me feel useful.” And, introducing one of the last songs of the evening, he said, “There’s so many horrendous things going on. It’s nice to remember now and again that it’s a beautiful world.”

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Earlier today I shared with three local friends the news I read that the entire country of Italy has been locked down, and that Israel is to begin mandatory two-week quarantines of anyone entering the country. My friend Eric replied: “So, like, when do I get to see my child again?” Eric’s daughter is studying at a university in northern England.

My father and I traded notes on the Episcopal priest in DC who tested positive after giving communion to and shaking hands with 500 churchgoers yesterday. My father is an Episcopal priest. “I feel very lucky to be retired,” he told me. Next Sunday my 82-year-old dad, hopefully accompanied by his friend Jerry, is planning to drive an hour from Colorado Springs to

Pueblo to officiate at a dwindling parish there. The Pueblo congregation is usually about a dozen people, all over 60.

Also today, a friend in Milwaukee told me:

I was entertaining a friend from out of town this weekend. He lives in Hong Kong and engaged in a self-enacted quarantine in Delhi for 10 days before flying to Milwaukee for a series of meetings; ironically, the folks he was supposed to meet with (C-level executives at [a corporation headquartered in Wisconsin]) refused to meet with him in person, so he had to sit in his hotel room and Skype into the meetings. Total paranoia. My friend pointed out to me that all of the coronavirus outbreaks are happening where Chinese tourists typically travel. I didn't see that pattern beforehand.

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Here is the lead paragraph of an article by aerospace reporter Dominic Gates in today's *Seattle Times*:

The extended grounding of Boeing's 737 MAX, which this week passes the one-year mark, has made the jetmaker's future tough and uncertain. Now the global spread of the coronavirus – which has rapidly slashed demand for air travel and for jets – will complicate its efforts to recover.