

Gifts of the Pandemic

Please understand that my comments here are not intended to trivialize or minimize the pandemic that we're all living through and will continue to deal with for the foreseeable future. For many who don't have the options and the shelter that I have, who are not retired with health care, who have small children at home, who are working or worse have lost their jobs, or just can't make ends meet during these trying times, this pandemic has been hell on earth, and will continue to be until it is brought under control, and it will be. It's just a matter of when. In the meantime, this is a time to think about those who are less fortunate, and to take action to help them through this time.

Having said that, for me, in forcing us to change our habits in order to cope with what we're confronting, the pandemic has presented a panoply of gifts of all kinds that I've been savoring, and I suspect in some ways it will have changed my life, and my habits and routines, for the better and for the long term.

At the heart of it all, the pandemic has forced all of us to simplify. And yes, 'tis a gift to be simple, if you embrace it.

I've gotten away from the habit of reading books, yes books, over the past decade or so. There's so much else to occupy your attention, and I'm a compulsive magazine subscriber, so much so that there never seemed to be any time to read anything else by the time I had plowed through the daily papers and all the magazines that overflowed our mailbox every two weeks or so. With the pandemic, I've rediscovered the pleasure of reading...books. I've been alternating between serious stuff like science writing and histories and the occasional biography, leavened with a heavy dose of mysteries to lighten the load between some of the doorstops. And I like the balance. We might discontinue a few of the magazines in the future to leave enough time in more normal times to accommodate the books. All gifts there for the taking, all along.

I've also discovered the magic of YouTube and podcasts. I've always watched the occasional opera on YouTube, as well as some of the viral stuff like Randy Rainbow, but now I've discovered that there's a world of theater, and other arts

there at our fingertips. Yes, I'd rather sit in a theater on Broadway and watch something live but watching something performed live on Zoom on the small screen is such a gift in its own way.

And speaking of Zoom. The pandemic has been such a catalyst for me, and I suspect most of you, to connect on a much more regular basis with far-flung friends and family who, for me at least, I might have seen once or twice a year, if that. I have regular weekly Zoom gatherings with college friends in all four corners of this country, with law friends, with my poker group in Hastings in lieu of our regular weekly game, and with friends around the country from Semester at Sea. I love these sessions. The conversations are all over the place, the people are alive and smart and teach me something every time we get together. They are energizing. Seeing their faces every week, and the faces of our men's group every two weeks, is such a gift. Without a pandemic, who would ever have thought to organize these gatherings?

Even the connection that Annie and I have with FUSW has been affected by the pandemic and by Zoom. Back in 1918, to be quarantined meant to be shut off from the world. What a gift it has been that this pandemic chose a time to infect and afflict when we had the means, at least most of us, to get on Zoom, or What's App or FaceTime, and stay in contact with those most important to us. Living in Garrison, Annie and I have not been regulars at Sunday services over the past several years. It's been such a treat, and yes, such a gift, to be able to be present and so much more a part of our community weekly through Zoom. We're so much more connected than we were before the pandemic, and now we know that on those weeks when it seems too much to drive down, after the pandemic is just a memory, we can still participate whether on Zoom or through the streaming that we've been working to implement.

And then there's our health. Sure, there's the constant threat of contracting the virus. But by taking reasonable precautions, and not going near an indoor restaurant or a bar or a gym or a theater, we've found that you can cobble together a reasonable routine and existence. I've been participating in an online Zoom exercise class since the pandemic first hit, and my knees and my rotator

cuffs are in better shape than they have been in years. I've also gotten into a regular daily exercise routine which most often is a long walk – we'll see what happens with that once the days get even shorter and the temperatures drop – and the result is that I've lost a whole bunch of weight. Now that's a gift.

And then there's the election. In 2018, I was out ringing on doorbells and stuffing literature under the doors when no one answered. This time around, it's been frustrating, but recently, with Callie's persistent encouragement, I've started texting to Pennsylvania, and Michigan, and Arizona, and Ohio, and who knows where else in the country I will visit over the course of the next two weeks? And yes, it has been therapeutic, and it has been energizing, and it is a sort of a gift.

But maybe the greatest gift of all is that the pandemic has given us the time and the perspective to recognize what's important and what isn't. Separating some of the wheat from the chaff. A lot of things that maybe we thought were important we've now found we can do without without missing them a whole lot. I know it's hard to predict how long some of these changes will last, but I hope, at least, that most of them will have some legs.

So recognize some of the little changes in your life and your routines that maybe have lessened the pressures and the hustle and bustle of life in this crazy century, take a walk, read a book, get in touch with some friends, share a glass of wine virtually on Zoom, and savor the simple gifts that we have been given. Just wear a mask and keep your distance for a little while longer.

- Art Lowenstein