

Message From the Bubble



Love in the Time of COVID19

A fine pal suggested I offer some strategies for Boredom Immunity as we endure our varying degrees of lock down and isolation. I doubt I have anything useful to suggest, but why let that stop me, right?

It hardly seems real. Unless you are one of the people on the front lines of our current predicament, the whole thing has a fuzzy cast to it. Like a piano slightly out of tune, just off enough that is not quite cringe-inducing, but far enough from harmonious to make it a little hard to take. Occasional moments of wincing at wave forms that do not quite align, the urge to stop and play a passage or chord over again to try to determine what is wrong. And then over time, the off notes start to sound more or less okay, what was the problem anyway?

We have been locked up for how long now? A week or two, for most, maybe a month for the more anticipatory/paranoid among us. Time goes mushy: Is it Friday or Tuesday? Sunday, you say. What difference?

For us – me and my enfeebled immune system and Stanwyck and the dogs – life under CV19 is really just a sharpened continuation of the practices of the past year. We have been practicing social distancing since before it was cool. Or cruel. A tad more intensely diligent, but really just more of the same. Keep your distance. Wear your mask if you have to go

out. And really, do you need to go out after all?

I know things are different now. Our friends in the medical world – including the heroes who helped keep me alive over the past year – are up against some serious trouble. A few scattered friends have been sick, or are very sick, or have even died. Our kids are scattered from mid-Florida to north Vermont, riding out the plague in their own fashion, afraid to come home because they are afraid they might kill me. (This alone cuts with so many sharp edges.) My elderly parents face isolation and uncertainty along with the litany of medical issues they brought with them to this era.

Aside from phone calls and Zooming (a new verb for our time), I am not much use to any of them. We talk, commiserate, hope for better times.

And yet...

A friend posted a lovely drawing on Facebook today with a comment that she had a wonderful day yesterday, and that fact made her feel a tad guilty. Piffle, says me, the world needs joy to survive, so have as many good days as you can. Good days had may serve as counterweight to the blazing shit show raging around us.

Or so I like to believe.

Because lo and behold...Most of my days over the past month have been good, some even very good. We are in the blush of Spring, the best weather of the year here America's most penis-shaped state. I have a nice home – free of mold, bless you all! – and a pantry full of food. I have books and music. And dogs. And most of all, Stanwyck.



Lou and Mimi

I spent the past year saying “Rob is the luckiest boy in the world”. And I meant it. Now, I feel even luckier. Most folks don’t have it so good.

People living alone or living with one or more people they do not really like. Having toddlers who need care, feeding, stimulation, and someone who can explain what is going on in a way that reassures, yet is honest and real. All while trying to not lose the proverbial shit in the face of what is probably the single biggest crisis most of us have ever seen.

Teens – and their parents – who are sick to death of the four walls and however many family members from which they cannot seem to escape. I cannot imagine how dire it must feel for everyone involved.

Worse: People stuck in toxic and abusive conditions. People who were at best day-to-day survivors, now out of work and money and wondering how to survive. People still at work and

risking exposure to a potentially-lethal virus doing the jobs we need them to do to keep the barest level of society functioning. People who were largely considered unskilled workers until all this happened, people who are now deemed “essential” to keeping the machine running.

I think about these folks every day, feel grief and despair for their plight.

And yet...

I still enjoy my days in semi-solitude. I revel in the absence of schedule and deadline and hurry up here and there. I am content to sit and stare at the sky for long stretches. After a year in which it was often all I could do, I have come to appreciate such a simple, basic activity.

But it is not for everyone. Stanwyck, bless her, has a dozen endeavors underway. The house is a maelstrom of sewing machines and laptop workstations and studio projects. She meets with friends via Zoom nearly every day, calls her Mom every day. I think she has mostly good days.

But the weight from ‘out there’ exerts force, creeps into dreams, disrupts easy slumber. We do not try to deny it. But given the measure of control we have in regard to the creeping beast, we try to not dwell and brood.

We do the best we can. It’s all any of us can strive for.

So, maybe a few ideas for how to build up some immunity to the tedium?

1. Avoid watching the wall to wall coverage of the crisis, especially if the criminal president is speaking. Read a few decent news sources every day and set it aside. Nothing is going to change in the course of an hour or a day or between a show’s A block and B block.
2. Try to establish a relationship with quiet and

stillness. If you can, cultivate Silence as a friend, whatever that might mean to you. Counter-intuitive tip: You can experience Silence even when your environment is howling like a tea kettle.

3. Read. Or write. Or draw/paint/play an instrument. A little goes a long way.
4. Move your body. Anything helps: sit to stand from a chair ten times and stretch your arms overhead. Or dance. Or jump up and down. Just move.
5. Eat well, drink moderately (or even not at all, if you wish). You do not have to be a fanatic. Just take it easy if you can.
6. If you can't, and you go on a spree, don't sweat it. Forgive yourself your transgressions.
7. Notice. The stuff that you like and the stuff you don't. Just pay attention. The blog contends that if you are bored, it means you are not paying attention. Find something worth paying attention to.
8. And most of all, and you know what's coming next doncha, you've been here before and it seems to still be the key for getting through whatever demented plot twist the cosmic scriptwriters throw our way...

Love Each Other, Motherfuckers!

It matters a difference.

What is a Metaphor For, Anyway?



One of our standard holiday activities is a ridiculously complex and near-impossible jigsaw puzzle. It lasts for days – weeks, even – and gives everybody a little diversion.

For Thanksgiving, the puzzle was a watercolor drawing of Shakespeare Books in Paris. Colorful. Fun. Aggravating. As always, we would get to the point where we joked about how there just had to be pieces missing, damn these people, &c. The joke behind the joke is that we have always made this complaint, and it has never turned out to be true. We always find that damned piece we were sure was missing, and we finish up with a sense of smug triumph.

Not this year. The bookstore puzzle had three pieces missing. Even stranger, there were four pieces that were clearly part of the bookstore montage, but that did not fit anywhere. Just random extras that must have belonged in some other bookstore puzzle.

Stanwyck lodged a complaint. The company, filled with remorse, offered a replacement of any puzzle in their inventory. We picked the one pictured up top here, a kitschy postcard from the town of my birth.

It arrived in time for Christmas. It proved to be ridiculously difficult, and most of the family gave up on it after a few days. But I am a stubborn – and/or obsessive – sort, so I kept at it. For weeks. Naturally, I complained that pieces were missing, but what are the odds two times in a row?

When I arrived at the progress pictured above, it became clear. There were pieces missing, no doubt. Even better: The

last four pieces that would complete the diver's thigh did not fit the cut of this puzzle. They were close, but definitely not right for this puzzle. After a full month working this damn thing I tossed the pieces in the box in disgust.

And now, the hinge point of this little essay, because what is meta for if not to extrapolate metaphorically?

For the past year or so I have known what is expected of me at pretty much any given moment. Submit to treatments. Endure the repercussions. Repeat. It was simple and straightforward and, frankly, about all I had energy for. I showed up when I was supposed to, took my medicine, and managed not to de cease. Bravo, well done.

Now that I am 'cured' More or less; there really is no cure for AITL. Yet. I find myself at loose ends. What am I to do with my newfound state of curedom?

Well, obviously, I should write and read and embrace my second (or third) chances, live life large and all such as that. I am *normal* again, or so it might seem. Get cracking!

Goddammit. I think there are some pieces missing from this puzzle. And a few others that don't seem to fit.

First off, I don't feel *normal*. I still struggle with energy and stamina issues and I continue to grapple with finding the right, um, the right...

Word. That's it. The right word.

I do not feel bad. But I don't quite feel great either. Some folks who have this transplant report that it took them three years to get back to whatever normal looks like. I did not believe that when I first heard it, figured it was some lollygagging candy ass making excuses.

I believe it now. Hoo boy. Now add in this cruncher: What am I to do for my Third Act on the mortal stage? It is arguable that

my Third Act already transpired after the Incident of the Tick and I am well into Act Four now. Which means I have overstayed my welcome and the cheap seats will be tossing overripe fruit any minute now. TBH, I felt like my recovery from the tick was a mistake. I recall clearly a moment that summer when I was pretty sure I was a goner. Maybe I was, and I'm in some sort of Twilight Zone episode where I refuse to admit that I've up and died already.

I find myself hesitant to commit to any kind of scheduled activity, uncertain if I will have the juice when the time comes to show up. It took all my willpower to pull the trigger on a flight and hotel commitment for Big Ears. I'm going come hell or high water, but dog knows how much juice I will have for the festivities.

Reading is getting better. I can stick with it for long stretches and actually absorb what I'm reading. I'm getting damn good at the NYT crossword. The greatest cognitive challenge now is difficulty in generative thinking. I've always been quick at synthesis of wide ranging ideas and formulating ways of re-casting them. Now, not so much.

I have article pitches teed up. But will I have the wherewithal to actually meet the commitment? Hard to say. Some days I'm cooking with gas. Other days it's all I can manage to drink some coffee before I go back to sleep. The pitches remain in the drafts folder.

I'm working on an idea for a novel, but find myself overwhelmed. Naturally, because I am stubbornly ob- and excessive, it is preposterously ambitious. I don't have any idea how to write a novel – aside from writing one not very good one, my experience is thin. It's like someone who has built a couple of crappy birdhouses – or maybe just one – trying to build a mansion.

So what to do? Or even bigger: What should I be doing? And

where the hell did that *should* come from, anyway?

The hell if I know. But I feel like I should be doing more. (That damned *should* again.) I feel like I should feel better. (I don't feel bad, but I don't feel especially good, either. I'm like lukewarm water.) This comes along with not-a-little bit of survivor guilt. As much as I believe the whole thing is random, I can't help but occasionally fall into some bathetic *what was I meant to do with this second (or third) chance?* line of thought.

And then there's that ever-present nagger of the possibility of recurrence.

Come on! Take the good news and quit yer bellyaching! Reckon oughta. Good news is that this is nothing that nags at me while I'm awake. It only comes when I'm sleeping. Mostly.

Right now, I can't make the pieces fit. I've got a sneaking suspicion that some pieces might have fallen off the table and down the HVAC vent. Or maybe the dogs ate it. Whatever. Unlike that puzzle up top – depicting the place of my arrival – I can't sweep this puzzle aside.

Only one thing to do, reckon.



Merry Happiness



So here's the thing. I've been kinda quiet lately, trying to get myself back into the groove of living outside the hospital. Steady progress but not yet *convalesced* to the extent I'd like. Baby steps.

Part of this has been the suspense. Did the three-quarters of a million bucks worth of hi-tech medical treatment work? Have

I beat the odds? The bet was a stretch for even the most pie eyed optimist.

The 100 day benchmark is one of the key milestones for this treatment. Last week I went back to the hospital for the first time since September. Scans were scanned. Blood was drawn. Various professionals poked and prodded my person.

Typically the results are available same day. All my blood work was fine – salutary even – but the results of the CT scan were not ready. This is the true test of the situation.

High patient volume combined with short staffing for the holidays. No word came. I started having dreams about being back in hospital, only this hospital was in a Holiday Inn. In my ass-open hospital gown, I had to roll my chemo tower through the lobby where a plumber convention was underway. The tower was made of plastic and kept folding and collapsing.

Anxious much?

So today we called. Had to know.

Turns out my scans showed no sign of residual malignancy. Treatment has worked as hoped. All clear.

I am in remission. I can hardly believe the news.

Happy ChristmaKwanzaKuh, y'all. Looking forward to the coming year.

In The Balance

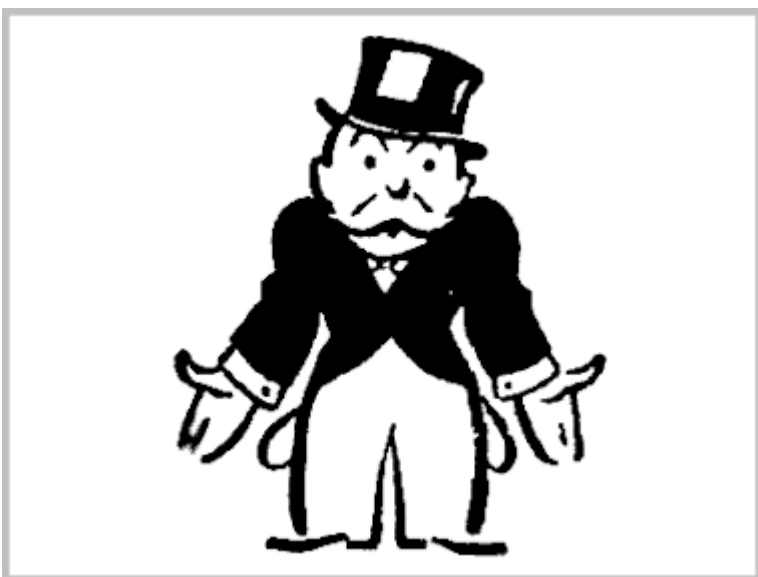


A tad before noon on a perfect day. Cool, a bit of a breeze, bright blue skies.

Fate hangs in the balance.

Sometime today we will hear whether or not our house passes air quality inspection. Samples are in the lab. We are on pins and needles.

All work to remediate the unpleasantness is complete, the crawl space deep-scrubbed and hermetically sealed, the HVAC air handler disassembled and painstakingly cleaned, all ductwork replaced anew. Five air scrubbers and four dehumidifiers have been running 24/7 for a solid four weeks, raising the internal temperature of the house to right around 100*f for most of that time. One shudders to anticipate the power bill that attends to this; the electric meter is flashing so fast you cannot really see it. Then again, this will amount to but a piffle in the overall cost of things.



What the hell. It's only money.

We – Stanwyck and the dogs and I – have been camped at the Mom’s two BR condo for the duration. Pros: Close to home. The dogs are happy. We are all getting along swimmingly. Walkable to coffee and other suchlike.

Cons: It is damnably “cozy”. Hard to work for any extended stretch of time.

Bottom line: How lucky we are to have had a place to land.

I had joked to a friend about being homeless for this stretch. That afternoon I watched a man push a bicycle laden with all his worldly possessions across 7 lanes of traffic to get from his “home” under the interstate overpass to wherever he was going next.

How dare I even?

One might say, if one were disposed to the cosmic woo, that the Universe has been generously offering us opportunities to ‘work on ourselves’. I would suggest that the Universe cares fuck all about the state of our selves, indifferently random in its relentless course.

That does not mean that I fail to recognize the opportunities no matter how they arise. Um, er, uh...most of the time anyway. Or at least sometimes.

A while back I shared some thoughts about Alan Moore’s epic and fantabulous novel *Jerusalem*. I’ve been thinking about the book a great deal, especially as regards the non/existence of human agency in the grand drama.

One scene in particular stands out. Legendary non-Conformist theologian Phil Doddridge – one of those people who would today be the target of sneering as some kind of ‘social justice warrior’ – finally has the opportunity to have a discussion with one of the Master Builders, an architect of the Cosmos. It is a chance at last for Doddridge to get an

answer to the question that plagued him for centuries, both before and after death, wondering...

"Look, did we ever, any of us, really have free will?"

Aziel the Angle (as the carpenterish angels are known in Mansoul) shook his head.

"No..."

...Did you miss it?"

They shared a pretty good laugh at that. I laughed, too, though my guffaw tapered off to mordant chuckle pretty quickly.

I'm not willing to totally discount the possibility of human free will, but I am pretty comfortable with the fact that most people are generally too asleep to behave in any but the most automatic and predictable ways. It may be that it takes a shock to the system to jolt any of us into some kind of truly intentional action.

Or perhaps I am more naturally dozy than most folks.

Either way, we have been afforded copious opportunity to awaken of late. Yeah, I've been pretty darn sick. But I had great insurance and world-class care. All indications are that I am doing great. And yeah, the house was all nasty with mold and accompanying yick, but we found good people to repair the damage (fingers crossed!) at a fair-albeit-choke-inducing price.

And yea and verily were we cast from our home, exiled into the wilderness of the Mom's cozy-yet-more-than-adequate condo. Granted, moving in with your Ma at age 60 is more than a tad humbling, but help was available. As it seems to have been at every step of the journey. We may arrive and depart this world

alone, but in between we are part of an astonishing web of human connection. If only we might see it. If only we might participate in it, no matter how humbling and scary and vulnerable it might make us feel.

One of the more staggering outpourings of help has been the ~~damn~~ ~~near~~ utterly unbelievable response to the GoFundMe campaign some fine friends launched on our behalf. The generous display of love and support from friends and family and – wow holy cow wow – people we have never met has been more than enough to undermine my well-cultivated cynicism about the state of human kindness.

I have been dangling from the psychic tenterhooks ever since the air samples were collected. Everything *should* be okay. But maybe not. There might well be another duration of remediation and exile. I have been consumed with dread, with the idea that I really do not think I can stand another opportunity to work on my damn self.

But as I was lying awake last night after Stanwyck shook me from a dream – a dream in which a familiar corporate drone was heaving piles of work at me over the cubicle wall. Stanwyck wondered at whom I was forcefully saying aloud, “Fuck you! Fuck YOU!” Lucky for us both, I did not act out the chestal finger jab I delivered in the dream.

But really, there it was. Bring it on, Universe. Gimme your best shot, ya bastid. I got Stanwyck and the kids and a universe of amazing friends on my side. Hit me with your best shot. I can take it. Fuck you! Fuck YOU!

Now I will go sit in a corner and tap my fingers incessantly until the call comes. Are we in or are we out? I can take it...