

WHAT COMES AFTER AMERICA

Whatever happens today, the Union is done.

It has been for a long time, maybe even from the start. But we have reached the point where the longer it goes on, the more harm it will inexorably do. It's time, past time, to admit it didn't work, it never worked, and that the Constitution and its institutions have ossified. There is no reforming the United States of America, there is no more perfect union to chase after. That turned out to be a lie – a lie woven into the legal fabric of this nation-state from the start. The United States of America, as defined by its constitution, can only get worse because of how irreparably broken both that document and the system it created are. This isn't a Trump or GOP thing. They are symptoms, but they are only symptoms. As angry as you may be at Trump, voting him out, driving him from the country, jailing him, whatever, none of that will fix the great flaw that created his presidency. It does no more than shoe a fly away from an open wound and call it fixed.

The flaw is our Constitution. As there is no politically possible path to rewriting the it, the Constitution can only fall further into entropy and catastrophe.

The longer this goes on, the worse the end will be. This is why it's the duty of people who are in and of, or love, America the culture, Americans the people, the land it spans and the diversity it holds, to imagine what comes next and the easiest way to get there. We've been running what was essentially the broken beta of the first representative democracy for almost 250 years, and it was built to not be upgradable. It doesn't work right, it never did, and it is awful. It was a compromise of rich and frightened men whose imaginations (understandably) didn't reach far beyond the 18th century.

The nightmares we live with, and their disconnect from the values we hold now are impossible to count. I was researching children in ICE detention living in cages, and their families being held in unsafe conditions and coerced into forced labor – back in the Obama days. The exploitation of forms of unfree labor continues to this day, as does the rise of oligarchy and political corruption.

Police have killed almost 900 people this year, despite a mismanaged pandemic presumably making it somewhat harder. The Flint water crisis is six years old this year, and still going. One person has been found guilty and sentenced to probation. I could go on, but you know this song: opioid crisis, inequality, lobbying, campaign finance, the two party system, gerrymandering, disenfranchisement, and of course, the damn virus. And still, all these problems are just symptoms of a deeper disease, a broken political basis for our society. Our laws have led to an irreparable failure of the American system when it comes to the basic task of keeping the people who constitute it alive and functional and with some kind of path to a sustainable, if not improving, existence. Medical care, housing, and education are all contingent. These are the most fundamental parts of having this thing called government and ours failed these tasks aggressively, despite the brilliance and determination of even its most oppressed people pushing forward our culture to greater things.

It's impossible to change any of this at a fundamental level, because it is impossible to re-write or even amend the superstructure of our laws and our government. Even if the GOP lost everything, and the Democrats suddenly became a party of reform (which they won't), nothing could meet the global problems we face because the judiciary will destroy efforts to reform and remake ourselves at every turn. But even before we get to the problem of the judiciary, the two party system is disconnected from the world as it is now: facing the end of the Holocene and

with that, a planet that is gentle to humans. What was the most democratic system of the 18th century is a travesty of permitted corruption, unrepresentative elites, and openly bought-and-paid-for influence. It's over, it's done, it's time to let it go before it kills us all.

The successes of America, and there have been many, came not because of our form of governance but despite it. The culture – for good and ill – isn't the constitution or the legal regime or the nation-state as recognized by other nation-states. It's the people. It's what we choose, believe, and imagine. Right now we choose to be constrained by a document that has manifestly failed us.

And yes, there have been efforts at positive movement using our constitutional framework, like the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. But they have been undermined and destroyed almost at birth by the perniciousness of the very flaws amendments were meant to fix. And thusly, because of the 14th, we live in a world where Exxon holds the rights meant for black folk who still struggle to vote.

After spending much of my adult life feeling alone in my views, it has surprised me how many people have said to me over the last years, and especially this year, that there's no redeeming this union, that it's not worth preserving. But this is not an ending thought that drops into a void.

The end of the Union isn't a hopeless position, but the only hopeful one we have. The alternative isn't chaos and dystopia, just as the alternative to monarchy in the 17th and 18th century wasn't chaos and dystopia. It was us.

Right now is when we start imagining and working on the most peaceful and productive transition to a post-USian world we can manage. That may seem impossible, but that's also what we thought about the Soviet Union in 1987. It's what we thought about the end of European hegemony at the end of the colonial ages. It's what we

thought right before parliamentary reform swept Europe after 1848. Right now we're settling for Churchill's worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time..., in this world of sin and woe. Why does humanity think it needs to stop there? We invented everything we have now politically, technologically, culturally, and in ways of coordinating and governing.

Why on earth are so many people convinced that we don't have anything more to invent?

The founders imagined a new thing, but they chickened out and didn't do it. They half-assed it, retreated from their own notions. When they were done with the thing, it was born almost a ghost and tied down to the old hierarchies. The framers of the constitution were afraid of their own notions of self-determination and equality. They pulled back and tried to not make it too democratic a nation for three million people, and now it fails more than three hundred million. In fact, it fails more than seven billion.

In 2020, this structure has been constraining the political imagination for centuries, stunting our growth, and stunting the world.

My allegiance is not to America, and it hasn't been for many years. My allegiance is to my family – my family of all the strange living things, unique in a seemingly endless void of rock and chemistry filling the universe, but not life, not as far as we know. I do love America – the land, the people, the crazy, loud, funny and emotional culture. I will always love America, but like all real love, it will be complicated. I don't have to love its flaws, its racism, its cowardly cruelty, or its legal institutions in order to love its soul.

My allegiance isn't to a bastard compromise of frightened men in 1776, or 1648, or even 1555. It's to the world now, in 2020. Those men are long dead, and they do not get to describe the limits of political imagination in the 21st

century. But right now, we are trapped in the infinitesimal space these old men described for us, surrounded on all sides by the high cliffs of doubt and familiarity. We need to succeed where they failed – humanity is counting on it.

I know it's unthinkable that any of this could change, just as it was unthinkable that Rome could fall, that Carthage would be wiped from the map, that the Russian Empire could cease to be, that the Dynasties of China would come to an end, that the Toltecs would collapse, that the eternal Pharaohs of Egypt would pass from the world, and any more of the dozens of political systems that have come and gone. We are still here, waiting on something worthy of our brilliance and creativity.

One of our greatest poets, a man treated like shit for the color of his skin, wrote

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is
free.

If you want to call that thing Hughes sang for America, sure, why not. But don't mistake it for the quicksand of desires we inhabit now. Don't mistake it for this most failed of hoped-for states. Don't even mistake it for a Westphalian state.

It all stops the day we decide it stops. None of these documents, forms, systems, or laws have any existence beyond our imaginations, and they never did. It is 2020, and we face a pandemic (with undoubtedly more to come), the end of our own Holocene, environmental destruction, and the task of meeting the needs of eight billion people in this world. It's time to abandon the best systems men could think of in the late 1700s and figure out one that works now. We could even lead the world in figuring out what comes after the Westphalian nation-state, hopefully before that legal and cultural construct kills us all.

This too shall pass. How it passes, whether it's

the end of the world, or the birth of a better one, is up to our imaginations, which we need to put to work in a hurry.

And so, on this most strange of days, I put the question to you – What comes after America?

THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE, PART TWO: LOVING FROM A DISTANCE

I began writing this in the Munich airport, waiting at a quiet, bright airport gate that was the liminal space between one life and another, between being mother, and being wife. My face was red and sore from wearing an n95 mask for 12 hours. Or, more precisely, two n95 masks, changing the first after about eight hours of wear.

I had said goodbye to my daughter in San Francisco, and was on my way to my partner, in Luxembourg. But in that moment I was nowhere and no one. I had been away from my partner for the longest time since we met. It was hard, but not as hard as leaving my child in the middle of a pandemic. Because of this damn disease, I did something else I've never had to do before: I said goodbye to my child without knowing when I would see her again.

I sent them both messages to say I was ok, that I'd landed, and was waiting for my next flight. I posted little updates, took pictures of odd things in the airport, and let time pass.

We are so far from each other these days, craving connection, and fearful of it. Many of us feel locked up in our own universes, either by local health measures, or by the fear of dying, killing, or both. Even for those flouting health measures there is doubt and distance, not

all of their loved ones agree, they miss people too. They can't travel to see the ones they miss, and everyone is avoiding the arguments about what the right thing to do is in a world where we can't know at this moment what the right thing to do is.

Uncertainty is in-between time, time when you want comfort and the closeness of your personal village, but now that has to be distant, and it makes the time interminable.

I am good at letting in-between time pass. I have always been something of a long distance person. When I was young I was a long distance child, with parents in different states. I was always far from my mother or father, before growing up and becoming far from my friends and lovers and eventually far from my child, most of the time. When she was smaller I would call her to say goodnight every evening, from wherever I was, even a few times while waiting for the police to roll in on a protest or camp. I would get away from the noise and current events as best as I could, just to hear about my little girl's day and tell her to sleep well, and that I love her. Now we share chatrooms and video calls, but that's not new with the pandemic. I have countless screen captures on old harddrives of my little girl on Skype, Jitsi, eventually Big Blue Button, and other bits of software we used to see and love each other.

I am always far from someone I love, it's one of the defining qualities of my life. But now, most people are far from someone, sometimes someone who isn't very far away. So maybe my experience can be of some use.

First off, yes, it's heartbreaking. When I think of all the time I've missed watching my daughter grow up, it feels like a broken thing in me, something jagged and free floating that catches in my throat and chokes me sometimes. I think of all the friends I have, continents away from each other – and me. Of the people I love, the people who I may never see in person again. I miss them, I am an ocean of missing them, all

salty tears and indistinct edges. But this is my life, and I've decided to get good at it. Right now, people are losing each other. The connections we took for granted have weakened, and the stress everyone is under only makes it worse. Right now, we need more love, but we're lonely.

This is what I know about loving from a distance.

Giving is the most important part. Reaching out, writing, poking everyone, it takes time, but in a way that feeds the soul. Don't expect something specific back. Some people, even when thrilled to hear from you, may not have the energy to reply. Revel in the fact that you've touched someone you care for. Make time to talk to people, as strictly as you make work time, school time, exercise time, eating time. Make lists of names. This is one of the things you're doing to keep healthy.

But it doesn't have to be big. In fact, it rarely should be. We often think we have to have a plan when we reach out, or at least something to talk about. We forget that most of our communications with the people we care for are ephemera. They are acknowledging someone coming in the room, relaying a joke or some inconsequential oddity encountered on the street. They are nothing at all to be recorded in our memories individually, but taken together they become the background music of love. They are not weighty, they should not be weighty, but they gather up like gold dust. These are the things I call small touches, and from a distance they can look like a text message, a joke, a funny tumblr post, a picture of something seen along a walk. When spring came and we were all sheltering in place I didn't want the flowers to pass unnoticed, so I took pictures of them and sent them to people. Here is something pretty – I am thinking of you.

There was a time when mail was delivered five times a day or more in some places, and while we look back on multipage letters from generations

past that's not what it was most of the time, that's the stuff someone saved. Little things are the scaffolding of love and connection. Little things are the bubble wrap that keeps our souls safe on long journeys, and right now we are all on a very long journey.

I make lists of people to connect with. I try to wave over the net, I don't always succeed. But I'm still taking pictures of flowers, and thinking of who needs to see my flowers.

When you can't be there, be real.

People think social media makes you fake, but that's bullshit. Being dishonest makes you fake, not the size of the screen you're dishonest on. In your communication, texts, letters, posts in your social media, don't hide, don't perform. What you tell them 45 minutes into lunch is what you put on Instagram.

I know that this is funny coming from me. I am probably more famous for being hated by the internet than for anything I've accomplished in my life. But while this can be incredibly scary, what happens next is a watershed. There are people that back away when you're honest, but mostly, people are honest back. They feel trusted, because they have been, and they feel safe, because if you can post that, so can they. Right now we need that trust and safety, and because our lives are so much online now, it means bringing that trust and safety into our online spaces.

That vulnerability can feel very unsafe. Liberally mute the toxic. Don't engage with it, and let the people that respond well to authenticity buoy you up. I have been destroyed several times by online mobbing. I was nearly driven to suicide after part of the net and media tried to blame me for my best friend's death, and then again a few years later when the mobbing showed up to destroy my career. If I can be real online after all that, anyone can. The friends and strangers who respond with kindness make all the difference.

This goes doubly for one-on-one communication. Be real. Even when you're just too tired to engage directly, just say it.

Accept incongruity. I am sitting here on a bright and clear late summer afternoon in a tiny european country. My child can't leave her house because of smoke and heat right now, and hasn't been able to for more than a week. I want to tell her to go get out and exercise, which is ridiculous. That's what I should do, I should be telling her to play more Minecraft with her friends. We are far away, and even though our love is deep, our shared world is very thin. She and I are not going to be in the same mood, or having the same experience of the world. Still, we make time to talk about philosophy, video games, and memes.

You're far away right now, from a lot of people, who are far away from each other. You're not going to have a shared experience of reality unless you've scheduled it. You're going to be having a great day while someone else is having the worst day, and vice versa. That's ok. You can be emotionally out of sync and still love each other with compassion and sympathy and warmth. You don't have to take on the emotional state of someone far away. Sympathy and compassion can heal and connect, but trying to have empathy, or demanding it, can destroy a narrow, long distance connections. If it feels like you're giving or getting too little, say so. Talk about it, be honest about giving and needing, and be ready to spread your needing between people. Don't drain someone, and don't be drained. Health is a team sport – it takes our overlapping personal villages to care for each other. It's ok to tap out.

Part of accepting incongruity is accepting asynchronicity. My partner and I have been in a eight year long conversation over the net. It never really ends, and doesn't line up perfectly that often. When we're apart we're typically nine hours apart. We leave things for each other. We poke, and then let it lie until the

stars align and we can have a little time in sync. My phone is always on silent with almost no notifications allowed on it at all. I once had to text a friend to find out how to turn the ringer on on an iPhone, he told me about the switch on the side, which I had forgotten existed. The people I love and I are not constantly interrupting each other to stay connected. Instead, we're leaving things for each other, and when we line up, either by schedule or happenstance, we catch up more deeply. Being connected to a friend cannot be a special occasion – the magic comes from the plainness and constancy of it. Right now, we all need that plainness and constancy.

It is such a blessing that in this particular plague year, we have all of this new technology to connect us and keep us safe for the first time. This is a chance to learn how to bring our humanity to the internet and technology – being human to each other – and that will get us through.

*My work for Emptywheel is supported by my wonderful patrons on Patreon. You can find out more, and support my work, at Patreon.
Thanks to Ryan Singel.*

IN THE MIDDLE OF ALL

THE 2020, BELARUSIANS STARTED FIGHTING FOR THEMSELVES.

The revolutions continue. Right now, the eastern European country of Belarus is weeks into street protests and strikes against the long and corrupt rule of Alexander Lukashenka, the main ruler Belarus has seen in the post-Soviet era, after he defeated Vyacheslav Kebich in 1994 and started a power consolidation right up to 2020, and perhaps no further. He rigged the election in early August, but Belarus is having nothing of it.

Belarusians are singing songs and filling the streets and getting shot and even hung trying to call a foul on election that wasn't free and fair. Neither were the other elections since Lukashenka came to power, but they are tired of it, tired enough to, as so many have said to western reporters hanging around Minsk and Zoom, lose their fear. People who can't find their fear anymore are revolutionary indeed.

Lukashenka wandered around waving an assault rifle, demonstrating that he doesn't know how to properly hold a gun, calling the protesting Belarusians rats, and generally getting on his melodramatic manbaby.

He is often called the last dictator of Europe by people who don't want to acknowledge that both Russia and Turkey exist in Europe as well as Asia, or that the EU has its own tin pot dictator. But Lukashenka does live up to the classic bastard and tin pot dictator: murdering opponents, hating women, and trying to spread delusional fears of invasions from the west, as if the EU and NATO were going to roll tanks into Minsk any day now.

Spoiler: they are not.

Belarus has a slightly smaller population than Michigan. Crowds of up to a couple hundred thousand people have filled the capital of Minsk, and smaller but sizable crowds filled other cities. Their demands are in the “Enough of this shit” category, but they’re probably settle for free and fair elections, and maybe not getting beaten and locked up quite so much.

The once loyal manufacturing sector is defecting from Lukashenka, in response to failed economic policies and a Covid-19 response that makes Trump look cautious and moderate. This is key, and a sign of deep changes in Belarus. Strikes are sweeping through key industries, reminiscent if not exactly the same as they did in '91, when the USSR was falling over.

From Global Voices:

Workers at state-owned industries have joined the protest movement, staging public meetings, walk-outs, threats of work-to-rule actions, and strikes. Researcher Volodymyr Artiukh points out that there have been reports of protest activity at “at least at least 70 industrial, trade and service companies as well as in the educational, medical, and media sectors” since the election. “Almost all of these are state-owned enterprises and/or publicly-financed organisations,” he says.

These were Lukashenka’s supporters for decades, but Belarus is changing. Close to a third of the people are young enough to have never really known anything but Lukashenka’s rule, but they can see how the rest of the world works, and they clearly don’t fucking love his nonsense.

Belarus borders Ukraine and Russia on its east, and three EU nations – Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, on its west. Traditionally and culturally Belarus is more closely tied to Ukraine and Russia than its western neighbors, and that’s not terribly likely to change, even

according to local pro-democracy activists guesting on various media shows. Belarus wants to stay Belarusian, which is almost Russian, but not quite, and definitely European, but not any other kind of European. They're not going to want western Europe to sweep in and save them, Belarusians have known western Europeans to long to want that. They're not likely to want Russia to come and be in charge, since they seem pretty keen on having their votes counted. All evidence is that Belarusians want to save themselves, and not have any other governments meddling in their affairs. Given how bad most of their neighbors have meddled over the past thousand years, you can't blame them.

After enduring decades years of post-Soviet strong man rule, they are joining the Green Revolution, OWS, the Umbrella Revolution, Euromaidan, the Ethiopian protests, The Puerto Rican anticorruption protests, The Chilean Spring, and the on and on of the last years (and years to come) in saying No More of This Nonsense. What ties the Belarusian protests to all these others is how tired people are of systems that just don't work for anyone but those at the very top. And they can see the petulant normality of those people at the top now, more than ever in human history, they can see how hollow and ridiculous it all is.

And they can see each other now, too. They know it's bullshit, just like you know it's bullshit, and now they know everyone else knows it's bullshit too. That's when you start to lose your fear.

It feels like there's often so little we can do to help in this slow moving planetary collapse. But there are those little things: showing up for a BLM protest with water bottles and masks, contributing to a Belarusian strike fund or a medical gofundme that shouldn't have to exist. We watch our plastic usage and trying to cut down on driving and beef. It feels like a thousand little things that don't do anything,

but they do, just like these little revolutions. They are the seeds of better worlds. Like most seeds, most will never germinate, but without so many, you could not hope to see the shoots of these new worlds. They are not uncomplicated worlds, not easy worlds, but worlds we get to (have to) cultivate rather than have them thrust upon us by incompetent, petulant men.

There's not a lot of obvious common ground between Americans and Belarusians, or Chileans, Iranians, Ethiopians, and so on. Except perhaps a sense that the globe should be a fair place, and that it should be free. And that our home should be managed and nurtured like it, and the beings who live on it, matter.

My work for Emptywheel is supported by my wonderful patrons on Patreon. You can find out more, and support my work, at Patreon. Thanks to Opit for research and language help.

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I'm supporting the Belarus Solidarity Foundation, more about that here.

THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE, PART ONE: CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

There's no second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, and there never really was a first wave. Like generals always fighting the last war, that's a metaphor we lifted from the 1918 Flu Pandemic. Whether it was a good metaphor then or not, it's not a good metaphor now. In a way, there isn't even a pandemic, not in any functional sense.

There's just thousands and thousands of local epidemics, breaking out, dying down, and breaking out again. Because of this, we're on edge, trying to judge our actions, trying to judge our risk, trying to understand what's ok in the Fog of Disease. Deciding we don't care, deciding we might be wrong again. Losing our damn minds. This is not something most people have to deal with.

But there is a group of people who do deal with the ups and downs, the sudden changes in freedom and pain all the time: people with chronic and remitting diseases. In a way, a pandemic is just the moment where society has a relapsing and remitting disease, though it's not just Covid-19 itself, it's also the economic and social impact, and how everything changes without warning.

I know these feelings well, I have several diseases that come and go, and I have dealt with them all my life, even before I knew what they were. One day I may be mostly ok, and the next, unable to get far from my bed. I might have weeks of freedom, then suddenly be barely able to get around my house. I have a partner, and a daughter, and many friends who have all come to understand that there are bad times and I can't control them. I can influence them, but all my promises and all my plans are contingent.

What I have learned in the process of 40 years of dealing with incurable and unpredictable illness suddenly applies to the whole damn world, so here goes.

I call the process Climbing the Mountain, partly because I can't climb a mountain. The Himalayas are right out.

I have a disease called Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS) which causes my joints to skitter around in unpleasant ways, and when I was young I had a number of amazing party tricks my physical therapist has banned me from ever doing again. But I can show you one with my thumb doing things thumbs aren't supposed to do, which has

also been voted by one party of friends the least gross. When I was young I was a gymnast and a dancer, which is a mixed bag for EDS kids. You're likely to damage your body, but you also get used to using and living in a damaged body, which can be a real blessing as you get older.

The first part of Climbing the Mountain, and for many people the hardest, is accepting what is. Just that: accepting what is, right now. There's something bold and great in rejecting what is and doing what's not possible, at least in stories. And there is power in rejecting the idea that what is can't be changed, because it always can be in some way. But without accepting what is, you can't make wise choices on how to change it.

I can't climb a mountain. We can't stop or cure SARS-CoV-2, at least right now. We can't just go back to life as we knew it. One of the things you have to accept with chronic illness is that what was normal is gone, and it's never coming back.

Let me say that again: *What was normal life for you, from birth to 2019, is gone. It's never coming back. Ever. What's in front is unknown, confusing, distressing, painful, and not what you know as normal, and all you can do is go forward to climb a mountain you can't climb.*

I have PTSD, which some clinicians classify as cPTSD, but for the sake of clarity I'll just call it fucking awful PTSD. Sometimes I can't get out of bed because my brain is torturing me. One of the things I have PTSD from is an episode of activities done to me as a child in a clinical setting that many years later the US government would call "enhanced interrogation techniques" when done to Iraqis. Also, I have lost many people I loved. I have been homeless, stalked, and beaten. I have been hounded and harassed. I come by my crazy honestly. I have nightmares most of the time, and mornings just aren't a thing I can do very often. When you're looking forward into an abyss and feeling weak, it's easy to write yourself, the world, or both,

off. But just accepting the limitations makes you stronger. I pick my weak times and distract myself. I don't try to be strong in the morning, when I'm waiting for the howling ghosts in my head to die down. But I've learned that they will.

This is the time I am preparing to climb the mountain. I eat a bit, do something nice, look after a plant, look at something pretty. NatGeo social media accounts are great. Food posts, nature, ceramic art, are all how I un-doomscroll in the morning, when I'm waiting for the screaming demons of last night to fade away.

For everyone, for you, now, it's the same. You need a method of un-doomscroll to let dread and sadness pass. Nature Instagram, Paleontology podcasts, Bird YouTube. It's all great.

Then, the climbing.

I am currently training to do a half-marathon. It's something I've been doing on and off for about four years. Obviously, as my doctor and physical therapist would tell you, I should not run a half marathon, and it's not my real goal. My real goal is a full marathon. 15 years ago when I got to my first physical therapist and was diagnosed with hypermobility, I couldn't walk. "I'd like to do martial arts and parkour one day," I told her. She gave me a look I can't fit in words and replied "Let's get you walking and see if we can get you back on a bike." We did both of those, but it was long and hard and painful and I cried a lot. I still cry a lot, which is ok and kind of my thing.

I have had to start and stop my marathon training more times than I care to count, because I don't care to count at all. I need every day to be new, because I can't control where it goes. I listen to my body, and my reality, and let that guide me. I didn't learn this with EDS originally, I learned it with my first chronic condition, childhood-onset IBS. I learned that sometimes I could do anything I wanted, and sometimes I couldn't leave the house

without throwing up and shitting myself. It's a lot better than it was, because I've learned it. I've accepted it. Not at once, but eventually after a lot of failure and pain and gross bodily fluids. I did eventually accept it, I listened to it, some have said I gave into it. "You let these things define you and limit you," I've been told by so many able-bodied people who I think just didn't like what I represented: Working with a thing you can't control, and can't beat, taking over your life.

There's a thing you can't control, and can't beat, taking over your life right now.

Working with that kind of thing means being mindful in the moment. Can I eat this? I ask myself, and if the answer is no, I don't. Sometimes that means missing out, and sometimes it means pissing off friends and being a damn inconvenience. "How is the bathroom situation where we're going?" "What kind of food is available, can I bring my own?" And the most dreaded and annoying: "I have to leave now. Right now."

For you now, it's the same. "Can I go there?"

"Is this way of eating out ok?"

"Do the government guidelines make sense?"

"How does this damn thing work and why does it keep changing?"

This is all the discomfort of climbing the mountain. You learn, you fiddle with it, and you let it change. You accept the change. You update how you live, knowing you'll update it again.

But there's the fun part too. Figuring out how long I can run/walk (called Jeffering in the running world) when I'm training, and learning to be an excellent cook in the process of understanding my relationship with food. But neither of these make it all better. Not training or cooking, or therapy for Major Depressive Disorder or medications for PTSD gets me to the top of the mountain. It's like I keep

telling you, I can't climb to the top of the mountain. We can't just make this go away. We won't, and we can't. It just is.

But, I can climb. Almost every day, in some way or another. And when I fall, and I will inevitably fall, I will land higher on the mountain than I would have if I hadn't been climbing.

That's the trick. Right there.

Everyday you accept what is and work with it. Everyday you exercise your mind, body, and spirit. When you fall, and you will fall, you won't be as low on the mountain. And you can climb a little higher until the next fall.

I know it sounds sisyphian. But it's just impossible, not meaningless. It is, in fact, the most meaningful thing we can do. It's just the little bits of impossible things you do every day when there is no such thing as normal anymore.

Here is how you climb a mountain you can't climb: Accept what is, accept that it will change without notice. Learn how your life works, and what is possible. Figure out what you can do today, do it, and maybe if you're lucky, a tiny bit more. Love things, even when you hate them.

Be completely quiet sometimes. Cry. Look at pretty things. Try to rest.

Try again.

Accept what is. Learn. Move. Rest. Climb. Fall.

Accept what is.

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THE ABSURDITY OF THE PRESENT: STEALING VACCINE RESEARCH

Last week the breaking news in international political/media drama was the Russians hacking vaccine research in Europe and America, and on Tuesday the DOJ charged two Chinese hackers for hacking what Politico called “hundreds of millions of dollars worth of intellectual property and trade secrets” about vaccines for a deadly virus that is currently ravaging humanity.

Right now the world is working on a lot of vaccines, as well as treatments, for and research about the virus. We’re not just trying to end it, we’re trying to pull the virus, and ourselves, out of the fog of war that we’re in right now. Some of that research is ending up as trade secrets and intellectual property, the modern legal equivalent of what was once the secrecy of alchemists.

Russia and China are not rich countries the way the US is, though they are spending their blood and treasure on medical research and treatment just like the rest of us. Journalists and experts, particularly in cybersecurity, have blasted their efforts at hacking European and North American corporations as a kind of greed and cheating when it comes to the vaccines research process.

This all makes sense, from the perspective of the absurdity of the present moment. As Misha Glenny, a cybersecurity reporter who went on the BBC’s Newscast to blast the Russian effort to get medical research data said, “They’re just trying to get a vaccine on the cheap as far as I can see.”

Of course they are. *It’s a fucking vaccine for a*

disease that's causing a global pandemic.

Before we talk about how important it is to motivate biotech firm Moderna to work on a medicine that could save millions and put the planet to rights again (at least in this one way), let's talk about where we are right now.

As of this writing, there have been 15 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 600,000 deaths. It's clear there will be millions of deaths before the pandemic is over and millions more maimed from the inside by the disease. There is also the suffering of families and communities as folks bury some of their loved ones and support loved ones who will suffer with the long term effects of Covid-19 for years or decades. There is no global public health infrastructure or even much in the way of public health standards around the world.

Most people can't get good quality care at the best of times, even though we have the ability as a species to provide it several times over. It's normally bad and it's all much worse right now. Pediatric vaccination rates has fallen through the floor the world over, and it could be that millions more children die of preventable diseases than adults of Covid-19, just because Covid-19 has wrecked public health infrastructure so badly. And with economic downturns around the world, there's no money to pay for routine care which could cost more lives than the disease itself, again.

But there's reasons things are shut down. The thing about a respiratory virus like SARS-CoV-2 is that it's so aggressively transmissible that no one is safe until everyone is safe. Despite how much we all hate each other, if Russian and Chinese people can't vaccinate against both Covid-19 and Measles, we will all pay, in blood, and treasure, and the kind of grief that takes generations to mend.

Will those generations care about Moderna, GlaxoSmithKline, or Sanofi's Q4 2020?

No, they will not care. They will be as

mystified by what we're doing now, by what we're valuing now, as we are by the people in history who drank mercury trying to live forever, or attached leeches to George Washington until he died of blood loss, or any of the other stupid things we did that killed people or actively spread disease over the millennia.

We still live with the biological and cultural trauma of the Black Death, and our whole world order was configured by Smallpox. But still, we are ghouls and deatheaters, asking about intellectual property rights when someone is using hacking to try to save lives, for once.

Why is any of this, any of this at all, still a secret? Why isn't all the data and research being published and collated and poured through by the scientific community the moment the data is collected? Why are we still such ghouls when it comes to public health?

Why do children still die of Measles? Why do 10 million people fall ill with TB every year? Why, in fucking 2020, do people die of fucking Consumption?

We could stop all of this.

But we think health should be a profitable business, like it's making fancy handbags or golf clubs or something.

We don't think voting is something you should pay for, or that only the well enough off should be governed. We don't think streets should turn a profit, or that you should pay a monthly fee to maintain your human rights. We don't even think you should pay firefighters to save your house, especially since it's going to set the rest of your city on fire. But we think Chinese people or Russians or you should pay for a vaccine, even though if you can't, it's going to set the rest of your city and then the world on fire.

It's evil, it's madness, and the fact that it's just the way things are doesn't make it even the tiniest bit less absurd. And my colleagues in

the media would do well to point that out, and not just leave it to comment sections below their articles and Trevor Noah.

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THE FOG OF PROTEST

“We could wrap this up right now,” a police officer said over the scanner traffic that I was listening to as I walked along Mission Street in San Francisco. It was late on the night of June 3rd, and I had joined a protest group walking south on Valencia Street in San Francisco’s Mission District. The group was loud and a little rowdy, but not destructive. 30-something people trailed down to 20-something people – counts are always a little abstract in a group like this. We made a couple turns and walked back north, along Mission. “We could wrap this up...” the officer had said, and then the radio chatter moved smoothly onto the tactical part.

I was listening to the police scanner while walking with the group. When I do this, I often notice a disconnect between the police and the people on the ground, and sometimes between the police and the police on the ground. In this case, there was some panicky talk of the protestors building a barricade and setting it on fire after we turned onto Mission Street. I spun around to figure out what I’d missed. This didn’t seem like that kind of protest. Loud and

rude for sure, we were hours after curfew and this was the proud hood crowd more than the carefully-stenciled-signs-of-unity crowd. But, not violent, and not even vandalous. From looking over the street behind me, I couldn't see what the police were talking about. I did spot a newly-emptied trashcan on the sidewalk, but not in the street. No one was near it, much less ready to set fire to the mess. I'm not a fan of littering, but I've watched people build burning barricades across streets, mostly in France, and this wasn't that. This was someone kicking the trash over.

The reason for kettling and arresting this group given by an officer on the scanner was the curfew violation. It was late, and there were "about 25" of us, an officer said over the radio. It gave me a sense that the police were done and wanted to leave. "We could wrap this up right now..." and they laid out a plan to bring in officers on both sides, close in, and arrest everyone. I ducked onto a side street and circled around to different sides of the area now blocked off by police, and tried to take pictures of the arrests. (I did not get many, Julian Mark of Mission Local got the best images while being detained.)

These three things, curfew, the hour, and something about fire, became conflated later into a nebulous story about lighter fluid, when the cops were tired of following 25ish shouty people cussing at them, but not doing much else.

None of this was extraordinary. Whatever problems are inherent to a protest situation, they are deeply compounded by police forces, and, to a lesser degree, protestors, all being very sure about what the other side is doing and thinking without having much real knowledge or insight.

I'm willing to say after more than a decade of doing this work that those arrests took place because the police were tired and wanted to go back to the station or home. But to get there, they really had to work up some other reason,

whether they were aware of it or not. Police are mere humans, and subject to mere human follies. Protestors are too, but everyone knows that. Protestors look like a mess, even when they're not. The police are the ones who dress alike and larp¹ being Perfectly Coordinated Machines of Order, instead of tired humans who just need to pee, damnit. This underlying humanity is scant comfort for those being arrested, maybe even less so for the one protestor that night who was taken away in an ambulance. When you're supposed to be the perfect passionless embodiment of state violence, but you're just a petty and tired as anyone, you can end up being a right bastard without knowing how, or that, you got there. This is what lies behind the sentiment ACAB: All Cops Are Bastards. It's not a personal statement; it's just what happens when role play gets out of hand, and in our society, the role play is always out of hand.

The other human bias police often suffer from in these chaotic scenes is that vigilance for the extraordinary generally leads humans to perceiving extraordinary things, whether they are there or not. Back on June 1st, when San Francisco was just getting started on its larger and more raucous protests, I was tracking people around the SOMA District (South of Market, a major dividing street in the city) protesting police violence. Scanner chatter was high, and the largest group was at the base of the Salesforce Tower, the tallest (and newest) building on the San Francisco skyline. There was talk of crowbars and vandalism, and the back-and-forth was working itself up into urgency. I started to run towards the tower, a few blocks away, because I know where this kind of talk usually leads. But another officer got on the radio. He was on the scene, and things were fine. "This is a peaceful protest," he said repeatedly. "Don't antagonize them." He talked the chatter down.

I stopped running, which I appreciated, and made my way over towards the building more slowly, taking some pictures along the way. The chatter

became tense a few more times, but the original officer kept talking them down. "They're peaceful," he said repeatedly, and something like, "We have them," as in he and the other officers on the scene were able to handle it. Another officer said there was vandalism, and the original officer said "Very minor" and again, "Don't antagonize them!" He expressed the tension of someone who was talking his friends out of doing something stupid, which as it turns out, he was. In the end the Salesforce Tower was fine, and undoubtedly better than it would have been if the police had clashed with thousands of protestors at its front door. Cooler heads prevailed.

We who attend or cover protests have a saying which we often don't say aloud because of the accusation of bias: "It ain't a riot 'til the riot cops get there." This isn't universal, but it's more common than most people think, including the police. Even well-meaning cops are in a system where they're looking for something to do violence on, and looking for things hard enough makes humans tend to see what they're looking for. It's hard to understand what's happening in a mass of angry people, but it's violence much less often than you'd think.

I have seen actual riots that are riots from their very first moments, torrents of anger and grief that become a violent backlash on the physicality of society itself. But I've never seen a protest get much beyond turning over trashcans and spray painting things without police provocation. But that form of escalation is so baked-in to the dance of police and protestors now, I can't imagine police can see it the way I do. The police look for trouble, they invariably find (and create) it, therefore they know there's always trouble to look for.

Sometimes cooler heads prevail, sometimes there's proportional responses, or no responses, and the crowd moves on without much damage, or the people drift off and go home tired at the end of a long day of exercising their First

Amendment. On those occasions, protestors are often praised as peaceful, but not by me. I expect most protestors (except maybe the French) to be largely peaceful by default.

Instead, I've come to praise the cops more over the years, though it's damning with faint praise. I praise them for not crashing hard into a crowd because a kid got out a can of spray paint. I praise them for just letting people walk it out late into the night, until everyone gets to go home and sleep. I praise them for not jumping at shadows and petty slights, for not getting frightened in the fog of protest and turning violent. Good cop, don't hit anyone.

Honestly, the fog of war effect and confirmation bias are not just police problems, they're human problems. They are the mistakes Homo Sapiens always make, and everyone including me, and you, would likely have the same errors of perception if we were suddenly part of a police force. As long as the police and people are other from each other, human biases towards the other will defeat our unity and progress.

The most heartening thing I've seen is police who took a knee, Kaepernick-style, against police violence. But I don't believe police violence can be meaningfully curbed until the police are no longer a separate force from their communities, both sides lost in fogs of human bias.

1. Larp stands for live action role play, a style of gaming involving dressing up and playing roles in a group.

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ANTIFA AIN'T THAT

You've seen the scary pictures of Antifa. You've seen them in images from the Battle of Seattle, Occupy Wallstreet, Oakland FTP protests, outside the G20, and many more moments where a reporter nervously says to camera "Things are getting out of hand at this protest." They're the omnipresent Left Boogyman, ANTIFA! They break windows! They menace police! They probably do other violent and bad things!

Or maybe you've seen them, who knows. Protestors don't wear uniforms or make it clear who they carpooled with.

I have known many of society's ne'er-do-wells: a myriad of drug dealers, Venice crack den regulars, Portland gutter punks, DC tweakers, straight edge punks with more scars than skin, body modders, tattoo fiends, seattle protestors, Food Not bombs, hackers, phreakers, freegans, and yes, quite a few Antifa, as well as Black Bloc. Let's get Black Bloc out of the way first, since that's usually who gets mistaken for Antifa.

The initiation for Black Bloc is pretty complicated, follow along carefully. 1) You show up in all black with you face covered, then 2) You throwdown with the police line.

Congratulations, you're Black Bloc.

There's not a particular affiliation required, except that you don't want to be identified while fighting with the police, and you're there to throwdown. Plenty of Black Bloc attend protests just because they want to fight someone and fighting the police is safe in a weird way.

It's very exciting, you're probably going to lose, you might help someone, and the police aren't really going to get hurt. Also you're probably going to engage in some light property damage, especially if the police take too long to form a line for you to fight. For a few of the Black Bloc I've met, it's definitely the healthiest way they have to get out an excess of aggressive energy. Possibly they shouldn't be like that, but they tend to be in the demographic that doesn't have health insurance so I figure it's a reasonable substitute for mental healthcare, which this country isn't going to give them.

Some of the people who do participate in Black Bloc are part of a wider political affiliation coming out of post-war Germany called Antifaschistische Aktion, shorted to Antifa. They arose to oppose Fascists, the real, sign-me-up-for-the-one-party-state kind, rather than the nudge-nudge-what's-wrong-with-a-little-genocidal-nationalism kind we have now. Antifa is one of the myriad of responses to post-war politics that made it not cool to call yourself a fascist by the end of the 20th century.

It's worthwhile to note that most Antifa don't do Black Bloc. Black Bloc is the kind of thing most people age out of pretty quickly and their knees age out faster. But most people don't age out of not liking Fascism, because Fascism is awful.

Antifa tends to be leftist, though it's not very pure about it. Some of the Democratic Socialists of America people who roll with Antifa would look downright right-wing in much of Europe, because of their willingness to compromise in the American political context on things that would not be OK in most of Europe, like expensive education, universal healthcare, and access to guns.

I've chatted with Stalinist Tankies who are Antifa, and registered Democrats. The thing that brought them together was being vaguely left, vaguely anti-capitalist, and strongly disliking

Fascism. The other thing they all had in common is their inability to organize anything larger than local groups. Most of the Antifa groups I've known met up in, and to some degree lived in, squats. In Europe, those were actual squats. In America, it's usually some crap but large apartment the one with rich parents or a tech job was renting. Honestly, most of them are trying to be good people, and all of them are dealing with difficult personal lives, in my experience. Which – no hate. Having that in common is usually how I met them.

Antifa is the perfect foil for someone like Trump. They're small, but not too small. They're amorphous and misunderstood. They like to take up space and be loud. They are not actually dangerous at any meaningful scale. They do punch above their weight a lot of the time, but they're not good at translating that into expanding their base. They're not politically powerful, and no one speaks up for them. In fact they have so little power that they can't defend themselves from organized rightwing slander. Some of them are misguided, some of them are incredibly well-read, quite a few of them end up as academics or working in NGOs. This makes sense, they don't want to be part of the business world they see exploiting the global poor, but they do want to grow up and participate in society in meaningful ways.

It's likely that Trump constructing them as The Enemy is the biggest boost American Antifa have had in years, and good on them. But make no mistake, Trump's slander is meaningless drivel and Antifa are mostly fine, if bad at doing dishes. I mean, seriously, dudes. Do the damn dishes.

Bad roommates often, fucked up kids sometimes, overly abstract academics, and window breakers, sure. But terrorists? Nah, that ain't it.

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IT'S THE INEQUALITY, STUPID: WHY TEST, TRACE, ISOLATE WON'T STOP COVID-19 IN AMERICA

Everything is changing, and in the face of that, America is failing. Over 90,000 souls have paid for our failing. Millions more are living in terror for their livelihoods and their families. But Covid-19 isn't a technology problem, or a science question, or a supply chain issue, or even a question of doctoring. This challenge is public health, and that is something we've been failing at for a damn long time. Not completely, but for most people the American health system is a nightmare, and interacting with it is among Americans' greatest fears. Without addressing that fact, anything else we do can't succeed, not in the models of countries like South Korea, Germany, or the overlooked best of all pandemic responses, Vietnam. (Not only did they aggressively treat, trace, and quarantine every case, but they did wonderful and meme-worthy public communication from the start)

California Governor Gavin Newsom, who reacted quicker than any other governor to shut down the state of California, saved innumerable lives. Now he is opening many shops for curbside pick up, and relaxing other measures. "This is a very positive sign," he said, "and it is happening

for only one reason: The data says it can happen.”

But with testing capacity still lacking in the state, (fewer than 1 in 20 Californians being tested) the data says no such thing, and it's even worse in most of the country. We are not ready to open. The history of fighting epidemics from Ebola to AIDS to antibiotic resistant TB is very clear. To stop an epidemic: catch every case with testing, trace every contact, and make sure the ill and their contacts can and do isolate safely, and be treated promptly if they fall ill. That last part is key, and each of these epidemics have borne out that treatment is important to both preventing transmission, and creating a unified populous for fighting the epidemic. Without *all* of those elements, the only thing stopping Covid-19 burning through the world is staying home, staying distant from everyone else – the isolated life we've been living so far in this pandemic.

Sars-CoV-2 is an infectious respiratory virus with a as-of-yet unknown but presumed small infectious dose. One person missed, one popular guy or woman about town doing essential work can start the whole cycle again within days without ever so much a cough or a headache. One party full of invincible young people or one pre-symptomatic nurse can begin another train of transmission that can eventually sicken or kill thousands.

The decisions that determine the course of an epidemic, all epidemics, are personal decisions. They happen millions of times every day in all kinds of contexts around the world. They happen when a kid stays in, or sneaks out a window. They happen when a community of faith cannot bear to be apart and tries to find ways to cope. They happen when people are balancing the need for health and comfort against the proclamations of some local official who is now a soi-disant disease expert. They happen when a doctor with unexamined bigotry passes over caring for a black patient in favor of a white one, or a rich

man over a poor woman. They walk the balancing line between top-down power, community consciousness, and the choices each person makes about who they care about and how they enact that caring. On this score, in this pandemic, America has one terrible failing that rises above all of its others: its unwillingness to provide treatment to the sick.

There are a lot of bad and desperate ideas in America right now: immunity get-out-of-jail-free cards, Bluetooth contact tracing apps, incoherent partial re-openings, and going wild and pretending it's all going to go away if we just can get a haircut.

The idea of certifying immunity status would be terrible. If you wanted something like that to work, it would have to convey no immediate benefit to the person being certified immune, and certainly not convey the benefit of being free and able to earn a living for yourself and your family. It is the ultimate moral hazard arising out of an immoral and unjust system.

How would you punish people for defrauding this system? Incarceration and fines would only drive more disease. And people faking immunity is the best case problem a health system would face. The worst is people intentionally getting the disease in order to be allowed back into society, and spreading the virus, even knowingly, because they are desperate. What will you do to the people using this system to get ahead in life? Covid-19 parties are inevitable, because people are people, but what happens when they become a condition for public life? Not only will it drive the poor to risk death while the rich sit away safer in their homes, it means that the level of disease will persist in semi-permanently trapping everyone who doesn't want Covid-19 and can afford to never go out.

Bluetooth apps do not contract trace. Tracing is an intimate process, a long empathetic conversation with a person who understands your community and seeks to understand and hear you. You have to trust a contact tracer, you have to

feel like the people who you name and place in their system will be cared for, protected, and treated, should the worst come to pass.

Bluetooth can't tell if there's a wall between you. It can't tell how windy it was between you and that other person, or if you were stuck in traffic next to them for a half hour. An app can't tell that you left your phone at home that one time. It cannot tell you of someone who went to the emergency room suddenly, phone lost and forgotten, only to be admitted for a week. It cannot tell you about someone who died alone at home, without ever being tested at all. It can tell you about neighbors you never see or speak to, but it can't tell you it's them, so you sit, wondering who it was, wondering if it was real, and what to do now.

Tracing a disease through a community is a human conversation. These are things only humans can do. This is a human job, and a job for those who are trusted by their communities, that speak the language, that know about the things that happen in the neighborhood.

Contact tracers don't just question people. They mostly are there to listen, and to listen carefully, to safeguard people's secrets and hopes as well as their shame and their double lives. They need to not just speak the language of those affected by the disease, they need to speak the culture. In the largely Spanish-speaking immigrant neighborhood where I am sheltering-in-place, I take many walks. And in those walks, I have seen hundreds of informational flyers, but almost none in Spanish – more failing.

We know that we need more testing and contact tracing, and we know we need people to quarantine to slow this disease, but before all that, we need to treat the people who are most at risk as human beings. In the long term, everyone's fate depends on that.

If you want people to stay home and be safe, it has to be financially and logistically possible.

People who are doing the right thing have to be supported and cared for. If you want people to seek medical care, it must be available and not cost more than the patient can reasonably pay – which means nothing for the poorest people.

Using police powers to enforce public health is also fool's game. Any use of police powers must be rare and only for the most unusual situations – no one should be able to look at those situations and say "That could be me there." The racist enforcement we're seeing now defeats the goals of public health and endangers everyone, not only spreading the disease to the victims of these arrests, but preventing the populations they come out of from cooperating with public health investigations. Incarceration or fines only threaten to spread disease as well as deepen poverty and resentment. Diseases, all diseases, feed on poverty and resentment.

Even with some as yet un-obtained insight into immunity status, we won't know for years how long immunity lasts, or how strong it will be from person to person. We still need to understand how the virus is likely to evolve, and how it affects its victims long term, before we can say much about what the elusive goal of "herd immunity" would really mean.

The simple fact is: a million tests a day, a hundred million, won't make a difference if the people most likely to get the virus don't want to be tested because they can't afford to test positive.

The unspoken problem with engaging with a testing regime is why do it when you can't get treatment, or afford it if you could get it? Why go to the doctor when that risks destroying your family's future? We want to test, trace the contacts of every case, and isolate everyone infected, and thus reopen the economy, but without the treatment piece, this idea fails the most basic part of epidemiology: universal participation.

The way we get out is not immunity passports or

herd immunity, it's not test test test, it's a whole system of health that cares for the whole population. The things that have worked the world over, from Germany to Vietnam, always begin and end with universal access to healthcare. Not just testing, tracing, isolating, but the most important part of public health: treatment. But doing that requires a public health system with the public as the beneficiary, not a small percentage of those who can afford it with ease.

If you want people to work together to get out of this, the people coming forward need to know that themselves and their people will be tested and treated with dignity and mercy. They need to know that going to the hospital with Covid-19 doesn't mean going bankrupt, giving up on dreams of educating their children, taking care of their parents, or facing deportation. They need to know that they will be treated on the basis of their illness, not their skin color, class, sex, or any other distinction the virus doesn't respect. Biology doesn't care about social distinctions. The virus doesn't either – it is a simple machine that responds to the environment it finds itself in. It's we who create more susceptible bodies through stress, ill health, co-morbidities untreated in a failed healthcare system. But the virus is not prejudiced, it only seems so in statistics. It will kill rich men in good health, and spare prisoners.

Not everyone is going to be prosocial, but when incentives are right, and peoples' needs are met, overwhelmingly people do the right thing. There's always exceptions, and those exceptions become news, but rarely are those the people who tip the balance. People well cared for and informed, educated and competent, will act for the best of their communities and loved ones. This in turn creates the kind of healthy communities that break the chains of transmission. If we concentrate on building healthcare capacity and supporting communities, many of the antisocial people will disappear into them, looked after by their own people.

There will always be exceptions, but no one can tell you what to do like Grandma can, especially if Grandma can also see to it you get healthy food, a good education, and most importantly right now, medicine when you're sick.

America's health disparities, and the likelihood that Covid-19 could follow other coronavirus immunity patterns could mean that we're doing this again every couple of years, even as other places in the world begin to recover. Our inability to treat, based on our desire to make medical treatment profitable, will doom us to cycles of disease until most susceptible Americans have died, and others who remain are maimed by the potential long term consequences of this disease.

Even with a vaccine, access in our current system, as well as the poison of antivaxxers, could doom the effort to control the disease. If we chose to do nothing to help or treat the victims of Covid-19, our commitment to denying healthcare to all could potentially keep chains of transmission alive for decades. With universal access to care and aid for isolation, we could break that chain in the next few months. But as we have currently constructed what it means to be American, that would be impossible. The choice this country faces is whether to change as a country, or possibly cease to be out of our commitment to inequality.

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A VIDEO GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING COVID-19 WITHOUT FREAKING OUT

It's a complicated time, and we're all emotionally worn out.

Here at emptywheel we've covered the current pandemic's scientific side in some depth. (see Jim White's look at the origin of the virus, Rayne has done several very good updates on the science, politics, and misinformation, and I've gone into the mechanisms of the disease and how it compares to other pandemics)

But we haven't done as much for the overtaxed, overwhelmed reader who just wants some pretty pictures and gentle talking heads to make Covid-19 make sense. Even those of you who voraciously keep up with Marcy's intricate political and media analyses might like to give the emotional roller coaster a break, and still feel like you have some frickin' idea what is going on.

The Modeling

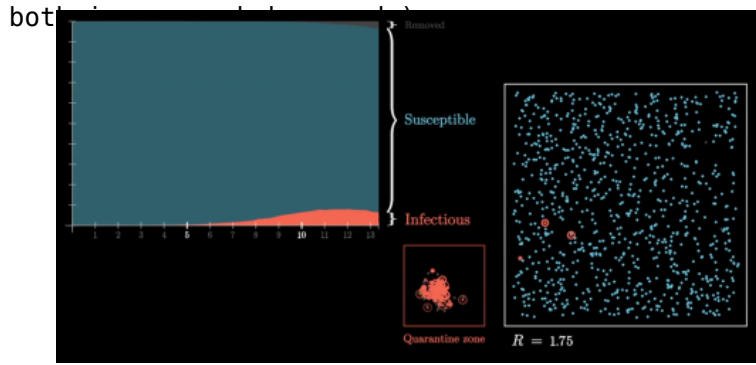
Nothing is more calming yet informative than 3Blue1Brown's soothing and surprisingly clear explanation of epidemic models. This 3Blue1Brown explainer uses SIR, a mathematical modeling system for epidemics. While simplified, it can give you a sense for how more complicated models work, and why policies like social distancing and contact tracing are important and effective.

SIR stands for:

S = the number of susceptible individuals

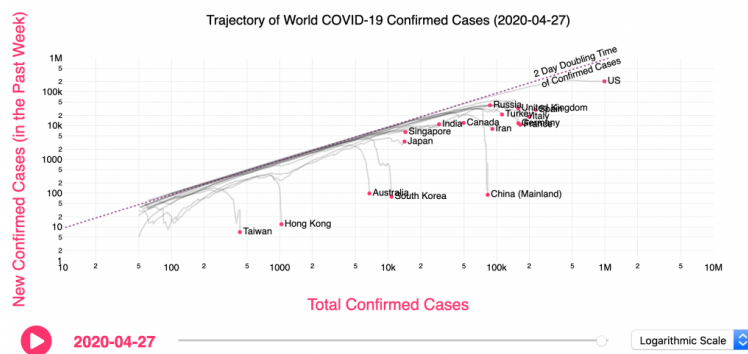
I = the number of infected individuals

R = the number of removed individuals (removed here means no longer infectious, and includes



3Blue1Brown is also one of the most pleasant-to-watch Youtubers of all time. Even when you don't have any clue about the math he's describing, it all comes together and you feel smarter by the end. "It's the mental equivalent of ice-skating," my daughter says, "You're a little bit worried about falling over, but it's nice."

The smartypants at minutephysics and Aatish Bhatia teamed up to visualize the progress of Covid-19 cases around the world. They use a visualization with a logarithmic map of total cases versus new cases to clearly show both how similar the track of the disease is, and what it looks like for a geographical area to get a handle on the spread. This video explains how it works, and here is the site where you can watch the model play with current data.



But why did this happen?

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And why now question is lurking in the back of everyone's mind, and SciShow comes through on it. SciShow has a long and storied history of well-researched and approachable science education, and their video tackling the zoonotic source of Covid-19 (and other viruses) in bats keeps in the tradition. Bats have evolved different approaches to having a mammalian immune system, which makes them better at handling some of the viruses and worse at handling other pathogens we can overcome easily – this is why their viruses can be so rough on us. We have a lot to learn from them, but we should probably stop disturbing their habitats if we don't want to keep catching novel viruses from them.

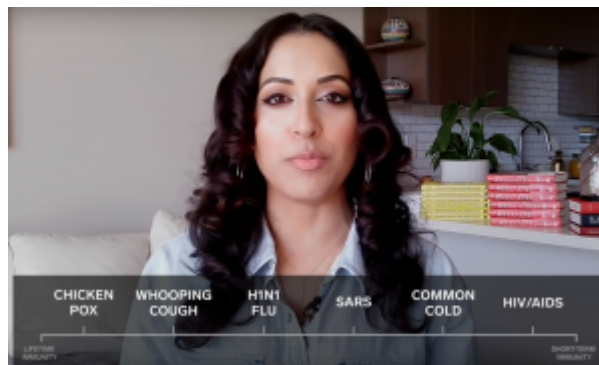
The Medicine

If you've heard a lot of terms and you don't know what they mean, Dr. Hope's Sick Notes goes through 26 of them with clear and non-technical definitions. Dr. Hope is an NHS doctor who teaches and works in an English emergency department as well as a YouTuber. (His ongoing Covid-19 vlog is great, but more stress inducing than the videos featured here.) He gives easy explanations of complicated concepts with handwritten flashcards, a nice soft focus, and some comforting quiet background music. At the end he hands it over to Dr. Sonia, an anesthesiologist at the same hospital, defining some of the more hardcore technical terms we've been hearing in the media, but with equal calming friendliness.



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appears in our next video as well, as an avid AFOL (Adult Fan of Lego). Dr. Hope and Dr. Sonia discuss how the ICU and ventilation really work, demonstrating with a detailed Lego model built by Dr. Sonia in her day off. It goes over all of the scary terms and procedures and why and how they're used, but with Lego, so it's fine. My daughter confirmed this too.



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ty, and the potential for re-infection, and a lot of misunderstanding about what any of those terms mean. Dr. Seema Yasmin breaks it down on a spectrum from life-long immunity to HIV (The worst). Where and how Covid-19 might fit into this is yet to be found, but she lays down the situation and puts it in context.

And Finally, Something of Less Value

Watching night shows, comedy news, and Youtubers adapt to filming inside their houses has been

some hits and a lot of misses, but there's a few amazing hits. These aren't so much information about Covid-19 as a few gems life in quarantine has generated. Relax, it's what everyone's therapist is suggesting we do.



Stephen Colbert interviewing fellow Daily Show alumnus John Oliver is somehow both unbearable and ten minutes of comedy gold. I wish all late night interviews could be like this, but I also think that would kill me.



Kate McKinnon takes to a spare bedroom to reprise her role as Barbara DeDrew, trying to get you to

adopt a cat, any cat, all the cats, from Whiskers R We.

Last but not least: what would you say to yourself, if you could travel back to January?

Please feel free to add your own calming and informative, or just funny contributions in the comments, BUT NO STRESS INDUCERS!!!!11!!!!

Um, am I doing this right?

My work for Emptywheel is supported by my wonderful patrons on Patreon. You can find out more, and support my work, at Patreon. Thanks to H.alhajji for the featured image.

WE'RE IN THIS FOR THE LONG HAUL

Update: Peterr clarifies the difference between food bank and food pantry, etc., here.

(Hey, I know that complaining about politics is our jam in Emptywheel comments, but can we keep the ones on this post to mutual aid and resources for now?)

The time of Covid-19 is different time, and we have to meet it with different commitments.

This pandemic isn't just killing people, it's putting people out of work, and driving the precarious into being the marginal of society. What many people need right now, even more than medical care, is food. At the same time, food banks are losing their donations while serving more people than ever. This need is immediate now, but it's also going to last much longer than the quarantine itself. The world will be reeling from this for many years.

I try to support and lift up people doing good and vital work every month, but this time is different. I'm committing to support the food bank local to where I am now, for the minimum of two years, and one that I would especially exhort you to consider doing this yourself, in the opening hours of this era of need.

The history of pandemics isn't just a history of disease and death, it's a history of the breakdown of logistical systems, of economic

hardship, and of tremendous working together and mutual aid. It's a time of social upheaval, but also times of social innovation. Epidemics wreck nations, and birth public health systems. They teach us fragility, and we fall silent at the end of the lesson.

Everyone is going to have a lot of time to think about their place in the world in the next months, at least, I hope you all do. Many of us will be touched by tragedy, and some of us will be crushed. Some of us will be able to give to institutions like food banks, and some of us, some of the people reading this, are going to need them.

I hope that you and your people emerge unscathed, but I also know not everyone will. The history of plagues is surprisingly full of generosity and honor. And we're going to need a lot of those qualities in the coming years. In that spirit, I'm committing to a monthly donation to the SF-Marin Food Bank, not in one lump sum, but for years to come.

America is not a kind country, and the need is tremendous here, and it will last years after Covid-19 has largely passed. Please join me in making a two or more year commitment to supporting a local food bank, if you can.

If you can't, and you find that you need a food bank, don't hesitate. They are there to help you, and we all need you back on your feet.

Here's a directory of food banks in America, one for Canada (Thanks, Mary R!), and another one for the UK. If you know of other directories or food banks, please leave them in the comments. If you decide to support a food bank, please also leave that in the comments.