

Augury

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True Stories from the Front: Facing COVID-19

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AUGURY

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Our world is an unpredictable place. Still, that has never kept humans from seeking order amidst the chaos: magic, science, religion, astrology, meteorology. Humans are programmed to create categories, put things in boxes, organize the present, and forecast the future.

Physicians even more so.

“What’s your differential diagnosis for hypoxia? By organ system, please.”

“Patient’s febrile, tachycardic, likely viral pneumonia - he’s septic.”

Order means control. Order means a plan. Order means *safety*. Life and death. Sickness and health. We study the signs to keep ourselves on the right side of the divide. But now there is no order, no playbook or plan.

So, we read the portents.

It starts as a trickle, a rumour. A distant threat a world away from you and me. People are sick in China. Something respiratory. Viral pneumonia? The WHO claims transmission’s *not* human-to-human but then why are so many people sick? Whatever they say, wider transmission feels inevitable.

Cases crop up here and there, sprouting like mushrooms in a moribund spring. The radio announcer states that the risk to Canadians remains low. Meanwhile I stop taking the streetcar and drive to work instead. My

family members ask if they should travel overseas and I tell them I wouldn't. Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe not.

Then one bright morning Italy puts Lombardy on lockdown. The next day the rest of Italy is shuttered too. Somehow this still doesn't qualify as a pandemic until, a few days later, it does. A stadium worth of basketball fans are ushered from their seats, hotdogs and beer in hand, before tipoff.

Subsequently, time fractures. News travels like lightning while life slides glacially by. There is no yesterday or tomorrow. There is only now.

I feel trapped at the summit of a roller coaster. I sense the fall coming, my stomach floating, the gravity of what's looming tensing against the inertia of what used to be. But the fall will come. Is coming. We just don't know how hard it will be.

So, we read the portents.

Outside, it is cold, bright and windy; nonetheless the streets are crowded with people, people walking dogs, people pushing strollers, people shopping. Silver-haired *babushkas* huddle as they gossip in a Tim Horton's coffee shop. My god, they need to shut this down. They need to shut this *all* down! Things will be much worse before they are better.

At night, the ambulances seem to wail louder and longer, screaming like air-raid sirens. I'm not sure why I even bother trying to sleep.

The Premier of Ontario calls a state of emergency and the city seems to hold its collective breath. Finally, I can let mine out. My commute to work now wends through empty streets that are somehow strangely soothing. It feels like the end of the world and perhaps it is. But I find hope in a simple formula: shorter commutes = less cars on the road = more people at home = fewer dead people.

At work, everything swirls in a flurry of activity. Policies change by the hour. New subcommittees erupt and I volunteer to sit on any I can. I need to feel like I'm doing something (anything), to discern some sort of plan. I draft worst-case scenario staffing schedules, brainstorm what to do if we run out of medications. I used to joke I'd only need three medicines to provide palliative care. Now I realize even they may run out of stock.

My friends and colleagues all sense what's coming. We know it will be bad. What we want to know, what we *need* to know, is whether it will get better. I watch online for a flattened curve - somewhere, anywhere. China did it but the West isn't China. Will we go far enough? Can we?

So, we read the portents.

I watch the case counts tick up and up, hoping for some sign that the shutdowns are working, but the numbers look worse and worse. Italy resorts to battlefield triage, heartbroken doctors deciding who lives and who dies, whilst bodies pile higher. In Spain, ice rinks are repurposed as morgues. And then, just south of our Canadian border, New York City ignites. In the richest country on Earth, nurses wear garbage bags instead of gowns while prisoners dig mass graves for the unclaimed dead. With such a torrent of news, I wonder if papers even have space for obituaries.

Here too, in Toronto, Canada, case counts multiply. The virus is seizing more mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, grandmothers, grandfathers, and friends. Some live, some die. Some linger in the liminal grey separating our world from the next. But I have read the critical care triage plans and they brook no shades of grey. Every contingency is spelled out in black and white. If the situation deteriorates, I know exactly who we won't try to save.

Yet, somehow, life and work go on. We adjust to this new abnormal normal. With a no-visitor policy and fear of the virus, the hallways echo as the hospital empties out. None of the staff have ever seen it this *quiet* but, still superstitious, we don't use that word. We fortify ourselves for a category 5 hurricane that, when it comes, is more like a tropical storm. The daily case counts plateau and nightly news epidemiologists seem to think we've peaked. Still, each day feels like wandering through a haunted house, expecting some new horror hiding behind every door.

After a while, the numbers stop meaning anything. The twenty-four-hour talking heads reporting from studios or from home or from some empty street have run out of anything novel to say. National numbers are expanding or flattening or flattened. The economy crashes in historic fashion but apparently is due for a V-shaped recovery or maybe for the worst depression ever. Seventy-five year old family businesses crumble overnight. The safety nets tear and millions are in free fall.

We will reopen in stages although no one knows when or how or how many lives it'll cost to do so. We only know it *will* cost lives. Living in lockdown is safest but it cannot go on forever. Just when we have a plan (Stay Home! Save Lives!) the ground beneath us shifts again.

I sit at home and eat too much, watch too much TV, and wait for what's next. I realize that none of it, not the news reports or the internet tickers, not the mortality data or the job reports, can tell me what I really want to know. People like order. People need a plan. We want to know what kind of world we'll be left with when the dust settles from the graves we'll have to dig. We want to know if we will be okay, not just as individuals, but as a society.

So, we read the portents.

On evening strolls I spot signs in windows and on lawns thanking essential workers. At 7:30 every night, neighbourhoods erupt in a pot-and-pan chorus, a standing ovation for those who must venture out to keep others safe. People donate money and volunteer time. Strangers sew homemade masks and neighbours check on one another. We take time to read and bake and meet virtually with distant loved ones we have not spoken with for too long.

I go for walks or runs outside, seeking answers. With the vernal equinox past, the days grow longer. Spring tiptoes in, then retreats again. Flowers bloom in fits and starts: first snowdrops and crocuses, then daffodils and tulips. Animals teem in unusual abundance, emboldened by human absence. Raccoons reconnoiter our garden in broad daylight. A skunk nearly sprays me on a dawn run. Overhead, the skies are untrammelled blue. I cannot remember the last time I saw a contrail.

Everywhere people go, everywhere we've been, for as long as we've been human, we've sought meaning. We've looked for order in the stars, in the seasons, in holy books, and in science. But right now, there is not much order to find.

In ancient Rome, the Augurs divined the future by watching the flight of birds. I remember, years ago, writing an exam in a colossal Victorian building, seemingly designed to intimidate, sitting by the window, and listening to the birds outside. Hearing their song, I realized that no matter my small sorrows, the world would go on. It could still be beautiful.

I do not know if I will be okay. I do not know if we will be okay. I do not know if the world we once lived in will ever return. But birds are ancient creatures (descendants of dinosaurs flitting by our windows). They've watched us rise and fall in our short span on Earth. They've seen us through worse and they're still singing.

From where I sit, a mug of tea beside me, staring out into a world waking up to spring, I can see them going about their lives, little different than they did before. I am no augur but, to me, it augurs well.■