



*Here's my wish:
That we learn
a few things.
That we get
smarter.*

The Plague Year

C Douglas Phillips, MD, FACR

[H]ere I cannot but take notice that the strange temper of the people of London at that time contributed extremely to their own destruction.

*Daniel Defoe
A Journal of the Plague Year*

Typically, writing this column gives me a great deal of pleasure. I find it relaxing. I get to vent about the oddities and rewards of our chosen profession: looking at pictures, figuring out a disease process, making an observation that may lengthen a life, occasionally doing a procedure that helps a patient, and working with other dedicated physicians, nurses, and staff who all have the same idea.

This is different. We've got a few unpleasant things to divulge and discuss here. Bear with me. Hopefully, soon we will be back laughing at the things we did before.

I rarely discuss politics here, and I will do this very superficially. Anyone interested in how I really feel? Drop me a line. We can talk.

Living and working in New York City, it doesn't give me a great deal of pleasure to look at the past several months. COVID-19 paid us a visit. Wow, did it pay us a visit. To say we were unprepared for it would be an understatement of the highest order. We watched it in China, then in Europe, and then in a few other countries, and yet we somehow took solace in the words we heard from almost everyone in government: "Nothing to see here. Go on about your business."

Defoe got this one right on the mark. Our "strange temper" (and what a great line that is, eh?) hurt us. Things like viral epidemics happen to other people. They don't happen to us.

Well, this one did.

Many people worked with scant PPE. I watched ED staff in South Korea and Singapore wearing hazmat suits, but we all know frontline clinical staff here who were forced to reuse standard surgical masks. We altered carefully learned habits of infection control because it was expedient, not because it was wise.

I have been fairly lucky. I work remotely a lot; my ventures into the hospital seemed to be about the most frightening thing one could do. My folks, my kids, and my friends all worried about me traveling into the heart of it all. But I wore and reused the masks, I wore the gloves, I used hand sanitizer. Lots of hand sanitizer. Social distancing? My wife and I became virtual hermits.

I did everything I thought I could do but was still scared stupid. Yes, indeed, friends got ill. I know a few who died. Most everyone here has been acquainted with someone who didn't do very well. COVID-19 disrupted everything about life — walking, driving, shopping, dining; what we watched on TV, what we read, what we discussed. It's going to be a while before things seem even close to normal.

Here's my wish: That we learn a few things. That we get smarter. One thing my wife has pointed out and I absolutely agree with is that this was an illuminating moment. We saw in the stark light of day all the things we have incorrectly configured, and we saw all the people who have absolutely no business being in charge of things. Let's flush all that stuff, as quickly as we can.

Keep doing that good work, friends. Stay safe. Mahalo.

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