

Ted Olinger
ANOTHER LAST WORD



Journal of the Plague Year: Part II

When this whole thing started, the family indulged in these long, elaborate breakfasts since there was no place anyone had to be, except maybe a Zoom meeting. Baked eggs, Dutch babies, sourdough waffles; things we once reserved only for Christmas or New Year's.

Now I'm down to half a banana and a pot of green tea I nurse all day. My wife drinks protein shakes between her online meetings or the classes she teaches, then sits cursing to herself while rage knitting.

I hear children playing outside. I get up from the computer to stand on our porch and listen. It's a lovely sound. I start for the neighbor's backyard to investigate, then stop. It's not children; it's just his chickens foraging in the garden, a different kind of lovely sound I haven't appreciated before.

My own child — though at 18 he's hardly that — is on our roof scrubbing the skylights. He asks permission while I am typing away at something and I say sure without thinking about it. Then I hear the extension ladder rattling and him banging around up there. This is the same high school senior who can't keep his room clean, but now he's clinging to our high-pitched roof 30 feet off the ground scrubbing moss. Then I wonder why I said sure without thinking.

At the end of almost every day he runs five or six miles at different parks after his online classes. One Friday he returned later than normal. Coming home across the Purdy Spit, he saw some friends standing next to their cars on the shoulder and stopped. They watched the stadium lights at Peninsula High School come on at 8:20 p.m. — 2020 hours — for 20 minutes to honor them, the class of 2020. Then they stood there in the dark for a while before going their separate ways.

I get an email from a relative. "We can't let the cure be worse than the disease," he says, adding "There's nothing political about common sense — spread the word." I ask what he knows about C-19 that I don't. He sends me a DIY pattern for a tinfoil hat.

I'm driving home on a sunny, breezy day after I've finished conducting interviews and running errands behind a mask. I think I've forgotten something and check

my list: Mail, pharmacy, groceries, wine from this one place, then more wine from this other place — all done. But I know I'm forgetting something. I look around the car. Seems normal. Put stuff away at home. Uneventful. Drink a cup of cold tea outside for a minute and watch clouds scudding across the sun. I should be out sailing on a day like this. That's it — that's what I forgot.

The dog is acting different, but we don't notice. I run him every day and he's getting slower and slower. I think he's just being stubborn because we put him on a diet. But now there's a bad smell and we examine his 114 pounds of bear fur and find a terrible wound from some skin allergy.

We can't get in to see the vet but we send photos and she prescribes antibiotics, steroids and some kind of spray. How had we missed this? We're with him all the time. Are we that preoccupied?

We stay up with him the first night he's on meds; he is restless and thirsty and unable to settle. I am usually pretty good at interpreting his looks but only because his meaning is usually pretty simple: feed me, walk me, play with me. Now he doesn't want any of those things and looks at me with an expression I can't interpret, and don't want to.

I am startled awake on the couch by his muffled barks. He's twitching and growling as he pursues, I hope, his favorite prey in a familiar dream. I think he must be feeling better, and I relax. I fall back to sleep and into my own recurring dream, sailing my dad's boat, though Dad and his boat are long gone. But this time I am sailing deliberately into shallows and between reefs to escape a dangerous shore.

Ted Olinger lives in Vaughn.

Carolyn Wiley
DEVIL'S HEAD DIARY



Socially Distant Amusements

In this era of social distancing, being out of the loop has been an adjustment, especially since there are no loops to be in. With meetings canceled, routines disrupted, latte stops eliminated, the squares on the kitchen calendar have become virgin territory.

What to do with all this unscheduled time?

My husband, David, and I were once habitual, even chronic, exercisers. The first disruption was the pool closure, setting our daily water aerobics group adrift. The

second blow came when the YMCA shut down. No more tai chi, no sword form for me; no weightlifting or treadmill for David. We were soon bemoaning the deleterious effects of our innate couch potato natures. Were we really going to watch all 635 episodes of "Gunsmoke"?

We thought a walk up to the mailbox would do us good. The round trip is one mile with a wee incline that Fitbit counts as four flights of stairs. The saunter put a dent in our cycle of inertia, but not quite enough to quell the restlessness. Adding a bit more to the walk made sense. But for the purpose-driven, a walk should have a goal, so we toted plastic bags along to pick up cans, bottles, candy wrappers and other treasures along our tributary of the Key Pen Highway.

I feel no remorse about my lack of compassion for graceless people somehow compelled to discard their debris along the road. I can only imagine these pampered but ill-fated souls had mothers or maids to pick up after them, depriving them of the opportunity to learn how to deal with detritus or master other basic life skills.

But de-littering a local road has its own subtle rewards: It is akin to spying on your neighbors. In the first few days, their signature behaviors became evident.

There was Cigarillo Guy. Obviously, littering the interior of his vehicle with cigarillo plastic tips was unthinkable. He — and I unapologetically assume he is a he — usually finishes his skinny cigar within a few yards of the intersection at 88th Street.

Another neighbor seems to need one more drink before tucking in for the night. He (or she?) tosses their mini-bottles between 72nd and 76th. Do you suppose the impact of favorite watering hole closures has created a boost in mini-single-serve booze sales?

Also, I do sympathize with the habit of those anonymous smokers repulsed by the idea of retaining their own cigarette butts, avoiding periodic in-vehicle clean-up by just flicking away that annoying ciggie stubble. But I hereby request that they please use the installed purpose-built receptacle — some call it an "ash tray." They may have no worries about starting a roadside fire, but the worst offenders are those who opt for tossing their butts in gag-inducing mixtures of partially filled booze bottles.

But our litter reduction efforts have paid off. Our right-of-way is now relatively trash-free, except for Cigarillo Guy and mister or miss One-More-for-the-Road.

To compensate for the reduction of entertaining treasure hunts, and missing

the benefits of deep squats, we went to work on the Scotch broom.

Although we are making steady progress dislodging the golden horde from our road south to Devil's Head, several stands still flourish. We have encountered dense patches of resistant individuals that will not yield to hand-pulling. More aggressive attacks with shovel and weed wrench will soon be part of the battle plan.

You may think this is a curious way for a couple of 80-year-olds to spend their twilight time, but for several years I thought it would be fun to make April "Scotch Broom Eradication Month" on the Key. I thought a catchy tagline for the effort would be "Pull Your Own Weight — In Scotch Broom," especially appropriate if the kick-off date was April Fools' Day.

One motivator for our ongoing effort was figuring out exactly what "Pull Your Own Weight" entailed. Upon reflection, I realized that for me the stated goal may be out of reach. I have learned that by leaving the bigger plants for David and not working fast enough to generate a my-size bundle means that if I am going to pull my own weight, I will have to go back on a serious diet.

But when I paused to look back at our handiwork, the unsightly Scotch broom debris left behind was appalling. As soon as David empties the truck of gravel he uses to maintain our private road, we need to drive that 4-mile stretch of the Key Pen Highway to pick up the scattered golden wreckage. Who knows, by the time that happens we may even uncover another month's worth of spent liquor bottles and cigarette butts.

Award-winning writer Carolyn Wiley patrols the byways of Longbranch.

Caleb Galbreath
RISING TIDES



In These Uncertain Times

I have been bombarded with this phrase through emails, ads on TV, radio, news media and everyday conversations. But it doesn't resonate with me. The times have always felt uncertain to me.

I think this is largely a product of my age. I'm young — or at least that's what I'm told when I complain about feeling old — and most of my life thus far can be characterized as uncertain.

I know I'm not alone in this, most of my friends feel the same way. I once asked a

Dan Whitmarsh

WRITING BY FAITH



A Christmas Memory

It's the early 1990s and we've gathered for dinner at Grandma's house. Adults are talking in the kitchen while the teenagers lounge in the back room, debating whether there's a Walkman amongst the presents under the tree. Somewhere, there's a record player spinning carols by Andy Williams.

The Gulf War is over, Communism is dead, and the American economy is booming. The future looks bright. Mostly, I'm looking forward to a home-cooked meal after months of bad college food.

My grandfather, a lifelong Republican, said grace and we dug in. I piled my plate with Mom's green bean casserole, ham, and yams without marshmallows (because that's a travesty). My uncle, who we suspected was a Democrat, opened the sparkling cider and passed it around.

My parents, who leaned conservative, told us about the Christmas Eve service at church. I, who was slowly moving left thanks to a university education, shared the details of my upcoming band tour.

In short, we dined, we laughed, we told stories, we gave gifts, and then, late that evening, as another Christmas faded into history, we drove home in the warm glow of familial love.

Will we ever experience moments like that again? When the danger of pandemic fades, will we gather with family and friends from across political, religious and social divides? As people grow ever-more segregated over not just political beliefs but the nature of truth itself, will we be able to share happy moments with those who believe, live and vote differently?

At the heart of it, the Christmas story is about Jesus leaving the comfort of home for a foreign land. God became human and made his dwelling here, far away from the trappings of power and glory. His mission of reconciliation was carried out by humbly crossing the great divide between heaven and Earth.

Angels declared his birth to be "good news of great joy for all people." Not just a select few, not any particular tribe, but all people, everywhere. This is the glory: Everyone is invited to the table.

Mary's Magnificat — a canticle found in Luke 1, also known as the Song of Mary — describes just what this table looks like. The hungry are fed and the humble are lifted up, while those clinging to riches

and power are left outside in the cold. This is further glory: Those who know their need will be filled, while those who, out of fear and desperation cling to false gods of security, are invited to let go of the charade and finally find true peace.

In these dark days, I long for the comfort of a warm holiday dinner with family and friends. I look forward to rich conversations with people from across the full spectrum of life. I pray we can all do our part by staying engaged, listening with humility, repenting the quest for unhealthy power, and yes, even wearing masks so we're all still here when this is over.

On behalf of the Church on the KP, I wish you a Christmas filled with joy, laughter, love and peace and, if you're so lucky, a plate of yams, preferably without marshmallows.

Award-winning columnist Dan Whitmarsh is pastor at Lakebay Community Church.

Carolyn Wiley

DEVIL'S HEAD DIARY



Pandemic Distractions

As I entered the early stages of restless boredom, our modern conveniences conspired to provide distraction. Minor amusements were provided by the DIY restoration of the coffee grinder, a favorite chainsaw, the TV remote, a sewing machine and other malfunctioning amenities.

When Googled info was inadequate, time was devoted to helpline contact. Each required a series of calls and robotic options, none of which addressed my needs, followed by pseudo-soothing music. For me "hold" became an exemplification of the socially distant state of mind. The result, once human contact was made, was pleasant, helpful, brief, and worth the wait.

In mid-August I entered into more meaningful and lasting acquaintances. My husband David was off on a "can't-live-another-day-without" Costco run, only to find he was driving a car with no brakes. He was able to roll back down our half-mile gravel road without damaging the car, the house or himself. I called for a tow truck and we bid the car safe travels to the dealership.

The problem was identified in short order and we were informed that parts had to be ordered.

And that was the seed that allowed my friendship with Brett to grow. We chatted weekly as he reported on the continuing search for parts. The dealership even offered to pay for them and the labor — provided they could be found.

I lodged a complaint with the parent

company. Its lack of support was damaging the image of the local dealer, as well as its own. For good measure I cited statutes requiring manufacturers to have parts available for 10 years after production and the car in question had a few years to go.

And that is how I met Valerie, the voice from the big corporate office in the sky. She called weekly for another five weeks to say the parts were on order and would be available ASAP.

After 10 weeks the parts were located. The repairs took less than a day. The car came home.

Meanwhile, friendship blossomed on another front.

Days after the brake failure, David walked into the kitchen and discovered the tell-tale puddle that alerted us to the death of the freezer.

Armed with sketches and measurements of our cabinetry layout, off we went to the big box store to search for the right-sized fridge. We discovered, much to our surprise, that modern refrigerators have outgrown our kitchen. After several stops we found one that would fit the space, and it would be available at the end of December — four months and several holidays away. At the fourth big box, an identical one was located that could be delivered before Thanksgiving.

A helpful employee then remembered that a same-make fridge had been returned to the warehouse. She took off with measurements in hand, and reported that "Yes it was there and it can be delivered within a week."

It arrived the following Sunday afternoon. Unfortunately, the measurements she verified were only for the box, not the hinges and convex doors. Still, the ever so pleasant young men who delivered and installed it took on the task and would not be stayed "from completion of their appointed rounds."

They hauled out the old and installed the new. Just one teensy problem, it stuck out about 12 inches, and although we didn't have to turn sideways to walk between the fridge and island, access to cabinets was blocked, and the doors could only be opened from the side.

The fridge we had originally selected was ordered and delivery scheduled. Although it would not be available until November, we could use the new silver monster during the eight-week interim.

Delivery day arrived. David moved all the vehicles that might interfere with truck turnaround, I moved all the goodies from the monster fridge. The new installation went smoothly, but when we went to retrieve cars, mine was dead.

Another chance to bond with a stranger! The spiffy automated roadside assis-

tance app assigned a tow truck driver from Olympia — only 12 miles away (if you are a bird) — and GPS led the driver to a spot about 4 miles off target. It took several chats to redirect him to the long gravel road leading to our newly refrigerated rural home.

We had just seen the tow truck off and I was thinking how nice it would be to renew my contact with Brett when the phone rang. It was an automated caller telling me that our new refrigerator would be delivered the next day and I should call the store if there was a problem.

I perceived a problem.

Getting past the automation and into a new cycle of hold music and finally a non-robot voice used up a good chunk of time: It was too late to stop delivery. If we were not at home the new fridge would be left on the porch.

Luckily, the delivery guys had no better luck finding us than the tow truck driver and delivery of a third new fridge was stayed.

If COVID-19 confinement has you feeling lonely and bored and your options for making new friends are limited, your stuff is too new.

Award-winning humorist Carolyn Wiley lives in Longbranch.

Lynn Larson

STEPPING BACK



A Hatful of Gold – The Medicine Creek Treaty

Runners spread throughout southern Puget Sound, inviting headmen from the villages on the Nisqually and Puyallup Rivers, the Key Peninsula and the southern inlets, during this rainy season 166 years ago.

The territorial governor, Isaac I. Stevens, assisted by George Gibbs, a lawyer and ethnologist, and Michael Simmons, the first American settler on Puget Sound and appointed Indian Agent, was under pressure from Congress to open up the lands of the Northwest to non-Indian settlement. But first he needed to make treaties with the present inhabitants.

Gibbs knew the highest political authority for Puget Sound Indians was the village headman, and that it was not possible to treat with every village headman. He solved the problem by lumping all villages on a river drainage into "tribes," and designed all of the treaties on Puget Sound to be negotiated between these tribes and the federal government.

The first was the Medicine Creek Treaty. Native people were encouraged by the name of the creek, suggesting "power." Six hundred Native people gathered at

Phyllis Henry

COAST TO COAST



Another Time

When I google “alone” I find a bunch of synonyms: single, friendless, solitary, lone, lonesome and more. I’m alone a lot these COVID-19 days. Today I spoke six words. Each time a meal was delivered to my door I yelled, “Thank you.” Since last March I have ridden in a vehicle five times, each event for a medical purpose such as vaccinations, blood sampling and testing. To get my mail each night I venture down to the lobby after 8 p.m. when I won’t see any other residents. Today living each day like this is by choice, but when I was much younger and living in Iowa being alone was a treat I needed to steal.

Back then at the corner where the gravel road fronting my acreage intersected with the gravel road that went by my cousin Lyle’s place stood a bullet-pocked stop sign. Leaning against that sign, drowsy from the scent of newly-mown grass, I watched the tall corn tassels moving in the breeze to the east and the slightly browning soybeans for a mile to the west. Neighboring farms basked peacefully on this warm summer day, and, with no other person in sight, the magic of feeling I might be the only human alive made me smile.

The sun warmed my face, and Baron, my golden lab, lay beside me, panting, not demanding attention, but content to be with me. He rolled onto his back with his four legs outspread just in case I wanted to rub his hairy belly.

Walking to that corner and back was our special together time. If I woke up early and needed time to calmly plan my day, we started out as early as six in the morning. On busy days we didn’t walk until late in the morning or even in the afternoon. Baron didn’t need a schedule, and neither did I.

On this day, we’d walked together to the end of the driveway shortly after breakfast. There I turned right and walked along the edge of the road. Even though traffic past our house was light, Baron wasn’t allowed to walk on the road because of the possible danger, so he dashed into the low ditch and raced through the Queen Anne’s lace and Shasta daisies and other blossoms and weeds, excited by the exercise and by the joy he exhibited whenever we were together.

As we passed the orchard, I checked the

apple trees where branches drooped with heavy fruit and reminded myself to prune some back before they broke. I was pleased to see the geese gobbling the downed, rotting fruit because that would prevent disease from festering on the ground.

At the far end of the orchard, Baron slipped through the wire fence into the first green and gold field and for a while kept pace with my lazy walking, then yelped once before he raced ahead, disappearing into the soybeans, with only an occasional flash of his champagne-colored tail bobbing above the maturing grain.

As I crossed the old wooden bridge at the bottom of the hill, Baron scoped out the culvert under the road. Then he explored all the way through to the other side before rushing between the corn rows until he reached the intersection, where he sat patiently on the berm of the road, waiting for my permission for him to join me. After I dropped to the grassy sanctuary around the stop sign, and called, “Baron, come,” he swiftly crossed the road and lowered his golden body beside me.

Stretching out under the warm sun, I half-dozed and watched the red-winged blackbirds fiercely guard their nest from an attack by the red-tailed hawk that lived in the trees across from my acreage. Baron snoozed beside me, legs running while he slept, probably chasing the rabbits that got away when he was awake. I listened to the rumble of a tractor on a distant road pulling a load of corn to the elevator in town.

Back home, letters remained unwritten, weeds continued to grow in the vegetable garden, llamas needed to be brushed and the soup for lunch should have been warming.

Jack, our neighbor, driving on his way to his own lunch, stopped his pickup when he saw the two of us relaxing on the grass. With his elbow sticking out the window, he called, “Are you OK? Do you want a ride home?”

“No, thanks. We’re just out for a walk,” I said, and, standing up, brushed the tiny twigs and grass cuttings off my jeans.

“Baron, come,” I said. Baron crossed from the grassy area to the edge of the road with me, jumped into the ditch and raced home. He was standing at the end of the driveway, happy to greet me, when I arrived. After I checked the mailbox, we strolled back to the house where I started lunch, while on the porch Baron cuddled with his favorite cat while he took a nap.

Alone, yes. Lonely, never.

Award-winning columnist Phyllis Henry lives in Gig Harbor.

Anna Brones

FRESH TAKE



Cycles

This winter has been difficult, perhaps more so than I had anticipated, the result of a combination of winter blues, too much political news and the “endless endlessness” of an ongoing pandemic.

I’ve heard from many friends and acquaintances who have felt slower, more tired, sad, less creative during these past winter months. Part of that is the nature of winter, a time when our bodies crave hibernation. But there has been something deeper at play too, the weight of the last 12 months, this feeling of endlessness.

As an antidote to that, I have been working at reminding myself of the cyclical nature of our lives.

We are surrounded by cycles. A calendar marks a cycle. We track our movements from one month to the next, all of them adding up into a full year before we start over again. The seasons are a cycle. We’re slowly watching winter change into spring and the days growing longer. A day is a cycle, a chance for renewal every time we wake up in the morning.

These cycles are the most constant thing in the natural world, taking place above us, beneath us, around us. It’s easy to forget they take place within us too. It’s even more difficult to recognize a cycle when things feel static, which is exactly the feeling the last 12 months have left us with.

But if we can acknowledge the cycle then we can remember that this too will change.

On a chart, a cycle is a succession of waves. Up and down, up and down, one after another. The upper parts of a wave in this cycle, the “crest,” are often the easier ones. These are the times when we feel inspired, fueled, passionate, committed. It’s the low parts, the “trough,” that can be a bit tougher to get through.

How do we carry ourselves through these low moments? We need everyday investments in our wellbeing. We need rituals that keep us grounded, give our lives structure. We need to create pockets of joy.

As a writer and an artist, over the last year I have found that the best thing I can do for myself creatively is to commit to small, daily acts to stay active and present, even in the lowest moments.

Whether creativity is your outlet or not, we can all focus on identifying our own cycle. If it’s helpful, start to jot down notes every day on how you feel. If you pay attention long enough, you will start to notice

the cycles. This will help to give you more awareness next time you’re in a lull, an ability to say to yourself, with a little more confidence: “this too will change.”

Because while those low moments can at times feel intolerable, it is thanks to the cycle that we grow, shaped by the ups and downs of the waves that we encounter along the way. As Katherine May writes in the book “Wintering,” “We have seasons when we flourish and seasons when the leaves fall from us, revealing our bare bones. Given time, they grow again.”

I have swum in the saltwater every single day since Dec. 1, another regular routine that has become essential for maintaining balance. Every day the water is different, the sky is different, the temperature is different. Change is constant.

On Monday morning last month, the tide was higher than I had ever seen it. After I had come out of the water, showered, dressed in several layers of wool, and started to warm back up again, I checked a tide chart. There it was, clearly marked: one of the highest tides of the month.

There is something reassuring looking at a tide chart, the ups and downs clearly marked, constant, yet still shifting. There they are, the crests and troughs of a daily cycle that is part of a monthly cycle, that is part of a yearly cycle, that is part of a cycle on a timescale bigger than we can comprehend.

It is a visual reminder that even an endless endlessness will eventually have an end, evolving into the next chapter. The best that we can do for ourselves is to embrace this cyclical nature, work with it instead of against it.

Because the thing about a cycle is that it doesn’t stop; it keeps going. And so do we.

Anna Brones is a writer and artist who lives in Vaughn.

Carolyn Wiley

DEVIL’S HEAD DIARY



Combating Pandemic Boredom

Social distancing opened up blocks of unscheduled time and put the lie to my standard excuse: “I don’t have time to ____.” In the initial phase of isolation, I felt the need to establish goals so the newfound time would not be wasted. I took inventory of my surroundings and started a to-do list that turned into a cumbersome tome.

Annoying “oughtas” cried out for attention but I could rationalize putting off most of them. For instance, if I actually removed the even coating of dust on horizontal surfaces, David would waste time

hunting for pen and paper each time he was stricken with the urge to write I LUV U!

Faced with a ballooning to-do list, I resorted to the Procrastinator's Planning Guide. First, I categorized the tasks into three sections: Things I Will Do Later, Things I Can Get David to Do, and Things I Have No Intention of Ever Doing. This exercise eliminated many items, improved my outlook, and a starting point was identified. However, before getting to work there was an obligation to fulfill. I had to meet my friend and tai chi partner, Judy. Since the shut-down, Judy has been my only FNFH (Frequent-Non-Family-Human) contact.

Before the YMCA closed, I was teaching a tai chi sword form class there and I didn't want those skills to atrophy, so I offered to continue instruction in the great distancing outdoors. During the first few months several people were along for the ride, but Judy is the only one who stayed the course in spite of soggy days, bone chilling cold and gale force winds. We meet two to three times a week; when the sun is out we are in the parking lot, when it isn't we meet at a local dock. Each place offers a perfect setting to focus on what is important — relaxation and stress elimination.

In standing meditation, we draw energy from the Earth or the tides — depending upon our location — inhale energy from the air, engage our senses to feel the heat of sun, chill of breeze, drink in the sights and sounds and focus on being present in the moment. Settled and centered, we move on to the onerous task of eliminating the enemies of serenity.

Tai chi poses have charming names: Waiting in the Attitude of the Fish, Parting the Grass, Catch Falling Blossoms, Birds Return to the Forest, Scooping the Moon from the Bottom of the Sea. But these names do not necessarily convey a description of the action. To assure that students understand the defensive or aggressive goals of all 37 poses requires translation.

Since mortal combat is to ensue, one needs a foe. The preparation phase requires focused calmness, and once you have quieted the myriad of distractions, it is easy to single out a worthy opponent.

Suppose the opponent of choice involves a blackberry bush army that is intent on invading the homestead. One must be ready to take on the grabbing, stabbing brambles; therefore, a targeted and vicious response is required.

Three Rings Around the Moon — my very favorite sequence — is better understood once the Immoral Points the Way and the threat is identified. The first pose of the series is Major Literary Star — a nice touch for this wannabe-writer. It is a

targeting move which signals intent, as in "I am coming for you!" and "Here's a knee to the groin." Then, advance: Slash from hip to shoulder. Advance. Backhand slash from hip to shoulder. Advance. Slash up the middle. Flip the sword. Wipe off the gore and run 'em through. The blackberry attacker has been dispatched.

Look out! Watch your flank! Spin to catch the next thief of time intent on grabbing an ankle. Stab him in the foot, raise the sword and deliver a meaningful downward whack. Follow up with a long sweeping stroke traditionally known as Phoenix Spreads Its Wings, which is designed to unseat an enemy on horseback or decapitate a giant.

This is just a small sampling of the graceful flowing tai chi moves that produce an aura of calm.

Having entered a phase of chilled sogginess after the immediate threat of boredom and the blackberry invaders have been banished, Judy and I say farewell and head home. But as I snuggle down in a blanket with a hot cup of coffee, I know that the sneaky blackberry army will resume its rightful place at the top of my Procrastinator list.

To quote Scarlet O'Hara: "I will think about that tomorrow."

Because when it comes to "crastination," I am definitely "pro."

Award-winning columnist Carolyn Wiley lives in Longbranch, where she defends the serenity of existence.



Matthew Dean
GUEST COLUMNIST

The Price of Safety

I have had a great deal of time to think over the past year. These days, there's not much to do on a Friday night once the dishes are done and the laundry is folded. So if I've got nothing better I'll make some tea, turn on some relaxing music, and think about death.

It's an ugly thing, but an inescapable one. News networks keep a running death count like it's the score of the latest Seahawks game. Casual conversations spin around comorbidities and fatality rates. Every positive test from a friend or family member makes us think: "Will this be the one?" The comfortable distance we place between ourselves and our own mortality has suddenly shrunk.

The weight of death is most clearly shown in the drastic steps we've voluntarily taken to ensure our safety. Staying home, separated from loved ones, discon-

nected from our communities, locked out of hobbies and holidays; these aren't measures anyone was excited about. But confronted with a new and terrifying disease that can — and does — strike wherever it pleases, we've retreated willingly.

Or rather, some of us have. Since day one of the "two weeks to flatten the curve" I've had family and friends defying the restrictions. Hosting parties, shaking hands, hugging loved ones. These rebels include seniors, health professionals and the medically high-risk. These are not cruel sociopaths or ignorant hicks; they are kind, compassionate, intelligent people.

When I've asked why they choose to act as they do, a common theme emerges. They're not ignorant of their chances; they move ahead, eyes open, always aware of the casualty figures that hover on every news site and Facebook banner. Like the rest of us, these are people who live with a daily awareness of death. Those who oppose COVID-19 restrictions have decided that the danger — to themselves and to others — is an acceptable price to pay for a human connection, a hug, an unmasked smile.

It's not up to me to decide whether or not this is right. The boundaries of our personal freedoms have been debated for two and a half centuries, and you won't find the final answer here.

However, I think it's important to recognize that any measure of freedom is, by necessity, a risk. Living in a nation of free people means being affected by the choices made with that liberty. We watch people make foolish choices every day, only granting government the authority to step in when their actions directly put someone else at risk.

Driving while impaired is punishable by law, yet we allow people to take actions that lead them to impairment. Why do we allow this? Because we see the level of control necessary to remove these risks as unacceptable. We've chosen a point at which we value our ability to act independently, even if the public good could be achieved through its sacrifice.

In my experience, those who oppose restrictions in the time of COVID aren't composed primarily of science-denying conspiracy theorists or people with reckless disregard for public health. They're people who see the level of control required to eliminate that risk as crossing a boundary. A leap from the prevention of harm to the prevention of the potential to do harm.

It's easy to suggest a philosophical difference and much more difficult to apply it to the complexities of the real world. We've accepted support for the public good in

the form of taxes, speed limits and building codes. We also reject control for the sake of freedom in every right we uphold and every new tax we vote down. My hope is simply that we can assess the pandemic as a question like the rest. If we can manage that, perhaps we can make some progress toward a responsible compromise.

Above all, I don't want to add to our year-long national shouting match. I've seen disturbing thinking on both the pro-restriction and anti-restriction sides of the aisle. I'm not a virologist or a politician, and I'm neither equipped nor entrusted to make any kind of public health decision. This isn't even about disease — it's about dialogue. Starting a productive conversation means acknowledging that we have meaningful differences that go deeper than statistics. Compromise may mean we have to live with the consequences of someone else's convictions, even while upholding our own.

Matthew Dean lives near Vaughn.

Richard Gelinas
EMPIRICALLY YOURS



Renewable Energy is Real and Profitable

On his first day in office, President Joe Biden brought the U.S. back into the Paris Climate Accord, revoked permits for the Keystone XL Pipeline and imposed a temporary moratorium on oil and gas leasing in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Some hailed his actions as bold and long overdue while others decried them for destroying jobs and condemning the country to penury.

In all fairness, cancelling Keystone did kill jobs, almost all Canadian, and will stop tar sand oil from being exported from U.S. soil (you didn't think it was for us, did you? The U.S. is already a net oil exporter). A total of 1,000 people are now out of a job and there won't be another 10,000 hires for construction. However, Biden plans to create 10 million jobs in the renewable energy industry, on top of the 3 million we've already got.

How's that going to work?

Energy underpins all industry and business around the world, and business is always looking ahead. Renewable energy may seem like science fiction to most of us, but energy intensive businesses have already recognized that renewables are everywhere and that they can build as much as they need, thus controlling this key resource.

For example, in 2019 a new steel mill

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