
Guest Column: The Grand Finale?

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Remember when you'd go to the fireworks displays on the fourth of July? There was always that moment of, "well, I think that was the end," only to have them continue? Next there would be a huge bursting display. This time you were certain the display budget had been expended, only to have them continue once again.

It wasn't until that final grand flourish, the one where you thought your ears would burst, leaving no doubt this was the end that it was finally safe to walk back to your car and drive home. Regarding COVID, we've reached over a million cases a day, we'll have a million deaths soon recorded and have an exposure rate of close to 90% (infection or vaccine), I'm thinking these sad facts may prove to be our not so grand finale.

How close are we to completing this recent wave and is this the final wave? The primary goal of any species, be it advanced vertebrate or a virus, is survival and propagation. For a virus to survive, it needs a host which will survive long enough to infect as many people as possible. The more contagious and less dangerous a virus the better it has adapted for survival. In the case of Ebola, outbreaks don't last long because the hosts don't last long. The disease is so horrific that society will isolate those infected in what is the equivalent of a modern-day leper colony. Alternatively, the flu virus hits the sweet spot. It spreads widely because over 99% of those infected survive, leaving them able to infect others. It has also adapted to evading vaccines annually. COVID is evolving just this way.

Over the past two years, COVID has become more contagious and less dangerous, the perfect combination for its survival as an endemic rather than pandemic species. Delta was much more contagious than the original strain but also more dangerous thus it burned out quickly. Omicron was perhaps 10 times as contagious but “milder.” Now we have the emergence of a new variant of Omicron, BA.2, which is twice as contagious as the original Omicron and no more dangerous. The Delta variant remained controllable with the original vaccines whereas Omicron (and likely this new variant) are not. Contagion, survivability and evasion. We’ve checked all the boxes for an endemic virus. Is the pandemic almost over? It seems that we are finally headed that way.

And it’s about time, the planet has a lot of healing to do. This era in human history has scarred the survivors in ways, both physically and emotionally, we couldn’t have fathomed five years ago. Most survivors of COVID have been physically damaged in some way. In some, such as a developing a new chronic pulmonary or cardiac condition, it’s obvious. In the majority though it’s subtle, and mostly undetectable. Still, there are very few who don’t notice some slight physical difference after a severe COVID infection. Aside from direct functional compromise, this pandemic and all that has been required to contain it has caused undeniable social and emotional damage, especially among the young. Humans are just another species.

In some respects, we’re not much different from dogs. And like dogs we need our daily routines. Without them, we develop personality changes, behavioral issues and loss of socialization. One only needs to pick up a paper to see daily examples of this. When, pre-pandemic, do we remember reading about flight attendants being attacked? We witness repeatedly large- and small-scale battles over masks and vaccines, some leading to violence. Certainly, COVID cannot be blamed for all of this, but it has in part contributed to our country’s behavioral reset. COVID somehow became divisive, a pot to stir for many disruptive groups. The question now is, how long will it take us to reacquire our old social norms or will we?

And this internal discord has cost us dearly. Our country’s strength was always based on a few common beliefs, shared by all groups which strengthened us as a nation. Somehow COVID has polarized us and the outcome of how we’ve handled this pandemic speaks for itself. In our great nation, we currently stand at 2,982 deaths per million. That figure is 20 times that of Japan and Australia, 300 times that of New Zealand and almost 1,000 times that of China (and they had the original outbreak)! The only country that matches us in deaths is the socially free-thinking Greece, with Mexico and the combined European Union not far behind.

These numbers make one think that maybe we could have done a better job at this? Probably, but heck, that might have hurt the economy and cost big business money. It seems with all the published numbers our economy is “booming,” with personal wealth, employment and incomes reaching all-time highs, but at what cost? And does anyone really believe these numbers? Does this really feel like a time of unparalleled prosperity for our country as the numbers seemingly indicate?

Our country was on the verge of splitting even before the pandemic and COVID has given this movement a solid platform. I guess what has impressed me, both watching the news and in my personal/professional interactions, is just how influenceable individuals and our society can be. What we’ve had here at points along the path of this pandemic, were many clear forks in the road. One clearly leads you to higher ground,

the other subjects you to the flood waters. Forks occurred over social separation, the need for shut-downs, masking and then most vocally over the vaccines. Irrational skepticism and suspicion about the vaccine and its effectiveness led to two groups, the vaxers and the anti-vaxers, which was almost a 50:50 split. The antivaxers believe that the vaccines were dangerous, part of a governmental conspiracy and not effective. How could such a large group be so far off base? A recent bar graph published in the NYT compares the weekly average deaths from COVID in different sub-populations within the U.S. The facts couldn't be clearer. If you are unvaccinated your weekly risk of dying is 7.8 per 100,000 population. If you are vaccinated that number plummets to 0.6, and if boosted to only 0.1. So, by choosing to not be vaccinated, for whatever your personal reason, you are increasing your chance of dying from COVID by 7,800% over a boosted individual! It turns out, if you are vaccinated and boosted, you have a substantially higher chance of dying from garden variety flu or a car accident than from COVID. How is it this isn't obvious?

But, as clear as the choice should be, there has always been a small but vocal group at every juncture who have somehow convinced half the flock that the more dangerous path is the one to take. Oddly, almost half our population will watch their supposed leaders occasionally fall by the wayside. Regardless, they continue along their misguided path, not for a second thinking it might be the wrong choice. I think it must be weekly that we see an article of some high profile anti-vaxer or anti-masker succumbing to COVID, after a month of fighting for their life in some ICU, often changing their opinions in the final moments. Yet their herd, with blinders on, seem to just step over the cold, dead bodies of their prior leaders and continue along their misguided way. And this not a monochromatic group, it spans all economic groups, social classes and levels of education. Daily I witness this, I don't get it, but I realize I have to accept it because clearly nothing is going to change it.

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