

Life in the Time of Covid, 2020-2022

David P. Sudermann, age 79

Just as spring came into view on 6 March 2020, Covid descended like a late, unwelcome snowstorm, shutting us off from children, friends, and grandparents, from jobs and schools, from church. It was quite a shock. Still, SARS-coV-2 would run its course in a month or two, I figured, and we would resume normal life. The images of dozens of refrigerator trucks lined up near a New York hospital shattered that illusion. Even so, I did not foresee that we would still be living in a time of Covid two years and more down the road, and that in the meantime a million Americans would die.

2020

My family escaped Covid's ravages in 2020. As the family food buyer, I began wearing a mask for grocery shopping almost immediately. Furloughed from work, Rachel, our daughter from Fargo, came home in March and stayed with us for six weeks. Later that year, Martha, our youngest, a grad student at Cornell, spent ten days in a quarantine dorm before she could return to her apartment.

At first, Covid seemed to offer advantages: comfortably sequestered at home, I would be free from all outside distractions; I could lean into a rhythm balancing physical exercise, theological study, writing, reading, music, cooking, and house maintenance. With no job to lose, no young children at home, no money worries, I felt primed for solitude. In short, I would beat Covid by living the monastic life I've long hankered for.

This freedom, however, soon came with a cost. In March St. Olaf's Tostrud Center closed to outsiders. There would be no more dawn workouts and socializing at the "Chapel of Tostrud." Even worse, Wednesday night meals, a favorite church activity, came to a halt. (For a would-be monk, commensality ranks as high as solitude!) Long jogs and walks in the Upper Arb helped me keep physically tuned. As snow melted, the Middle School track opened for running. Then the gates to the outdoor tracks at the Carleton and St. Olaf were unlocked. During the summer, biking to Dundas offered variety. Still, recalling Robert Putnam, life during Covid felt too much like "bowling alone."

During Covid's first year Mary, my wife, started on her half-time glide-path to retirement from St. Olaf. She taught her French classes from home on Zoom. Her presence at home eased my isolation, but I soon learned to keep out of her second-floor study while she was teaching. In the spring Mary planted a small garden which provided much of our fresh produce through the summer.

A year earlier I had reframed the south gable of our house, installed a new attic window, nailed on and painted fresh cedar siding. The task for 2020 called for the same process on the north gable. This time, however, long ladders would not work. Instead, I constructed a large wooden scaffold over the kitchen addition. This made tear-off, applying new siding, setting a new window, and painting quite safe. Since the front gable also needed repainting, I decided to re-erect the scaffold over the porch roof and do that job, too. Both projects together took over six weeks, met my manual labor goal, and provided entertainment for neighbors.

My plan to finish reading one book each week in 2020 came up short. The completed list of thirty-three included James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*; Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*; Annette Gordon Reed's volumes on the Hemings family and Thomas Jefferson; Doris Kearns Goodwin's study of progressive journalism and politics, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*. I also pulled down several books from bygone student days to reread. In honor of Covid, it seemed fitting to reread Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, a collection of 100 novellas set during the Black Death in Florence in 1348. George Orwell's *1984*, a novel about the dangers of "alternative facts" that I first read in high school sounded eerily like 2020. Books on politics included John Bolton's account of life in the Trump inner circle, and Jason Stanley's *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*.

2020 marked the sixtieth anniversary of my high-school graduation. When Covid forced cancellation of our class get-together, I collected high-school memories from my still-living classmates and published them in a booklet. At the same time I began writing a memoir of my four years in a small Indiana high school. Could I find a way back into the inner life of the limit-pushing teenage boy I was? That was the challenge. I'm still working on the memoir.

In 2020 I listened to Keith Jarrett ("The Köln Concert"), John Prine (Prine died in April 2020 of Covid), and Bach, all good stress relievers. Rachel and I streamed Ken Burns's fine "Country Music" series, which at times gave lachrymose release—I'm thinking of Kris Kristoferson's "Help Me Make It through the Night." Together we also discovered Townes Van Zandt. Later, I found Pepper Choplin's "You Are Not Alone," sung by Oasis, comforting. Listening to the Dave Brubeck Quartet brought vivid memories of the concert my mother and I had attended more than sixty years ago—Dave's Bach-like riffs on the piano, Paul Desmond's soulful sound on alto sax, Joe Morello's drums, and Eugene Wright's bass.

Dining out fell off the table, so to speak. I ventured forth only to shop for groceries. Although we missed St. John's friends, the *Sunday New York Times* eased the break from church. Covid seemed as much a passing nuisance as a burden. Even so, as the pandemic surged, the "pressure got the drop on me," and I shocked myself by bursting into tears from time to time. Van Zandt's "If I Needed You," the centerpiece of a bittersweet film, "Broken Circle Breakdown," helped "ease the pain" of the growing loneliness, illness, and death around us.

By far the greater psychological weight in 2020 came from the intensifying political and social conflicts tearing at the fabric of our democracy. Long-festering systemic racism burst open when police killed George Floyd in May. A toxic mixture of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and threats of violence spread as rapidly as Covid through social media and intensified throughout the 2020 political campaign. Efforts to undermine science and subvert democratic norms cascaded. In sum, the quality life in the time of Covid, already difficult, worsened, and heading into November's election, service for the common good seemed in retreat.

2021

We expected to see Covid disappearing in the rear-view mirror by 2021, but new variants evolved. On 4 March Covid cases in Minnesota reached 500,000; the more contagious Delta variant struck in early June. Then Omicron made its debut in November. By early March of 2022, 1.42 million Minnesotans had contracted the virus and 12,455 had died.

When the Northfield Hospital called us late one afternoon in February, Mary and I rushed over for our first shot. There we met friends, the Cederbergs, also signing in. Even though the vaccinations gave more freedom to venture out, I continued to mask for early-morning grocery shopping. In August we felt safe enough to travel to Fargo and then to Detroit Lakes for Rachel's sprint triathlon. In September Mary and I drove to Indiana for a long weekend visit and my rescheduled class reunion. Even so, as the more dangerous Delta variant caused a serious spike again in the fall, we kept mostly to ourselves.

Despite vaccinations, I felt greater mental-emotional stress this year. It was harder to face each day's routine; still isolated at home, I lacked the will power at times to do even simple chores. House projects went on hold, except for some repainting around the porch during the fall. The January 6 insurrection in DC intensified the weight of our national crisis of government. I began to fear with William Butler Yeats that "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

The twenty-four months of pandemic and national crisis caused each day to blur into the next. If the *New York Times* appeared on our sidewalk in front, I knew it was Sunday morning. Some weekends we held Google Meets with our daughters. From home Mary completed her final term of St. Olaf teaching and retired; our daughter Martha finished a doctorate in plant pathology in July and came home for a short visit on her way to a post-doc position at Oregon State. Once there she weathered a week-long bout of breakthrough Covid. Covid's ravages—reaching more than six million worldwide—underscored the fragility of life and often drew me back in memory to those I have lost: classmates, friends, mother, father, parents-in-law, grandparents, brother, and two aunts recently.

John J., my older brother, died at Christmas, 1999, after nearly a lifetime of schizophrenia. I finally found the courage in 2021 to unpack and catalog his books. Dozens held slips of paper used as bookmarks on which he had jotted down a fleeting thought, some with titles of songs or snatches of lyrics that held special meaning. On one slip I found fragments of Bill Withers's "Lean on Me": *just call on me brother, when you need a hand, we all need somebody to lean on.* I feel that now.

Many titles in my brother's library reflected his efforts to escape religious fundamentalism and nurture an authentic faith. We shared this quest, and in 2021 retired pastor Phil Eaves and I resumed our Thursday theology conversations. We found theologian Gordon Kaufman's late works, *In the Beginning Creativity* and *Jesus and Creativity*, transformational. As the year drew on, Phil and I dug into Sallie McFague's brilliant *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. On the way we met Jesus as "a parable of God."

On my own I revisited several books that had left a mark when I first read them. Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving: An Enquiry into the Nature of Love*, opened my eyes now fully to what, as a fourteen-year old, I had only perceived through a glass darkly. I had started *Walden* in college but abandoned it after forty pages—Thoreau did not speak to me then. This time, however, I got the message: *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.* Living through Covid, like going to the woods, has also meant confronting the essential facts of life.

Thoreau's lyricism also touched me now: *The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little stardust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.* When I come to die, I hope to be clutching that rainbow segment.

This year, more than last, music helped keep body and spirit together. Bach's "Six Suites for Cello" and Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue" fit moods of the moment. Along with Tommy Makem and the Clancy Brothers, I sang "Will You Go Lassie Go" ("Wild Mountain Thyme") just as I did when our girls were babies. Makem and the Clancys have died, and my lassies left the nest, but the song still brings a grateful tear. 2021 was the year I felt the force of Sinéad O'Connor's intense presence in "Nothing Compares 2U."

The weight of interleaved crises during Covid—global warming, public health, culture wars, gun violence, systemic racism, the dissolution of civil society—changed my faith. Healing in the broadest sense, personal and collective, I now believe, defines a church's true mission. Healing, of course, begins with loss and grieving, exactly what we now face daily in these cumulative crises. And just as loss entails grieving, so healing leads to restoring hope. Venerating the Cosmic Christ, in this view, is less important than making whole the poor, comforting those sick in body and spirit, welcoming immigrants, refugees, and outcasts of all stripes, healing the environment. A church springs to life in this fourfold process of grieving, healing, hoping, then setting forth to renew the face of the earth. Can the present church rise to the task?

Heading into year three of the pandemic, we know that rapid testing, vaccinations, and effective medicines will bring relief from the virus. Even so, Covid's variants will surely insist on accompanying us into the future. We may never return to pre-Covid "normal," whether at work, school, or church. While I feel confident that sound science will constrain the virus, I do not feel as sanguine about rapid restoration of the broken parts of our socio-political institutions. And now the devastating attack on Ukraine casts a shadow on a more humane, democratic world order.

Recently, I cued up Jimmy Cliff's reggae classic "Limbo." The words and tune express my impatience: *Sitting here in limbo / But I know it won't be long / Sitting here in limbo / Like a bird without a song / Well they're putting up resistance / But I know my faith will lead me on.*