

## Life in the Time of COVID: 2020-2022

Mary Cisar (age: 69 3/4)

March 2020 notice to the St. Olaf College community: “wipe the classroom computer keyboards after each class, wash hands regularly while singing ‘Happy Birthday to You’ twice.” At home, a visceral fear gripped us as we disinfected our counters, doorknobs, refrigerator doors, and everything else we might have touched after putting away groceries. Faced with the impossibility of buying masks, I scrounged for fabric and sewed cloth masks lined with coffee filters for us and our daughters. More distressing than those memories: harried health-care workers in hazmat suits; vans transporting bodies; angry people insulting and sometimes assaulting others, rejecting masks and vaccines. A constant hum of politicians’ bad faith and lies in the effort to hold onto power. Punctuating all of that: Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, and too many more . . . Then January 6, 2021; and now Ukraine. The past two years have been exhausting, disheartening, and frightening.

But for me, life during COVID also carries a more immediate personal layer: the pandemic coincided with my glide path toward retirement. By March of 2020, I had already started teaching half-time, anticipating retirement from St. Olaf on September 1, 2021. So when the faculty began teaching remotely for the rest of the spring semester of 2019-20, I was grateful to have only one course to retool. I muddled through using the limited resources in St. Olaf’s course management system for the remainder of the term. Thanks to summer workshops offered to faculty, by the fall of 2020 I felt comfortable using Zoom and several other online tools. Although I missed seeing my students (especially the seniors) in person that semester and throughout the year, teaching online offered an interesting intellectual challenge for my final year. I savored the online experience for the same reasons I have always enjoyed teaching: enthusiastic students full of good will; a dear colleague/friend with whom I collaborated in the fall; and the stimulating course content of my courses. (And for once, I could not forget my students’ names, visible on the Zoom screen!) My wardrobe choices became easier, and I didn’t even need to wear shoes! Teaching online from home helped me transition to retirement.

Our daughter, Rachel, visited for six weeks in the spring of 2020. She and I took long walks daily and talked over at length her options and goals for the future. Her furlough from her job at TNT Kids’ Fitness in Fargo also allowed her to supplement her exercise science degree with two online certifications for adaptive sport (coaching sports with kids with disabilities). When called back to her job, her position was upgraded.

I was glad I had visited our Martha in Ithaca, NY during summer 2019. That experience helped me visualize her space when we could not visit her in person. In July 2021 we watched the rain-drenched Cornell graduation ceremonies on Zoom as she received her Ph.D. in plant pathology.

Shortly afterward she came home to Northfield on her way to Corvallis, Oregon, for a new post-doc position at Oregon State.

Because of our limited social interactions and the dangers of travel during the pandemic, I really dug into gardening (so to speak), in part as a way to cope with the stress and to relieve cabin fever but also as an intellectual and artistic outlet. The 2020 gardening season benefited from nearly perfect weather, and I refined my vegetable garden ("*potager*"). On a whim, I decided to plant the biggest, boldest, most outrageous annuals I could think of on the south side of our house: sunflowers, tithonia, zinnias, and cosmos. The blooms brought joy every time I saw them, and I hope that those passing by with newly-adopted dogs felt the same. While gardening, I also met people in the neighborhood, connected with friends and acquaintances—and even saw some of my students walking by!

Teaching in my study on the second floor of our vintage foursquare, I watched goldfinches enjoying the sunflower seeds. In 2021, to expand my gardening skills, I took the "ProHort" horticulture course (nearly the same content as the Master Gardener course) offered online for the first time by the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Binge watching the BBC's *Gardeners' World* helped, too! Gardening has been more than a hobby; it became a spiritual discipline and nourishment during the time when attending church was not an option, daily offering hope, wonder, and the joy of resurrection in a tangible, hands-on way.

In addition to gardening, the pandemic together with retirement provided the gift of time. Among dozens of books, I finally finished all eight volumes of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, read several books on racism in the U.S., and enjoyed the Amanda Cross mysteries. I continue to host monthly Google Meet sessions with my four siblings and another series with our daughters. The girls and I regularly bake via Google Meet, each preparing the same thing but in our own kitchens—and cleaning up our own messes. To celebrate my retirement, I decluttered part of our home, discarding clothing, books, old financial records, papers and mementoes from our girls, but keeping the treasures. Some day, I'll finish organizing the photos! I began learning Norwegian. I started daily piano practice, guided by our girls' old piano-lesson books. Putting needlework skills to use, I made quilt tops, kids' pajamas, prayer shawls, and baby blankets.

Our family and I have been among the lucky ones. COVID has only lightly and, for the most part, indirectly impacted our lives. But we don't have far to look to see that our experience has not been typical. The pandemic has brought fear, confusion, and sorrow. I mourn the deaths, the physical suffering, and emotional distress it produced for so many. The pandemic has made visible deep socio-economic inequalities and worsened political divisions, caused by certain officials' falsehoods and projections. If only this scourge had at least led to greater social cohesion instead of violence and that our country had met the spending needs for public health, child care, teachers' salaries, and paid sick leave.