

## Covid: A Personal Perspective on the Spring of 2020

By Irvin Sam Schonfeld

A lifelong New Yorker, I live in an apartment in Brooklyn. In March 2020, as the spread of the pandemic began to accelerate, I was alone. My daughter and her family were living in Denver. Pearl, my wife of 39 years, had joined my daughter to help with the new baby. My son and his family had moved from the Upper West Side to Minnesota. And the College at which I taught closed and put all courses online.

All my life I have been self-sufficient. When Pearl visited a friend in Seattle, I managed the basics of temporary bachelor living: shopping, cooking, and (a little) cleaning. I can tolerate being alone for periods of time. I have a large library, a PC, and Turner Classic Movies. In the first half of March, my response to the pandemic was to grab our shopping cart and roll to the market. I stocked up on staples: rice, beans, coffee, etc.

My life soon took an unhappy turn. With the vernal equinox, I began to feel sick. I developed a fever, a persistent headache, and a telltale loss of appetite. The latter was especially a big deal because I ordinarily have a metabolism like a prairie fire. It was Covid, as a test eventually confirmed.

Many months after I was out of the woods, my wife told me that while I was sick the thought crossed her mind that she could become a widow. I learned this in her response to a pointed question I asked later in the year. Thankfully, she didn't share the thought with me when we talked on the phone each day in March and April. Mostly, we made small talk about our adult children and our grandchildren and how I was feeling.

I didn't want to go to Methodist Hospital, the hospital nearest our home. I didn't think I was as sick as the people whom the hospital was admitting those days in late March. Even if I decided to go to the hospital, I thought a triage nurse would turn me away. Patients had fevers of 102 and higher and my temperature was never higher than 100. I continued to teach my classes although I shortened them by fifteen minutes owing to that persistent headache. But the rhythm of periodically meeting students, even if my classes were online, was good for my morale.

The trees outside my window were beginning to bud. I dared not leave my apartment. Julia, my neighbor, had the key to my mailbox and placed my mail on my doormat. One of the only occasions I opened my front door was to briefly collect the mail sitting on the mat. As self-sufficient as I was, watching sunlight splatter my windows gave me a hankering to go outside. It is one thing not to have face-to-face contact with others, but another to lock myself up and deny myself the opportunity to walk—albeit alone—in the meadows in Prospect Park on a sunny day. I continued to remain at home.

I took my temperature each day. I weighed myself regularly. I lost weight. My daughter, a medical doctor, called me every morning. She badgered me to eat three squares every day even if I had to force myself and to drink lots of fluids. She and Jessie, a local doctor-friend, discussed my case. They arranged for Jessie to lend me a pulse oximeter, enabling me to measure my heart rate and blood oxygen. I had one on back-order—almost everything was on back-order then. Measuring my blood oxygen was important because of the damage Covid wreaks on the lungs. Fortunately, my daily oxygen readings and heart rate were in the normal range. My son ordered cases of ginger ale shipped to my apartment. That was the only thing that gave me an appetite, as meager as my appetite was. I was happy to connect with my pal Mickey on the telephone every evening.

On April 6, I woke up at 5 AM. I thought I was dreaming about swimming in Coney Island Creek. I was, sort of. I was soaked in sweat. My pajamas were drenched. The sheets and pillowcases were wet. I ran into the bathroom and took a shower. Then I put on a robe and felt fucking fine for the first time in a fortnight!

I took my temperature. The fever had broken. My headache was gone. I was actually hungry. I brewed coffee, cooked two eggs, and made toast, on which I slathered butter. I enjoyed that breakfast like no breakfast I had ever eaten before. I returned to my bedroom. I grabbed a pile of clothing and moved the pile into this empty-nester's second bedroom, having decided to sleep there. Then I returned to my bedroom. I stripped the bed and threw the linens and pajamas on the floor to let them dry. I let them lay on the floor for a week in case I shed virus. At the end of the week, I stuffed the linens in two giant laundry bags along with my clothes. I summoned a commercial laundry, instructing the service to use hot water.

My daughter insisted that I stay home for two weeks post-fever in case I was shedding virus. I reluctantly followed her directions. My pal Charley Kleinberg had traveled by Uber around Brooklyn until he found a pharmacy that would sell him several packs of facemasks. He dropped off a pack of masks at my apartment in anticipation of the day I would be able step outside. The pulse oximeter I had on back-order arrived after the fever broke. I returned the borrowed oximeter to my daughter's friend and lent mine to a couple whose adult daughter was sick—fortunately it turned out she didn't have Covid. My friend Mickey and I continued to talk every evening throughout the spring and summer.

I finally got to go outside, double-masked. As has been my habit on warm, sunny days, I donned a beige long-sleeved shirt, light pants, sunglasses, and a pale cap. When walking in Prospect Park, I looked like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man*.

**Bill**

Having recovered, I called my friend Bill. He didn't answer. Every day for five straight days I called him but he didn't pick up the phone. Bill couldn't have been traveling; no one traveled back then.

Bill and I met long ago when we were both teachers. For me teaching in the New York City public schools was a stopover on a trip to somewhere else. For Bill, it was a career. I admired his dedication to helping a great many inner-city kids. He was beloved by his students, so much that when several of them had grown up, they asked him to be the godfather of their own children.

Bill wasn't answering his phone. I suspected that Covid caught up to him, like it caught up to me. After that fifth call, I phoned Coney Island Hospital, the medical center nearest his apartment, figuring that's where he ended up. The operator told me, yes, he was there. I anticipated that the operator would route my call to a room in a Covid unit. No, she did not. She routed my call to the psychiatric unit. Bill, who was single and lived in a small apartment, was depressed and having suicidal thoughts, having sheltered in place—alone—for two months. He had voluntarily put himself in the psych unit.

I called Bill every day. I felt relieved that he was safe. I called him each day, sometimes twice a day, until he was discharged. After his discharge, I continued to call him at home.

The effect of Covid on my circle of friends turned grimmer.

**Willy**

Willy Helmreich was a friend and, like me, a professor at City College. I got to know Willy in the late 1980s when he was working on a book to be entitled *Against All Odds*. He wrote about the ways in which Holocaust survivors managed to adapt to life in the United States. I was intrigued by a brilliant idea Willy had. He observed that much of the research on survivors was written by psychiatrists who, naturally, emphasized psychopathology. But Willy thought that the people in psychiatrists' offices were unrepresentative of the totality of individuals making up the population of survivors. Consequently, he assembled a representative sample of survivors who lived in the U.S. For comparison purposes, he also assembled a sample of U.S.-born Jews who were otherwise demographically matched to the survivors. I got to know him when I offered to help with the data analysis. Willy found that the survivors got married and had children at the same rates as his comparison group. In equal measure, the survivors found jobs and went to work, despite having had their educations cut short by the *Shoah*. Sure, some had bad dreams. Who wouldn't? Willy showed that the survivors were amazingly normal. They showed remarkable resilience. I admired Willy for writing the book and was glad that I could help him in some small way.

There was another thing about Willy. It seemed a bit kooky. He was in his sixties when had finished walking every single street in New York City—6,000 miles! He wore out nine pairs of shoes *en route*. He wrote a book about the people he met while on those walks, people in bodegas, housing projects, gentrifying neighborhoods, and just on the streets. He showed how much more there is to New York than restaurants, museums, and Broadway shows. Willy was a friendly, voluble guy. He was great talker, which made for interesting interactions. The book is called *The New York Nobody Knows*.

When the College announced that Willy succumbed to Covid, I was shocked. I thought of Willy as the hardiest professor on the faculty. Who on the faculty could walk every street in New York City? Not me! Losing Willy was quite a blow. Not only to his family and friends. It was a loss to everyone at the College.

### **Brion**

I have another friend at the College. Henny Wong. Henny is a computer expert. If there were a software foul-up or a hardware failure, he knows what to do. He is also the proud father of two adult children. His 43-year-old son Brion had trained hard to become a chef. He could, for example, make crispy, boneless almond chicken, coated in beer batter, as well as cheeseburger spring rolls. Brion was quite accomplished and made the food pages. After landing executive chef jobs in Detroit, he moved to Florida to work in another restaurant. A colleague called me to quietly inform me that Henny's son succumbed to the virus. This was one of the most difficult condolence calls I ever made. I could not hold back tears when I called Henny and his wife.

### **Charley**

Then there was my friend Charley Kleinberg. He was the thoughtful guy who he dropped off the package of facemasks at my apartment after I got sick. Charley and I go all the way back to Samuel J. Tilden High School in Brooklyn in the 1960s. We sat in all the same honors math classes although Charley was the better mathematician. He also had another talent. He was a marvelous actor. With one spotlight on him, Charley, on the otherwise dark stage in our high school's auditorium, played Walter Mitty in a Tilden Drama Guild production. He acted out one of Walter's daydreams, wearing a funny hat while sitting in a chair, as if driving a car while daydreaming that he was piloting a U.S. Navy hydroplane. He got lots of laughs using gestures

and articulating the lines James Thurber wrote for him. To me, his performance was better than Danny Kaye's in the movie version of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*.

We were also at Brooklyn College at the same time but lost track of each other after graduation. We found each other again in the early 1990s and remained good friends ever since.

Charley was a talented in other ways as well. He pursued a doctorate in mathematics before switching fields and going to law school. Charley was first in his class in law school. He got a job in the Civil Division of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York. He also earned a doctorate in philosophy while working for the Eastern District. Charley had many accomplishments in the Eastern District, including successfully suing the stuffing out of the Gambino crime family. He switched to the Criminal Division, where he nailed white collar crooks. It was unprecedented enough to switch from the Civil Division to the Criminal Division, but Charley then switched back to the Civil Division for his last few years before retirement. At the wedding of my daughter, a cousin of my son-in-law recognized Charley and went over to him. The cousin is a Miami criminal defense attorney, who had gone against Charley. I could see in the cousin's eyes the respect he had for my friend.

Charley never lost his sense of humor. He kept a blow-up Bobo clown in his office, which he punched whenever he became frustrated. Charley and his wife Judi threw terrific Super Bowl parties although they had the tiniest TV, which I complained about year after year to no avail. The parties were graced with two six-foot-long Italian hero sandwiches. There was beer to wash down the Genoa salami. Of course, better than the game and the sandwiches was the company. Charley and I would occasionally have lunch at The Purity, a Park Slope diner. As we sat at a table, we would shoot the breeze about politics and share memories of the people we

knew in high school and college. We always ordered Scotch to help us digest the blue-plate special.

Charley got sick with Covid. He was admitted to Methodist Hospital, the local hospital I was able to avoid. I called him a couple of times every day. Soon my phone calls went unacknowledged although I continued to call. He had gotten sicker and lost consciousness. He too succumbed to the virus.

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The Spring of 2020 broke my heart. There was the near-loss of Bill. The deaths of Willy, Brion, and Charley have weighed on me and still do. Charley was an old friend and you can't make new old friends. With all the awfulness I felt, I had to confront, more forthrightly than I had before, the idea that the time I have left is finite. The pandemic forced me to concentrate on the future although it is not a future of arbors, meadows, and sunlit uplands. But I resolved to work a little less and spend a little more time with friends and family. I hope I can maintain that resolve.

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