

Sheltering in Steamboat

David H. Parish

The normalcy is what lingers now that we're back, the groceries crammed into cabinets, refrigerators and freezers, all now bursting. Adding the newly purchased to what was already here, we have perhaps a month's supply of food for four adults, I would guess. The dash to the market was a tipping point in my personal connection to the accelerating pandemic. Because while the western world threw its cinematic disaster cloak over its shoulders during the past week or two, just as China was doing the opposite, I've been toppled by sciatica, barely able to teeter or totter from one room to the next, pain radiating from hip to calf, let alone venture out to see for myself the oddly quiet streets, sparse store shelves and the awkward six-foot-distance-dance performed within five-foot wide supermarket aisles while the unconcerned who barrel through, invincible. My view of the crisis, until ninety minutes ago, was limited to the boundaries of my tolerance for watching news or reading about respirators, dire statistics and political grandstanding on this screen or that, as pop-up ads for 90-Days of Free Music from Amazon interrupt global crisis updates, amplifying the surreal feel of it all. Which is to say, not much.

City Market was sedate. Surprisingly calm. I expected a more frantic tone, particularly with Routt County's newly issued grocery store directive, mandating a limit of five customers per thousand square feet, beginning at 5pm today, which left only two hours until chaos. Or so I thought. I stretched latex gloves over my hands and began weaving a shopping cart through the aisles. Surprise surprise. Produce was plentiful and there were more than enough options on most shelves, save the well-publicized exceptions of paper goods and anti-bacterial everything. Thirty-five minutes later, with only a single self-checkout glitch, our reusable bags were overflowing as we walked to the car, carefully snapped our gloves into the trash, cleaned vulnerable surfaces with disinfecting wipes and started for home, a bit winded. Not from exertion, but because I had been taking shallow rather than full breaths while in the store in a semi-subconscious effort to reduce the risk of exposure while out and about. I felt foolish.

Home. Though it's always been so, the Steamboat house feels much more like a genuine refuge these days. A safe place in every way. Gabrielle and I have owned this house for twenty years, having financially stretched ourselves mightily to buy it early in our married life, dreaming it would become a sanctuary for our scattered family in the years to come. And it has. Thank goodness Gabrielle always stood strong against my occasional push to sell it for how costly and relatively underused it was. Up until the past year, tucked below a ridge line with thirty-mile views of the Yampa Valley on clear days and cherished for weeks at a time in summers, falls and winters, it's always been our "second home", which is as much an emotional label as physical. But now that we've mostly retired and transitioned from the suburban house-we-raised-our-children-in to a Minneapolis condominium roughly one-third its size, and spend months rather than weeks in Steamboat, I realize that the core of the real home vs. vacation home distinction was lost on me, until recently. In fact the focus on how much time we spend here is misleading. Weeks or months is not what defines "home or not". The essential difference between visiting Steamboat and actually living here, even for part of the year, is that we are now only occasionally, not constantly, surrounded by our children and visiting friends, whereas previously we were always in a type of self-imposed social cocoon. As vacationers, we were in the nearly two-decade habit of bringing our community with us, which created a transactional kind of connection to Steamboat. Fleeting with no real depth to it. The embarrassingly obvious recent revelation is how important it is to build meaningful connections to neighbors and local institutions to truly bond with a place. To work at it. To move beyond the superficial. Somewhere inside I always knew that to be true, but it's human nature to focus on what's urgent at the expense of what's important. Making sure our children and visiting friends fully enjoyed their trips to Steamboat was, to us, urgent then and there. Now, seeing past that constrained view, our Steamboat immersion effort remains a work in progress, but has great momentum, thanks mostly to Gabrielle, and is extraordinarily satisfying. Successful enough, in fact, that we no longer say it's our vacation home. It's simply home.

The comfort of being "home", of caring for others and feeling cared for is inestimable as we all

sort through this slow-moving massive reset to every hidden and visible element of entitlement we all carry. The additional distress of managing through this crisis while feeling physically unsettled or emotionally isolated would be awful. Worries careen into one another in my hyperactive mind, cycling between my aged mother who lives fifteen-hundred miles away, the health of our adult children, our suddenly uncertain financial safety net, the exposed vulnerability of a retail business being built right now by our youngest son, and the fact that Gabrielle woke today with a slight burning sensation in her chest. To say nothing of my daily morning cough. Heartburn? Dry mountain air? Or is it the concern I do my best to suppress but which persistently wiggles its way into consciousness ... that our throats and lungs are retooling themselves in this very moment into coronavirus factories, gearing up for their assault. Of course the common theme across all of these and innumerable smaller concerns is uncertainty mixed with a dose of helplessness. Yes ... wash hands constantly, essential outings only, know that Vi at Lakeside Village, which has “Redefined Senior Living”, is literally the safest place my mother can be in the entire country, and have faith in the two-hundred year history, more or less, of stock market trends that say it too shall recover. But ... really? Do any of those actions or beliefs end up changing any of this, or are we collectively kidding ourselves? It’s the question that persists, sometimes pushing on yes and other times no, though sanity insists we swat it away as we try and live to the standard of “control what we can”.

I’m aware that this all may present as a panic-rant from someone walking rapidly towards the edge. Actually, and I’m not sure why this is the case, I’m not panicked. Other than my self-destructive habit of fixing on one or another intractable topic while awake in the middle of the night, I’m relatively, surprisingly calm during daylight hours. Almost accepting of my inability to affect meaningful change on anything external that matters (small acts of kindness notwithstanding), while not actually, truly believing that the virus will place a devastating hit any of us, physically, financially or emotionally. And I do mean the “extended” us, as in literally everyone I know and care about. Is this a form of “learned helplessness”? Am I delusional? Perhaps but I would argue that some variation on denial is at times the best available mental health strategy. For sure I would do well to stop checking the financial markets

every ten minutes as I'm equally agitated regardless of whether they go up (we should have moved our cash back into equities) or down (our non-cash positions are getting slaughtered), for a lose-lose emotional outcome. I wish I had more of Gabrielle's unflappable certainty in that regard. I really do, but don't and never will. Her ability to compartmentalize is preternatural (she sleeps soundly no matter what is going on beyond her closed eyes every goddamn night) while my default operating mode is rumination, which is well-suited to ... almost nothing.

So I cycle through my "shelter-in-place" days, trying to be disciplined about working on the novel I've been researching and writing for more than a year, with an occasional break to write some topic or another off my mind, learning new songs on guitar, meditating to my favorite chants and trying to improve my Italian. A big dose of exercise would normally be in the mix, but my adventure to City Market aside, that's more aspirational than achievable until my back recovers completely. Perhaps a long walk next week. As a family, we try to keep our coronavirus conversations to no more than 90% of what we discuss, which is difficult to accomplish unless Nurse Jackie is on. (How did I not know what a terrific show that is until now?) Meanwhile I've become religious about calling my mother daily, while both our youngest and oldest sons check in with us constantly ... the oldest in particular reminding us of how "on guard" we must remain. We have, after all, just recently graduated into the at-risk age group and remain slightly disoriented by the realization that the most stark CV-19 statistics are directed at us. Our middle son is actually with us in Steamboat, having arrived with his girlfriend from New York three weeks ago for a week of skiing, a trip planned months ago. We're enormously relieved that they will remain here for the duration working remotely, instead of navigating stay-in-place orders in New York, where non-pandemic daily life is frantic enough and where the crisis is still in its early, horrifying bloom. We of course miss seeing our friends and most of all, miss the emotional freedom of not buckling, slightly but constantly, under the weight of "what's next".

And yet with all of that, I manage to not dwell too much on my expanding list of "topics to not

dwell on". Perhaps my ruminating default is becoming a little less so. That would be a welcome change. And I'll admit that there's an aspect to this newly imposed "live slow" daily routine, this quieter life that prioritizes personal, private interests while forcing us all to be more intentional about connecting with and helping one another, that I genuinely appreciate. I cringe a little even thinking those thoughts, let alone writing them down, knowing what a privilege it is to have this sort of emotional freedom to roam while most people are completely consumed with a daily struggle that is overwhelming. Still, hopefully the experience will leave us all with lessons on how to live more mindful and connected lives, post CV19. That would be good. Meanwhile, breath deeply and stay safe.