

Lockdown in Virginia: 6 Feet, 10 or Fewer People, Sunshine?

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We are in lockdown in Virginia after Governor Ralph Northam last week closed beaches, book stores, libraries, restaurants, coffees shops, cancelled live music concerts, and ordered churches closed. He said to not have gatherings of more than 10 people and to practice “social distancing,” which I think in this strange world of invisible enemies, threatening us at all times, means staying away from people mostly and staying about 6 feet apart when you are with people. I am not totally sure, though. The governor’s edict - or maybe it was the CDC’s — qualified the 6-foot distance, or “socially distancing” recommendation to say that spouses and children and their parents did not have to stay 6 feet apart.

I am a public-school teacher, not in school now, because they are closed, of course. I love my church, my libraries, bookstores, musicians I go to hear, and getting together with my friends. Two friends in the last few days have declined walking outside together, even though I said, “We can walk apart from each other if you want to.” I am not sure why. Quarantine? Just stay home? Will walking outside endanger me or others? I thought we could gather as long as it’s less than 10 people. Isn’t two OK?

I have worked to keep clarity and a sense of humor, while trying to make sense of a morass of fear and language around this virus, which I know may be serious, but which I also think has been surrounded by a lot of panic and misinformation. I found a few anchoring facts that seem reliable - people with the virus have a recovery rate in the high 90 percents, and infection, or testing positive for it, does not mean you will get the disease. Also, most people who die, who have tested positive, die of other serious causes, though the CDC has misled the public by forcing doctors to say the deaths were caused by the virus rather than saying the truth, which often is that the person died of heart disease, diabetes, old age, pneumonia, while they had also had tested positive for Corona virus. They died with the virus but not from it.

Some doctors have reminded us that outside in the sunshine is one of the safest places we can be when an illness like this is a worry. Fear and misinformation have convinced people that inside their homes, in closed rooms, they are safer from this invisible enemy that we are “at war with,” according President Trump. The War on Terror, the War on Drugs, the U.S. is always at war with someone or something. I am not buying this war any more than I have bought the others. “Somewhere behind all wars are a few founding lies,” wrote Mark Kurlansky in *Non-Violence: Twenty-Five Lessons in the History of a Dangerous Idea*. I do not think this “war” is much different than others with its early lying and distortions that take hold, take on lives of their own, and manipulate us into group-think and rash actions, like forcing all businesses to close, probably causing many small business owners to lose what they have spent their lives building.

Isolation and loneliness, especially loneliness of the elderly, who can't see their friends, go to the symphony, to book groups, to church – all activities that give life sustenance and meaning; economic despair, unemployment, exacerbated addictions without the social supports that keep people alive and healthy – all these kill many more people than any virus, I believe.

Language viruses infect our culture this spring. This is not a “lockdown,” as it really is, not government control, as it really is, or the government's taking our civil liberties, such as practicing our religion at our churches or exercising our right to peaceably assemble. I do not think the writers of the Constitution wrote that we have the right to peaceably assemble, unless there is a sickness around. No, this is not lockdown. As people comply with hardly a word of protest, they are not calling it lockdown; instead they are not only doing as they are told, they are speaking as they are told — “sheltering in place” or “staying home” or “social distancing.” These are creepy terms, meant to make government-enforced lockdown sound cozy and good for us.

We are also told that this is the “new normal.” Words and phrases like this distort realities, and not for the better, I believe. This is not normal at all. Human beings are meant to live in communities. Research supports that human touch, emotional and physical connection, strengthens immunities and prevents disease. There are viruses that cause people to get sick, and some to die, but so much of this so-called pandemic is not adding up. We are not seeing the deaths from this virus in the context of deaths from other causes, such as cancer, heart disease, obesity, car accidents, domestic violence.

I remain skeptical that the government knows what is good for us after studying other wars and calamities and their precipitating and enabling language and lies. Lies around the Gulf of Tonkin incident ignited the U.S. war against Viet Nam. The Kuwaiti ambassador's daughter was told to tell a false story of babies yanked from incubators to whip the U.S. government into the war frenzy of the first Iraq War. The Weapons of Mass Destruction and “mushroom cloud” nonsense, touted by politicians and bureaucrats, sent thousands of Americans to their deaths, destroyed a whole country, and scattered millions as war refugees. I have mistrusted the media, while continuing to seek alternative, independent-thinking information sources, after almost every major U.S. media outlet championed war against Iraq. U.S. media outlets never issued formal retractions after that devastation and after the lies were made plain. I remain skeptical of the government and health bureaucrats when they approved harmful drugs, such as high dosages of estrogen from mare's urine, which scientists knew caused cancer in women, and they approved it anyway. Women died. The examples of government deceptions that cause death are numerous. We must read and talk and listen, and keep thinking.

Now, because the government and its highly paid health and disease bureaucrats told them to, people put their pictures inside “Stay at Home” or “I am Saving Lives by Staying at Home” signs or even the stronger “Stay the F Home” admonition to others and shared them on the Internet. Language changes have been fascinating and frightening when friends now are scared to walk outside, even in pairs. My teenage son, whom his dad and I wheeled in a stroller in demonstrations against the U.S. war in Iraq when he was a toddler while a gauntlet of counter protestors screamed in our faces, today tells me that I shouldn't drive to do farm chores on my friend's farm to help with food production because the government said, “We have to stay home,” my son said.

Death has done it this time. Death and fear and language. Insidious death. Unseen. Phantom death on the TV or computer screens — or even rumored to be there. We don't even have cable TV in our home, but this fear has infected our home. The red numbers are out there flashing, digits rising, blinking. Attractive people with super white teeth and expensive haircuts talk non-stop. Bureaucrats and politicians wield language of fear and death – death, like the greenish smoke, snaking by each door in the Charlton Heston movie, *The Ten Commandments*, my brothers and I watched on TV when we were children. Maybe our “Stay at Home” hashtags will save us like the blood painted in the shape of the cross on the doors in the Charlton Heston movie.

Today a “news” station showed a cartoon-colored virus spray cascading over a barricaded grocery aisle to the cartoon people on the other side. Over weeks, we have had to look at lines of bright stick people in diagrams multiplying and stacking up, dead presumably, if we did not “social distance” because the deaths will rise exponentially. But even the exponential part is being called into question by health professionals. On social media today a New York writer, I somehow ended up “friends” with, posted an obscure study saying that 6-foot distance is not enough to stay safe while running outside. It was complete with cartoon figures and bright-colored virus sprays, clouding the air and making their way to a cartoon runner many feet away. Oh, brother.

Tell people, like the politicians and bureaucrats are doing, that they may have *it*, not know *it*, may not even know how long they have had or will have *it*. You could not even be sick and still have *it*, give *it* to others. Reading and listening to so-called news, I could not get a handle on how long you could have it and not know it – some said five days, someone else said two weeks or more. It may be me. It may be you. Paranoia abounds. But, guess what? We all have it. We are all going to die. This virus, however, has a recovery rate in the high 90 percents. Most people recover – not in the hospital but at home, I read today Contracting it and recovering may build immunity and make us stronger. Our bodies – and our lives – are amazing, are miracles. How can we miss this in this season of resurrection?

Because I miss my friends, and I love getting outside in the sunshine, especially before the government closed the Shenandoah National Park and Skyline Drive, even to motorists, I still wanted to better understand Governor's Northam's rules after he closed the beaches and businesses too. My teenage son is worried I am not following the rules or taking them seriously enough. I am. Nothing is open. I only go to the grocery store. I have been making the best of it. We have planted flowers, moved mulch, cleared brush, had a fire on the deck and made Smores. I taught him how to thread a needle, how to sew on a button, how to mend a tear, with two different kinds of stitches, as my mother taught me, I taught him to make French toast. We played Jenga and listened to my 60s and 70s Pandora station.

I do not like lockdown, however. I do not like the sorrow and grief I feel as I hear of friends and acquaintances losing their beloved businesses they have spent their lives building. And many others do not have the economic privilege to “work at home” or not work at all. I like being free to come and go as I chose while being responsible for my health and caring for the health of others. When I learned we will likely have to endure this government-mandated lockdown until the end of April at least, I wanted to understand it better. Maybe others were having similar questions, and I could help. I called the CDC press line, planning to tell them I was a freelance journalist doing a story on safe practices for outdoors.

I thought I would be able to talk to someone and ask my questions right then, take notes. Write my story. I was trying to get a handle on how the 6 foot rule (or is guidance, surely not

a law?) worked with gatherings of 10 people or less – and how did that work with being outdoors? Maybe I should call Northam’s office with my questions. I decided to start with the CDC. I also wanted to tell my son, whom I told he could walk to a nearby friend’s house, and they could walk or play in the neighborhood (stay apart if they wanted to) and that the CDC and the governor said that was OK. I was worried about this health, staying inside so much, and know he misses his friends and is out of the school routine. But my son said no, he didn’t want to go outside to meet his friend. I said, “Why not?” He said, “You know, quarantine.”

So, I planned to ask the CDC and the governor if it was OK to walk outside with my friend – if one friend was OK, and should we walk 6 feet apart? I see people walking in my neighborhood, in pair and small groups. I knew people in Walmart were not always 6 feet apart though they have little tape marks on the floor now because maybe because the governor told them to do that. Surely, outside is healthier than Walmart with all the hands that have touched the bread bags and housewares from China.

I planned to ask how the 6 feet rule worked with gatherings of less than 10, which I thought were OK. And how did it work with family members, which the governor and the CDC said were not required to stay 6 feet apart. What if you had a cook-out in this glorious spring weather with, say, eight people, five family members and three close friends, middle-aged, healthy, not sick? Would we have to stay 6 feet apart? And what about beaches? They are closed, but the governor said not for fishing, and that the beaches could still be used for exercise. So, can you fish with your spouse or child or friend and not get in trouble? Can you walk on the beach with your boyfriend, for exercise, or would you have to be six feet apart?

I had my notes ready and planned to start by asking the CDC press office these questions. But things are different now than they were when I was a reporter 20 years ago and got people on the phone quickly then wrote my story. The woman who answered the CDC phone said that I would have to complete an online form, listing my name and my questions, and then a press officer would get back to me. I haven’t done that yet. Maybe I will take a walk outside instead.

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Christine E. Black’s work has been published in Antietam Review, 13th Moon, American Journal of Poetry, New Millennium Writings, Nimrod International, Red Rock Review, The Virginia Journal of Education, Friends Journal, The Veteran, Sojourners Magazine, Iris Magazine, English Journal, Amethyst Review, and other publications. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Pablo Neruda Prize.

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