Aboard the Titanic

These days any venturing beyond my front door is, regrettably, often an adventure.

August 11, 2020 By Jeff Neurman

As anyone who has read even one of my blog posts or other writings is most certainly aware, I do not peddle in optimism. Although some would find my high level of cynicism to be at least partially unwarranted, I find that facts (remember those?) tend to generally support my worldview. Thus it should come as no surprise to the reader when I say that I have very little confidence in the abilities of our fellow human beings. Very little.

This is not to say, however, that I think most people are innately “bad”, whatever that might mean. In what may pass for my one scintilla of optimism, I do generally believe that most people are well-intentioned. It is just in the execution where the trouble comes in. To that end, I am of course greatly dubious about our ability, as a society and even as a species, to overcome the current pandemic. Stated rather plainly, I just do not believe that the average person has the mental faculties or internal fortitude to do what it takes to overcome what is, admittedly, probably the largest single challenge we have faced in generations (with the possible exception of the threat-that-wasn’t known as Y2K).

My defeatism is not even factoring in the significant portion of the population that is sometimes referred to as “anti-maskers.” These people are, near as I can tell, beyond redemption when it comes to this issue—and likely many others. I will add, while taking my cheap though justified shots, that I do find it ironic that many of these same people who refuse to don a mask are the same ones who never miss an opportunity to voice their purported patriotism and yet refuse to take such a simple and, at worst, mildly annoying, step to save their fellow countrymen and women.

Nonetheless, we can probably deal with these self-absorbed and misguided faux-patriots. The bigger issue, and the one that has given me greater cause for alarm, is the generally well-meaning but completely dysfunctional members of our society that will surely be our downfall. Although I am sure the reader can envision many such instances and individuals, allow me to supply a few examples to help those less imaginative amongst my reading public, drawn just from my very limited travels outside the home.

This morning I was reluctantly forced to stand on a line—well more than six feet from the next closest individual of course—when I witnessed a person at the front engaging in a discussion with the overseer of this particular assemblage. Because, apparently, the woman at the head of the

queue did not fully grasp how a mask works, or perhaps because she felt the need to be overly emphatic in orally conveying her point, she leaned over the table separating her from the line administrator and pulled down her face covering below her chin to speak loudly to the poor runner of the line. Now, I am not an epidemiologist nor a medical professional of any kind. I also do not possess a degree in either aerodynamics or physics, but I am nonetheless relatively confident that if one removes the mask from over both one's nose and mouth while speaking loudly and leaning in to the unwilling audience that the chances of sharing the orator's spittle with the poor receiver go up quite dramatically. And let me assure anyone who is wondering, this table was not anywhere near six feet in width.

Although I do not go out much—for one thing, where am I going to go?—I do see pictures of the outside world from time to time. And just like the woman I had the misfortune of witnessing firsthand in her attempt to be her own super-spreader event, I of course see any number of individuals who fail to wear the mask with anything approaching appropriateness. Again, I am not a doctor (not of medicine, anyway) but I am pretty sure that air—which may largely be comprised of carbon dioxide (I did take some chemistry in high school)—likes to escape from one's nostrils. And that CO_2 often travels in tandem with mucus and other disgusting bodily fluids, any of which may be a great vector for unpleasant microbes such as, just for example, the coronavirus. As a result, while covering one's mouth may have a somewhat salutary effect, leaving the schnoz simultaneously exposed to the world—and definitely those within snort-shot—is really not going to cut it.

And then we come to those who completely misunderstand the purpose of wearing a mask altogether. Just the other day, on yet another adventure outside of my abode—and these days any venturing beyond my front door is regrettably often an adventure—I encountered a friend of mine whom I had not seen in quite some time. In fact, it would be fair to characterize him as a pre-pandemic friend: All of my friends are either ones from before we retreated to the hopeful safety of our own homes or those that have become part of my cluster of acquaintances on whom I am willing to gamble that they probably don't have COVID. (But we keep our distance—and Clorox wipes—just in case anyone's assumption was overly optimistic.) So this pre-March 2020 friend and I exchanged pleasantries. I should have been tipped off immediately that he must remain in my past as, upon seeing me approaching, he immediately positioned his body to engage in some type of coronavirus-substitute for a handshake. It was either intended as an elbow bump or some kind of shoulder salutation, but whatever it was supposed to be it was definitely not respectful of my "safe space" if, for no other reason, that my elbow is not six feet from my body. I am not Manute Bol (may he rest in peace).

Much more troubling, however, was that after narrowly escaping the unwanted—and unwarranted—physical encounter I noticed that my pre-friend was maskless. (I was a little slow to notice this as he is a bearded fellow so sometimes facial hair, when seen in the right light and from a sufficient distance, can appear to be a type of face covering, which of course it is.) I allowed my anti-Lone Ranger friend to chat at me for a couple of moments, but eventually I could contain myself no longer. Finally, I blurted out, "Where, pray tell, is your mask?"

“Oh,” he replied somewhat sheepishly. “I left it in my car.”

Not wanting to start an incident—I feel that as one with cancer the fewer battles I have to wage the better—I allowed: “Well, sometimes I forget mine too.” To which he promptly, but in a most friendly manner, responded, “Well, you can’t afford to forget your mask.”

“No,” I retorted angrily. “I can’t afford for people like you to forget your masks.”

See what we are up against?

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