Post (Far) From the Edge

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May 6, 2020 By Jeff Neurman

Like so many millions of people across the country and around the globe, I find that time is hanging quite heavily these days. I should not complain: As a person with cancer, any amount of time – regardless of its mass – should be viewed by me as a gift. And I am grateful, more or less. But let's be honest: Now, after what may or may not be more than a months' worth of self-imposed house-arrest – with the generally positive (although sometimes decidedly negative) co-incarceration of other inmates, namely my sons – I am starting to lose any sense of perspective as well as any semblance of lucidity. Before the remnants of my sanity have escaped – a concept so tantalizingly appealing yet so fraught with danger – I am determined to write down what I can recall about my life over these recent days (or is it weeks?) that has brought me to this undesirable place, which I used to simply call my home. Since there is no end in sight to this experience, I imagine this will be just the first in a series of observations (read: complaints) so please do not consider the following to be an exhaustive list; more is on its way.

With that in mind, I think the appropriate place to begin is that which we need everyday. No, not toilet paper. For whatever reason, we were long on TP before this started. Instead, I am talking about essentially its opposite: food. Notwithstanding the detestable trend of "foodie"-ism, acquiring groceries used to be among the most uninteresting and rote of weekly must-dos. Now, however, acquiring any food item is an exercise in extreme patience – and ultimately disappointment. Because even going to the grocery store with full hazmat suit on is considered somewhat risky, not to mention socially inconsiderate, our household is forced to rely on what seem to be fly-by-night businesses of "personal shoppers" who are compelled to risk their well-being so that we can have a bit of fresh produce. Despite the sacrifices these individuals are making, their employers are clearly not up for the challenge. It is no one's fault, really, as who expected that none of the 19.5 million New Yorkers would be allowed to go to the supermarket? Certainly not the people of Instacart or Shipt.

Yet even the seemingly simple task of identifying items on a grocery shelf from a list carefully prepared by the ultimate acquiror thereof, requires in our modern age a good deal of attention to detail and, frankly, some intelligence. And, as I have often said, intelligence is not a trait that we find an overabundance of in our world. By way of illustrations, I shall relate the following vignettes:

He Hath Risen: Unfortunately for Jews the world over, the COVID crisis coincided with the holiday of Passover, which some erroneously refer to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. I say this is in error as anyone who has existed solely on goods made of unleavened products for a full eight days would not think there is anything festive about the experience. Some things are just meant to rise: the sun, Lazarus (so I am told) and, of course, baked goods. But because we cannot eat such lofty goods during this week-plus period, more or less observant Jews restrict themselves to eating only foodstuffs expressly designated with an "Kosher for Passover" imprimatur on them. Yet, to the uninitiated (which is a polite way of saying our gentile shopper), the appearance or absence of that demarcation is a non-event. Consequently, we are now the embarrassed owners of several boxes of matzoh that is explicitly not to be eaten during Passover. If any of you are willing to jeopardize your colonic health for it, please just email me. We will be more than happy to get rid of it and even pay the postage (the USPS needs the business anyway). To be fair to our shopper, I can imagine that she was understandably so fatootsed by having to handle a jar of gefilte fish on our behalf that anything that occurred afterwards was truly not her fault. (If you are not familiar with this Passover "delicacy", Google an image of it and you will understand. Just don't do it if already feeling nauseous.)

Half This, Half What?: One of my greatest concerns during this period of quarantine has been that I would run out of coffee. (As a side note, I prefer the term quarantine to "shelter-in-place" because, as a child of the Cold War, the latter term invokes the notion of dusty1950s era bomb shelters, canned meats and very old Russian politburo members.) And because it is not enough that I drink too much coffee, I also imbibe it with half-and-half. Yet our shopper, who apparently is not a particularly close reader nor, worse, a coffee drinker, purchased for us the fat-free version of this coffee condiment. What??? Proper half-and-half is half milk and half cream, which by definition is comprised of essentially nothing other than fat. So fat-free half-and-half makes no sense whatsoever. I think it is also known by the term "skim milk" or, as I call it, whitish water. Whatever it actually is, I think it is probably brought to us by the same people who are plaguing us with non-Kosher for Passover matzoh.

Jumbo: Why do eggs come in so many sizes? Does it depend on the size of the chicken? And how come so few people seem to realize that eggs, despite their seeming uniformity, are in reality anything but? Every recipe in the world (except, annoyingly, those by the Barefoot Contessa) call for large eggs. Not extra-large, not medium and definitely not jumbo. But now we have all of those – except of course for large. If you could use them, I will send them along with the treif matzoh.

The Clock is Ticking: When the time – and, more pointedly, day – finally came for our personal shopper to acquire our goods, she set off in a most industrious and communicative manner. Leaving aside that she was supposed to arrive with our essentials and non-essentials (Goldfish, Milanos, etc.) early in the morning but did not commence her shopping until noon, she was nonetheless trying to be as responsive as possible. Thus, for the ensuing three hours she was regularly texting my poor wife with questions about substitutes, sizes, and so on. Finally, in response to one of these interrogatories, my wife, who is after all a doctor and thus in charge of our collective health, replied: "I hope that, more than three hours into this shopping experience,

you have not been wheeling around the milk and other items that need to be refrigerated all of this time." No response. Unlike my wife, I was not too concerned: I don't drink milk anyway and as established the ½ & ½ would not be consumed by anyone either. And maybe jumbo eggs are more hardy than mere large ones?

Timing is Everything, and Nothing: Despite the repeated frustrations we experienced with our shopper agents, we were determined to avoid the grocery store. Melissa is already on the front lines working in the hospital, and my cancer argues for a position well in the rear. Yet our last order, which was originally to arrive on Friday, was then postponed until Saturday morning. Then delayed further to Saturday afternoon. Next we heard it would arrive by Saturday evening and, then, in continuance of this unseemly trend, by 9:30 p.m. Saturday night. This was really approaching the line for me as I like to be in my PJs by that time (even in non-quarantine times – I need my rest), not setting up a Clorox-infused detoxification center in my kitchen, which also strangely requires storing boxes of non-perishables in our garage because apparently the novel coronavirus cannot live adjacent to idle automobiles. And yet the provisions still did not arrive. Finally, in disgust (and in my jammies but with a respirator and gloves adorned thereto), I gave up. Melissa then received another message informing us that our order would be coming at the next available time: Sometime between Sunday and Thursday! That was too much for me. I resolved the next day to chance it and go to the store myself. I could not wait until potentially Thursday. We were almost out of gefilte fish!

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