Self-Improvement

After feeling great zest for all that I would accomplish now that I had to stay home, my excitement soon began to wane.

July 9, 2020 By Jeff Neurman

During the past three-plus months of mandatory isolation, I have attempted to use the imposed "down time" wisely. I have, regrettably, failed miserably at doing so. Like all seemingly great ideas, I started off with not only the best of intentions but also great zest for all that I would accomplish now that I was forced to do nothing but be at home. Yet after cleaning out the basement and pantry and a few other unsightly areas of accumulated junk, my excitement for this newfound domestication began to ebb.

On the physical front, I had similarly viewed this as an opportunity to continue working on my external appearance, one which could, arguably, use an upgrade. This was made quite challenging, however, for two principal reasons. First and foremost, although I have a love-hate relationship with running (the emphasis on the hate portion), I quickly realized that my body can no longer take four or five days a week of running on the road. This realization manifested itself when I suddenly developed pain in my right—or dominant—foot. (The reason that it is the dominant foot is because I already have an unhealed broken bone in the left foot—also likely caused by such pavement pounding—and that will not heal unless I have it surgically removed, which does not really seem like it would heal the bone either.) As a result, I have had to cease most forms of exercise and instead merely don a nighttime compression sock that is supposed to stretch my plantar fascia but seems to merely look weird. I am currently in the market for podiatrists who don't mind looking at one's feet through FaceTime (even though that is the wrong end of the body).

The second cause of my inability to improve my visual appeal has to do with my hair. Until two days ago, when it was finally deemed sort of safe to visit a barbershop, I had been forced to allow my hair to grow unrestrained. It must have been highly noticeable because people who are not really on a "comment on your unsightly appearance" basis with me were suggesting I get a haircut after a Zoom meeting or two. That being said, at one point I actually thought that the longer locks might be a good change for me as I am one who generally likes to keep his head shorn fairly close. Yet, as the above would suggest, I was apparently the only holder of such unfounded optimism. In fact, when I asked my beloved what she thought of this plan, her response revealed a less enthusiastic reaction: "I think you need to invest in a comb."

Having failed at both household improvement as well as similar ventures for my own personality, I

still had one remaining area of enhancement that seemed available to me: My mind. In order to effect this plan for increased acuity, I turned to the time-tested and truest of methods: television. I realize that my view may be that of the minority, but I am actually a big believer in television. As one who was raised on it, I appreciate the value that it adds to my life. Furthermore, it has largely improved in the nearly 50 years I have been a fan thereof. No longer does the television need the night off. Instead there is 24/7 programming, most of which is admittedly not worth watching but at least it beats a ROYGBIV test pattern for six straight hours, accompanied by an even more unsettling incessant eardrum piercing noise to let you know that it was time to go to bed hours ago.

With my unflinching belief in the power of cable programming, I have learned a tremendous amount over these last few weeks. I watched several documentaries, on topics ranging from the rise and fall of the Assyrian empire (how they managed to stretch this into three hours of programming I still don't know—and I watched all three!), an episode of Nova on building a cruise ship, which now seems rather anachronistic, and of course a number of investigative reports on how we have handled the pandemic, the conclusion of each of which was that our response was as deft as an Abbott and Costello routine, which I also found some time to enjoy. I also watch a great deal of what used to be called news but that I think now has become its own genre. My interest was really in learning more about the pandemic, but I found it hard to focus when there is an invariable bright red banner across the entire width of the screen screaming "BREAKING NEWS" when the fact is that it is far from news that has just happened. Yet I watch anyway to hear what the alleged experts have to say about this terrible virus and their best guesses as to what will come next. In fact, I have taken to writing down these experts' predictions to see how many of them actually come to pass. So far, they are not doing too well. Apparently epidemiologists and economists have a great deal in common.

When I grow weary of expanding my mind through the miracle of television, I also try to find time for the arts. This mostly consists of harassing my sons into practicing their piano or, in poor Will's case, his piano as well as his cello. I appreciate that it can be a challenge to see the value in such practice during a pandemic, but as I often remind him there is nothing about the coronavirus that makes a future at Julliard impossible.

Lastly, I tried to find a way to give back in light of all the suffering that is taking place around us. I am acutely aware of the sacrifices of others as the spouse of a doctor who has seen more than enough cases of coronavirus. With that in mind, but having no medical skills whatsoever, I decided to take a course online on contact tracing. I kept hearing that it was going to be essential to our nation's recovery, and it seemed like something I could do since I would not have to deal with people face-to-face, which would be risky for me and which I generally dislike anyway. I did well with the exam questions at the each of the lessons, only having a bit of trouble on those that were sort of touchy-feely in nature. When the time came for the final, I was confident about my accumulated knowledge. I did miss one question, I will admit, but that still gave me a 96%, which is usually an A. With my exam results in hand and my cell phone charged, I was ready to start in my new role as the Sherlock Holmes of COVID-19. I could finally give back and do something socially important.

Unfortunately, a couple of days after submitting all of my virtual paperwork to assist in this vital role, I was notified by an impersonal e-mail—one that I actually found in my Spam folder—that I was not what they were looking for. Thanks, but no thanks. I am not really sure how, in the New York City metropolitan area, we have the luxury of turning down people who want to help in light of the almost 400,000 cases we have had, but apparently I am just not up to snuff. I was candidly a bit disappointed that I would not be able to call total strangers and ask them intrusive questions about their comings-and-goings and how they were feeling. But, in the true spirit of societal concern, I am determined not to allow this temporary setback deter me from being ready in case my services might ultimately be useful. So for now I will return to watching the CDC's braintrust testify before Congress so that I can be at the vanguard of knowledge for when that call from Tony Fauci does come.

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