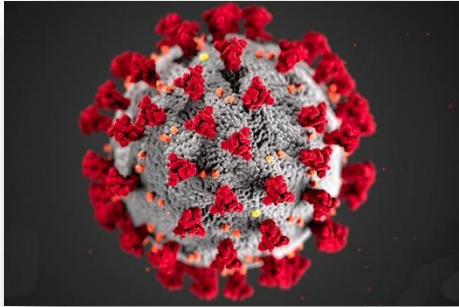


WHAT IF WE GET USED TO STAYING HOME?



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By DAVID KLEMENT

Going through a pile of unread magazines the other day while dutifully fulfilling the mandate that the Covid-19 quarantine is the time to declutter, I came across the February edition of one of Sarasota's glossy magazines.

Surprised that I had overlooked it when it

arrived in late January, I leafed through it to see what I might have missed.

What followed was a jolting account of just *how much* I – we, all of us – have missed in less than two months since that magazine came out. That jolt was followed by a disturbing premonition about how much we might be missing when the mandatory confinement ends.

Near the front, a full-page ad touts the Wine Walk to Ca D'Zan, a big wine-and-food gala to benefit The Ringling Museum of Art, which was set for March 20. Canceled.

A few pages over, a half-page ad showcases the Sarasota Opera's Winter Opera Festival, offering the chance to see four different performances over a three-day weekend in mid-March. Canceled.

The Inspiring Hope Dinner, the Lee and Bob Peterson Foundation's fund-raiser to benefit mental health services, was to be held on March 14. Postponed to early 2021.

Further on, a half-page ad promoted the Sarasota Ballet's March 27-28 performances of "Romeo & Juliet." Canceled.

Near the back, a full-page ad listed five current or upcoming plays at Florida Studio Theatre. A couple of them got to open, but the season wound up being canceled on March 16.

Near the center of the magazine there was an interview with Rick Steves, the travel guidebook guru who was to speak to the Ringling College Library Association's Town Hall Series on Feb. 11. Steves actually *did* make that appearance, but his comments in the pre-appearance interview about travel to far-flung destinations seemed almost surreal in the current context. Board a plane to travel anywhere? Really? It's hard to imagine.

Which led to a lot of what-if questions:

- What if we feel that way about all of our cultural and civic events as the virus threat eases? Will we ever be comfortable in a crowded theater again? Will we feel safe jostling for our seats at a Bucs game in Raymond James Stadium? Or negotiating the packed lobby of the Van Wezel to see our favorite Broadway performer? Or packing First United Methodist Church to hear a Sarasota Institute of Lifelong Learning lecture on world affairs?
- And what if it's not merely fear that could keep us home? What if we have gotten so used to Skyping and Zooming and FaceTiming and live-streaming that we'll decide we don't need to go to an actual live gala or ballet or lecture or opera or play? What if we all just wait 'til it comes out on Netflix or Hulu?
- What if we decide we don't need to eat out as often as we did BC (Before Corona?) Now that we have honed our cooking skills, what if we throw more dinner parties at home instead of going out to eat with friends?
- And then, what if our favorite restaurants don't survive the shutdown even *if* diners are eager to come back?
- Now that we have survived the loss of March Madness, spring training, National Hockey League and National Basketball Association competition, what if sports events no longer retain their hold on our lives?
- What if the education officials, having seen what distance learning is capable of, decide that online instruction is the way to go, assuming technological improvements can be made and systems upgraded to clear up the glitches our kids experienced?

I'm not trying to be a gloom-and-doom prognosticator here; just thinking pragmatically. I mean, I really can't see getting on an airplane in the foreseeable future. Can you? While the idea of sitting down in my favorite sports bar and feasting on a burger, fries and beer is quite appealing, I'm not sure if I want to rub elbows with my fellow diners just yet. And that crowded Van Wezel lobby just before the show or during intermission? No way do I see myself in that crowd anytime soon.

Yet Gov. Ron DeSantis and lots of the state's business moguls have formed the Re-Open Florida Task Force to draft plans for reopening the state, perhaps starting as soon as May 1. That's well and good, but the fact that there is not a single doctor or epidemiologist on the task force gives me pause. And without a plan for mass testing to gauge the degree of contamination vs. immunity in the general population, skeptics like

me are going to have no confidence that it's safe to go back to "normal," whatever that may look like.

And this doesn't even consider the other side of the what-ifs – the new habits we've all formed that may make us reconsider whether it's worth it to get dressed up, fight traffic and parking, and pull out the debit card to go to an event in person. I'm not saying I won't, but right now Season 3 of *Ozark* on Netflix, with my bowl of cheddar-flavored kettle corn and beverage beside my comfy recliner, still seems quite appealing.

Yet . . . give me another month of this, and I could change my mind.

David Klement is a former journalist and freelance writer who lives in East Manatee.