

What the Future Holds, Part I. November 2020 Version

We have no crystal ball to be used for a look at the future. Like everyone else, we observe the events around us, read the thoughts people share online; glean over the news articles of interest and try imaging where this country is going with elections, COVID epidemics; general discontent about so many things that engulf our lives.

Very humbly, we want to look into the near future and speak of what we see in store for America. You may agree or disagree with our line of thinking, as the world around us now becomes highly polarized.

Well, here we go. The future begins today.

A COVID epidemic was and is a double-edged sword. It uprooted our lives as few things can. It also accelerated us into new directions. Gone are many familiar businesses, services and conveniences we enjoyed for many years. Gone are the freedoms to travel, to eat out, to shop in person, familiar ways of conducting one's affairs – in work, study and meeting others; a lot of real life events have moved online and switched to remote access. Plenty of it shall stay in that form, accelerating our transitions from real to virtual; whenever necessary, more convenient and economically feasible. Business centers are standing empty in towns and cities around the country. Many will continue to be vacant for a long time.

Companies small and corporations large took bold steps towards conducting their affairs online, remotely, using their employers living rooms and bedrooms as free spaces to do business, saving tons of money in the process. Your telephones and internet connections became theirs, yet you pay for them. Employees are on call 24/7 from now on; everyone knows where you are most of the time. One's boss may think nothing of calling you on a Saturday night. Customers no longer think business is conducted Monday through Friday, 9-5. They expect you to answer the phones at any time, day or night, weekdays or weekends. The lines are becoming very blurred between your own time and what someone thinks your business hours should be. On the other end, customers are just as 'confused'. Time's attributes have lost much of their meaning. In between the four walls of one's own home where people spend every day, there is no distinction between Monday and Saturday. You don't go out for lunch or some drinks with buddies or co-workers; you don't pick your kids from school. You don't go on vacations together as a

family. You don't drive as much, and where would you go anyway?

We don't have the statistics, but hear that divorce rates are up everywhere. Being together, 24/7, in the same living space with the 'significant other', may amount to 'cruel and unusual punishment'. People who barely tolerated each other's company in pre-COVID days, can no longer bring themselves to feign 'love and affection'.

Much of it is expected to return to normal when the epidemic ends or get reduced to a mere inconvenience (as opposed to being a deadly disease). But not everything is coming back. Changed attitudes are here to stay. Politicians who forced us to hang about homes all the time, have ruptured the fabric of society, broke the interpersonal ties which may never be repaired fully. You can be sure COVID-induced emotional wounds can never be completely healed within the current population. In many places around the world the virus is cause for strict population movement controls, instilling sort of 'martial law'. A regime where your activities are controlled and permissions to go places becomes a feature of daily life. Frustrated, you cannot do anything about it now.

Wearing masks may stay around way after the epidemic is gone. We have to wear them in public. It has become a habit, and bad habits are hard to break. Fear is a powerful factor. Our lives will be guided and defined by fear for a long time to come. Fear of getting infected and die; of become incapacitated; fear for the loved ones; fear to lose work and income, fear of eviction, fear of political instability and home intrusion. Few people have the means of escaping fear to greener and safer pastures elsewhere. Most of us don't have that luxury. Those who ran away have little incentive to improve social, personal ties with their neighbors.

We are losing our travel, tourism and entertainment industries for good many years. Airlines shrink their fleets, up the ticket cost; travel agencies book a fraction of destinations as before. Spending incomes are reduced for almost everyone. All of the non-essential spending that made living fun had been curtailed. Shopping on a whim is down. Thousands of places like bars, restaurants, gyms, shows, galleries, shopping centers may never reopen. Restarting life takes long time. Many unemployed people don't pay their rents now; personal bankruptcies and massive future insolvency failures of real-estate owners are not too far away. That would be very hard to recover from. Real estate taxes and mortgage payments are a staple of financial life in this country. On its own, this industry will not soon recover.

It feels like life has been postponed, frozen in time. We wait. Wait for resolution and don't have a clue when it may occur. Vaccines promised may not

have the desired effects until their effectiveness is time-tested within the general population. Smart people around the globe are not looking to become the guinea pigs for the pharmaceutical companies, so they will wait out for confirmed results, not PR promises. That may take years. Vaccines cost money. Not every country can afford to administer vaccinations for free. In many places people simply could not afford vaccines. You get the picture.

And then there is politics. Big politics have entered our lives. It agitated the entire country. There is so much to it and it is disturbing as hell. The entire nation is waiting with bated breath for the outcome of Presidential elections and what's to follow.

It calls for another chapter to be written, just about politics. It will be done, in due course

Be safe out there; may things go your way in these troubled times.