

The Millennial Republican  
by S. Nagle

In case you didn't notice the world changed last week. As I write this we are nearing the end of the second week of a county wide shut-down because of, as a friend phrased it, "the Corona." Like "the Corona"—also known as "Covid19" or the "Wuhan Virus"—the shut-down has a few different names. Some people call it a "slow-down" a "precaution" or a "quarantine." At the moment I don't know if we are, nationally, experiencing a chicken little moment or we are, nationally, collectively sitting back and waiting for a hell we could, at best, slow down. I'm not a doctor, I'm definitely not a prognosticator. I'm also not a professional political animal.

There are so many things I do not know right now. I don't know how long this will last. I do not know how bad it will be. I don't if I should worry about my own health, or my parents' health, or the state of the economy. (It is likely that there will be thirty-three million additional unemployed Americans next month as a direct result of this shutdown.) I don't know whether our political leaders made the right decision, the wrong decision, or the right decision just a little bit too late. I do know that this is the first time in nearly two weeks that I have had time—sleepless at 2am, alone in the dark, my fingers slowly turning my thoughts into words on a glowing screen—to really think about what is happening.

The reality we are living with now seems crazy. Two weeks ago that crazy reality seem localized. Living in the SF Bay Area you get used to a different sort of normal. I grew up in the Bay Area. I've been lucky enough to travel enough in the rest of the country to know that our normal isn't America's normal. So when the shutdown started (just before St. Patrick's Day) it seemed like just another of those weird Bay Area things that would be a weird Bay Area thing that we would live through and the rest of the country would watch on television

with a mental question mark.

In fact, the first I heard of the shutdown on that Monday afternoon was with a question mark. A friend from out of state texted me, "WTF!!!!???? I just heard, you're going into lock-down?" (WTF by the way is an acronym, and it doesn't mean Whiskey Tango Foxtrot. Think... "What the F@%k?!") This mind you came from a friend who I had never known to use acronyms or four-letter words before. So... crazy times. My mother was the second person to tell me. She insisted on reading me the full e-mail notification she had just received while I drive down 101. So... real but surreal.

The first day wasn't so bad. Other than the fact that it was St. Patrick's Day and I spent the day at home drinking one Guinness answering work e-mails, not watching a parade on television. Because

there was no parade. So... I was irritated. Thwarted. Bored. And then, then things got crazy. For the record... working from home isn't that great. Business trip after business trip I was supposed to go on got cancelled because conventions and meetings got cancelled. A friend's wedding—that I was supposed to attend—got postponed. The Diocese had been asked to refrain from allowing large gatherings. The catering hall got closed. Oh yeah.... the stock market went crazy that week too, really crazy. Nineteen-Eighties style crazy. I know this because the grey haired analysts kept repeating it over and over again. And me? I had e-mails, so many e-mails to answer. Phone calls to make. Stay calm, stay calm. Calm others down when I'm not feeling calm at all. Deal with the new weird reality of having the ONLY place I go when I leave the house be the supermarket.

The term "social distancing" became a thing. And yes, you can make jokes... Millennials, my generation, have ALWAYS been socially distant. So many of us were raised by parents who were so terrified of serial killer kidnappers they preferred to bribe us with endless screen time to keep us indoors and out of harm's way. Two career households had less time for a social life anyway. And the kids? Well... we learned to entertain ourselves. Found virtual friends online, sometimes never had friends irl. (In case you don't know that is an acronym too... "In Real Life." ...A sad acronym if you think about it too much... an admission that too many people don't have enough of a real life.)

So I was heads down working. Trying to worry less and keep a stiff upper lip. Do the right thing. Social distance. Entertainment, the outside world, consisted of text groups with friends, a couple of phone calls, two trips to the supermarket, one trip to the FedEx office. I was doing my part. Trying meanwhile to keep a really stiff upper lip when dealing with work. Because, after the disaster capitalists crawled out of the woodwork, after the reality of the Bay Area's new normal of closed restaurants, closed malls, closed hairdressers, closed almost everything, swept the nation things started to look really ugly for everyone not in the canned soup business. (In case you want to check it out... When the stock market yo-yoed down after St. Patrick's Day the canned soup stocks actually went up.)

Mentally I checked out of politics for about eight days. I had stuff to deal with. People to worry about. Maybe that is the moment you realize you've really grown up... you start to worry about other people more than you worry about yourself. From the point of view of dealing with the virus, the odds are probably in my favor. I'm young. I'm healthy. I've never smoked. Considering the demographics of the Bay Area I may actually be the Republican with the best immune system in the county. So... I've been worried about others far more than myself. Even the economy... I've always been a saver. My great grandparents mainly grew up in peasant villages on the blood soaked fringes of European Empires that collapsed in war, revolution and rebellion. I

was raised by people who were raised by people who grew up in the shadow of war and famine. I've lived a life of suburban American middle-class privilege, but the memory of hard times lingers in my bones and I realized last week that I wasn't even going to flinch at the economic carnage unleashed in America last week. And yes... no matter what anyone says, in March of 2020, the American economy was basically murdered. (Or at least gut-shot.)

Other countries have it worse. Much worse. Both from a financial perspective and a human perspective. I'm not Catholic, and yet every morning now I look at a picture of the Madonna. A friend of a friend—two degrees removed in the business world, which isn't much, and oddly... I am lucky enough that I do consider many of the people I work with to be friends—is Italian. He's in the North of Italy where ten thousand people are now on the official death rolls as a result of the virus. And every day now he posts a different picture of the Madonna on his business page. If, one morning, I do not see that picture of the Madonna I will know that either the epidemic has passed, or he has passed.

For me Fulvio now represents the best of what the social networks of the internet have given us. He is a man throwing out a message of hope in an ocean of fear every day.

Sadly, when I lifted my head from my work earlier this week and started to really pay attention to the news, pay attention to the memes and the feeds and the conspiracy theories and the snark that make up the entertaining portion of the internet for a Millennial, I realized that in a crisis we don't all become Fulvio. We don't all even manage to think of someone other than ourselves. Instead hypocrisy, petty squabbles, rabid partisanship, profiteering, snark and sheer nastiness continues.

Quite frankly I'm o.k. with sarcasm. Even gallows humor, when times are dark sometimes you have to make the dark a little smaller by laughing at it. I also believe in the First Amendment. I believe in the First Amendment the way liberals of my father's childhood believed in the First Amendment. Freedom of speech matters. Freedom of speech for everyone matters. And so... I defend the free speech rights of people whose ideas I think are silly or frankly wrong. Not buts, no caveats, no one is beyond the pale of the First Amendment.

However, and this is a big however, although I feel it is my duty to defend the rights of the despicable to say their piece, I also believe that if we all believe in Free Speech we should be willing to debate, to argue, to call out those who've crossed a line. So I had an argument with a friend—at this point possibly an ex-friend—earlier this week. Because I realized where my line in the sand was, a principle that I would fight for as vociferously as I fight for all of our First Amendment rights.

It wasn't a in real life fight... I don't really see people in real life now that we are in shut-down mode. The social highlight of my week last week was a long distance 4 minute conversation with supermarket shelf stocker. (Please consider in this era of shutdown, the supermarket employees are first responders too... and truly doing a heroic job.) It was instant message based, and only after it was over did I realize that he was still living in a world where politics shapes everything... and I am now living in a world where I wait each morning to see a picture of the Madonna.

Earlier this week, for a few hours, there was a rumor going around that Mike Pence, the Vice President of the United States, had tested positive for Covid19. I heard the rumor first online. In an instant message from a friend.... we'd been distracting ourselves talking about music, wondering what the home lives of toilet paper hoarders are like, stupid stuff.... And out of the blue he messaged me that Mike Pence had Covid. I thought it was the typical way you mention breaking news to a friend online. Automatically I said I was sorry to hear that.... Because I am sorry to hear when anyone is ill. And my maybe-ex-friend became irate. He was happy at the prospect Mike Pence might have a fatal disease. He felt it was karma. He felt it was a silver lining. (He hasn't really been coping well with the end of Mayor Pete's presidential bid.) He felt we should celebrate! I told him I would defend to the death his right to attack Mike Pence on political grounds, but wishing someone an actual illness was petty, cruel and simply wrong. And... I thought he was better than that. My "friend" told me Pence didn't deserve humane treatment. And suddenly the ugliness of our new world of scorched earth partisanship came back into my life.

I haven't spoken to my friend since. We may never speak to each other again. I'm not actually sure I care about the loss of the friendship. I do care that I had to confront that kind of casual self serving cruelty.

Sadly, in many ways, the internet is a reservoir of pettiness and cruelty. Often I wish there was a gigantic downvote button for the internet. And no... I don't think the internet made us meaner. I don't think memes make us stupid. They just gave us scope to express ourselves. And a forum to reach more people than ever before.

Quite frankly I think we can do better. Not by abandoning our principles, not by policing the internet for hate speech. (Although a bit of policing for real crime might be a plus.) But by speaking out. Setting an example. Thinking about what we really want, and what we really want to say. Fighting for what matters. Being gracious. Being smart. Being Fulvio.