

Degrees of Separation

by Anna Gaberscik



Degrees of Separation Part I

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 15, 2020

The Theory of Six Degrees of Separation was originally inspired by a series of short stories published in 1929, entitled *Everything is Different*, by the Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy. In one of the stories, entitled "Chains", he wrote that as various types of technology advance over time the connections between people and thus their interconnectedness increases regardless of distance. The chain of links becomes more and more complex, whereby the links constantly interlock. The story prompted countless studies that sought to verify the theory. The most famous of these experiments was carried out in 1967 by American sociologist Stanley Milgram, who coined the term 'small world' experiment. It was from these and numerous other scientists' findings that the 'Theory of Six Degrees' evolved. The thesis holds that any two people on the planet may be related to each other in some way through six or fewer degrees.

In "Chains" we read:

Everything returns and renews itself. The difference now is that the rate of these returns has increased, in both space and time, in an unheard-of fashion. Now my thoughts can circle the globe in minutes. Entire passages of world history are played out in a couple of years ...

Karinthy goes on to describe a game in which he and his friends toy with testing his concept of connections:

*A fascinating game grew out of this discussion. One of us suggested performing the following experiment to prove that the population of the Earth is closer together now than they have ever been before. We should select any person from the 1.5 billion inhabitants of the Earth – anyone, anywhere at all. **He bet us that, using no more than five individuals, one of whom is a personal acquaintance, he could contact the selected individual using nothing except the network of personal acquaintances.** For example, "Look, you know Mr. X.Y., please ask him to contact his friend Mr. Q.Z., whom he knows, and so forth." "An interesting idea!" – someone said – "Let's give it a try. How would you contact Selma Lagerlöf?" "Well now, Selma Lagerlöf," the proponent of the game replied, "Nothing could be easier." And he reeled off a solution in two seconds: "Selma Lagerlöf just won the Nobel Prize for Literature, so she's bound to know King Gustav of Sweden, since, by rule, he's the one who would have handed her the Prize. And it's well known that King Gustav loves to play tennis and participates in international tennis tournaments. He has played Mr. Kehrling, so they must be acquainted. And as it happens I myself also know Mr. Kehrling quite well." (The*

proponent was himself a good tennis player.) ~All we needed this time was two out of five links. **That's not surprising since it's always easier to find someone who knows a famous or popular figure than some run-of-the-mill, insignificant person. Come on, give me a harder one to solve!"**

The link below contains the full text of "Chains," a delightfully witty short story. https://djjr-courses.wdfiles.com/local--files/soc180%3Akarinthy-chain-links/Karinthy-Chain-Links_1929.pdf

We now fast forward to 2020: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other social media platforms allow us to exchange and communicate with one another all around the world, thus shrinking the physical distances between us such as were unimaginable 100 years ago, not to mention the advances in transportation technology that bring people to new places more than ever before. The complex and far-reaching effects of globalization have also led to a world in which, for better or sometimes for worse, the interconnectivity of our lives is inevitable. The web that we live in is sustained by the mutual cooperation of every moving part, whereby our lives have become interwoven and interdependent

These links include national governments, corporations, international organizations and, of course, individuals. The balance between these links is a very delicate one, for if any one such link is unable to provide certain goods or services to the degree expected, then several subsequent links will feel the effects. Every link in this chain is connected to many others. Every link is crucial.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, we see just how delicate the stability of this system of interconnectivity can be.

Epidemics and pandemics change our socio-political landscape drastically: not only are the evident truths of our interconnected existence hard to swallow, but so also is the extent to which we miss that very interconnectedness when, for all intents and purposes, we are forced to almost mutually cut each other off.

What keeps us together is our combined struggle in coping and adjusting to social distancing. Although many of us are more than ever separated from immediate contacts, what binds us must be strong enough to at least figuratively bridge this distance. As we will discover over the course of this series, a populace without a strong sense of solidarity is troublesome.

We impose damaging collective hurt on ourselves when we alienate each other. The heightened similarity of all our experiences during this pandemic increases the likelihood of us connecting with people we would have otherwise never imagined connecting with. We are intensely engaged with each other by digital technology, seeking human interaction in any way possible. The threads between

us have always existed, just waiting to be engaged. The degrees of separation that connect, rather than separate us become more apparent through the impact of an outbreak such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Developing a healthy relationship with precarious situations such as this is imperative, something which is, indeed, a tall order. We must also develop a healthy relationship to fear, especially in times of heightened tensions. Learning how to reckon with these new circumstances facilitates a better approach to them in the future, and although history shows that there have been many opportunities to do so, advances have proven insufficient. Alongside systemic changes that need to be made, we must prove ourselves sufficiently steadfast in showing mutual support. Divisive political tactics employed for the political and economic gain of a few cannot be tolerated; racist, classist and xenophobic propaganda that points fingers at certain ethnic groups as being the sources and disseminators of infections cannot continue to prevail. Moreover, we must recognize how the lack of trust in national and state institutions (often resulting from the above-mentioned tactics) also threatens to rip apart the very threads that keep us together.

Under normal circumstances, no one event or condition would connect us at an international level to the extent that COVID-19 has done; and thus we are all collectively stripped down to the very rudiments of our existence. Now, we all share something in common, and this one, common thing is wreaking havoc on our lives. It prompts similar emotions in us all, and we find ourselves asking the same questions.

The question in the first Degrees of Separation series is as follows:

How do you meaningfully connect with loved ones while upholding the rules of social distancing?

On what occasions do you feel most united with people you do not know personally? What are the things that make you feel nervous about the future?

Here are a few examples of answers:

Question 1: We wave at each other from across the street and create shared spotify playlists!

Or:

Question 1: I videocall loved ones more than ever before. I have familiarized myself with Zoom and Jitsi, and use Facebook, Facetime as well as Skype. When talking with people on the phone, I share absolutely every detail of my daily life, and they

do the same. Some days are mundane and depressing, and I have no desire to talk much about what was and what was not done. On such days as these, I prefer just listening. We connect over shows and music, I like to find out about what people are watching or listening to. Then, perhaps, I watch the same show or listen to the same album, which we can talk about again the next day: connection! When speaking with someone far away, I like to hear about what is going on in the area in which he or she lives. I like to talk about food. What I eat and cook, and what the other person eats and cooks. Accompanying pictures to these stories are a plus. And although we are unable to discuss recent, 'physically' shared experiences, we do reminisce. We talk about the times we were able to meet up with each other. When was it, what did we do? We may talk about distant memories, some time spent together years ago: "do you remember the potato stew that grandma and grandpa would cook for us? I was thinking about them, so I made it today to remind me of them. When eating it, it took me back to when I was fifteen. It was so good that I ate too much – apparently I was reminiscing just a bit too much!"

Question 2: Although I rarely feel connected with strangers in Vienna, the times when I have interacted has been with the cashiers at my local supermarkets and stores. Today, I went to see if my local 'corner shop' sold large cardboard boxes. I went in and asked the two men if they sold such things. Although they didn't, they said they could give me some from the storage room at the back of the shop for free. When they went to the storage room, I looked around to see if I could buy something in the store to support them but I really had no need for anything they had for sale – and I had no wish to purchase a large rice cooker just for the sake of politeness. When returning they handed me the boxes. I asked whether they were sure about not charging me anything, and they insisted that they did not. I thanked them and left, pleasantly surprised by my luck. I hope their store can survive. On another day I went to a local supermarket and asked if they still had masks. The young woman seemed eager to chat and ranted on for a few minutes about how some people would come to the store seven times in one day just to claim the free masks. In Vienna, free masks are handed out in supermarkets. I listened and agreed that some people might be a bit overzealous. I thanked her for being here for all of us, for continuing to come to work so that we could continue to buy the groceries we need. Her eyes crinkled up a little bit when she said goodbye, which indicated a smile, though I was not entirely sure since most of her face was covered by a mask.

Question 3: Financial security. Internship opportunities and the job market. The prospect of unemployment, and whether or not the system I live in can handle the amount of people currently unemployed and those that will follow them due to COVID-19. What will happen when I'm also among the unemployed? I worry most

of all about people themselves. People who I know and love, as well as acquaintances. I'm worried that we might never be able to hug each other again or go to crowded concerts and festivals. Or maybe it will just take a long time. I'm worried about losing my patience and that others will, too.

Next 'Degrees of Separation':

There are always several of us who are bound to resist orders and rules, even if they are put in place to protect the health of the general public. In the second essay, we delve into human defiance and resistance in the face of outbreaks, a fascinating occurrence with often lethal effects.

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Degrees of Separation Part II

Anger and Frustration: Rebelling Against Social Distancing

SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 2020

To begin with, what is the origin of the term "quarantine"?

From fourteenth-century Venice. The institutionalized system of quarantine as we know it today, was established in the late 1340s, although many variants of quarantine had already been implemented prior to that: these date back to A.D. 542, when a bubonic plague ravaged Constantinople during the reign of Byzantine Emperor Justinian. In the fourteenth century, the spread of the Black Death forced Venice to institute legislation requiring incoming ships to wait for a period of thirty days before being allowed to enter. This was then extended from thirty days, or "trentino", to a forty-day period of isolation "*quaranta giorni*." Hence, the birth of the term "quarantine". About 500 years later, in the 1880s, we encounter the infamous Mary Mallon, also known as "Typhoid Mary." Mary Mallon arrived in New York City from Ireland at about this time, where she made a living as a cook for wealthy families. In 1906, she was employed in this capacity by the wealthy banker Charles Henry Warren at his family's Long Island summer house. Over the course of the summer, six of the family members contracted typhoid fever; the first among numerous families to suffer the same fate.

The sanitary engineer, George Soper, was responsible for tracking the infections back to Mary Mallon and published his findings in 1907. He then tried to track Mary down so as to test her under laboratory conditions. Initially unsuccessful, his tests described Mary as uncooperative, claiming that on occasions she even chased him away. Eventually, the New York City Department of Health and the police department were called in to support the investigation, and she conceded to undergo tests, though only after having refused for five hours. Mary was then sent to North Brother Island, where she spent two years in isolation, after which she was released under the condition that she would never again work as a cook. Mary did the precise opposite, and began working as a cook at Sloane Maternity Hospital in Manhattan, before her cover was eventually blown following an alarming increase in cases of typhoid fever. She was then banished once again to North Brother Island, this time until her death in 1938. When still alive, she earned the infamous nickname 'Typhoid Mary', and was shunned and ridiculed. Mary Mallon was the first known case of an asymptomatic, or "healthy carrier" of typhoid fever in the United States.

Thirty-two years after publishing his findings of Mary Mallon's case in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, George Soper published the article "The Curious

Career of Typhoid Mary" in the *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*. "The Curious Career of Typhoid Mary" is a candid account of his experiences with Mary. The following is a telling excerpt from the article:

*On her release Mary promptly disappeared. She violated every detail of the pledge she had given to the Department of Health. She changed her name and went to cooking again. Under the name of Marie Breshof, and sometimes Mrs. Brown, she now cooked in hotels, restaurants and sanatoria. At one time she ran a cheap rooming house, but kept it so badly that it failed to pay. She tried ironing, but found cooking paid better. For five years Mary traveled about New York and its vicinity without restraint and without her identity being discovered by the authorities. I was not asked to find her again, but I think I could have done so. My official connection with the case ended when I cleared up the Oyster Bay outbreak in 1907 and turned Typhoid Mary over to the Health Department. Mary's history during these five years has never been traced in detail, but I know some of the places where she worked and some of the things that happened to her. **The world was not very kind to Mary.** She could not resume her cooking in rich private families, for practically all of them got their cooks through two agencies – Mrs. Stricker's and Mrs. Seeley's – and both knew Mary and were afraid to place her. She never had what might be called a permanent situation. She did not get on well with other servants and wanted to be moving about, anyway. One day Dr. Edward B. Cragin, head obstetrician and gynecologist at the Sloane Hospital for Women, telephoned me asking that I come at once to the hospital to see him about a matter of great importance. When I arrived there he said he had a typhoid epidemic of more than twenty cases on his hands. The other servants had jokingly nicknamed the cook "Typhoid Mary." She was out at the moment, but would I recognize her handwriting if she was really that woman? He handed me a letter from which I saw at once that the cook was indeed Mary Mallon, and I also identified her from his description. I advised that the Health Department be notified, and it was not long before Mary was again taken and sent to North Brother Island. On this occasion she made no struggle. Mary was on the island the second time for twenty-three years. During this long period she never once tried to escape. Did she want to regain her liberty after her second arrest? I believe she did not. **Some think she had come to recognize her condition as inevitable and had become reconciled to a life of imprisonment. My belief is that a change had come over her - a change that was due largely to the passage of time. It was both mental and physical. She felt that she had been hounded because of typhoid fever. She did not admit that there was any typhoid about her, but since others said there was, she had not been allowed to go freely where she pleased and do what she wanted to do. As her lawyer had said, she had been advertised to the world as a dangerous person and had been treated worse than***

a criminal, and yet she had not been guilty of the least violence toward anybody. Mary was now about forty-eight years of age and a good deal heavier than she was when she slipped through a kitchen full of servants, jumped the back fence and put up a fight with strong young policemen. She was as strong as ever, but she had lost something of that remarkable energy and activity which had characterized her young days and urged her forward to meet undaunted whatever situation the world presented to her. In these eight years since she was first arrested, she had learned what it was to yield to other wills than her own and to know pain. In the last five years, although she had been free, there had been times when she had found it hard to fight her battles unaided.

Mary possessed a violent temper against which, when fully aroused, few persons had ever been willing to contend. I had had this weapon used against me three times, Dr. Baker had seen it in full force on the occasion of Mary's first arrest, and there is a story of it when an English health officer, neglecting a warning he had received, undertook to interview Mary and photograph her at her bungalow. Mary knew how to throw herself into a state of what Dr. John A. Cahill, Superintendent of Riverside Hospital, called, "almost pathological anger." In the many years of her incarceration, Mary made good use of this personal weapon. Usually a look or a word gave sufficient warning of what might lie behind. When, on the basis of a long and friendly relation, the head of the laboratory asked Mary to tell her about her love affairs, Mary silenced her with a glare.

The following is a letter written by Mary Mallon, originally addressed to the editor of the *The New York American*, which she later re-addressed to her lawyer George Francis O'Neill:

*To the Editor of The American,
George Francis O'Neill,*

In reply to Dr. Park of the Board of Health I will state that I am not segregated with the typhoid patients. There is nobody on this island that has typhoid. There was never any effort by the Board authority to do anything for me excepting to cast me on the island and keep me a prisoner without being sick nor needing medical treatment....

When in January (1908) they were about to discharge me, when the resident physician came to me and asked me where was I going when I got out of here, naturally I said to N.Y., so there was a stop put to my getting out of here. Then the supervising nurse told me I was a hopeless case, and if I'd write to Dr. Darlington and tell him I'd go to my sisters in Connecticut. Now I have no sister in that state or any other in the U.S. Then in April a friend of mine went to Dr. Darlington and asked him when I was to get away. He replied "That woman is all right now, and she is a very expensive woman, but I cannot

let her go myself. The Board has to sit. Come around Saturday." When he did, Dr. Darlington told this man "I've nothing more to do with this woman. Go to Dr. Studdiford." He went to that doctor, and he said "I cannot let that woman go, and all the people that she gave the typhoid to and so many deaths occurred in the families she was with." Dr. Studdiford said to this man "Go and ask Mary Mallon and enveigle her to have an operation performed to have her gallbladder removed. I'll have the best surgeon in town to do the cutting." I said "No. No knife will be put on me. I've nothing the matter with my gallbladder." Dr. Wilson asked me the very same question. I also told him no. Then he replied "It might not do you any good." Also the supervising nurse asked me to have an operation performed. I also told her no, and she made the remark "Would it not be better for you to have it done than remain here?" I told her no.

There is a visiting doctor who came here in October. He did take quite an interest in me. He really thought I liked it here, that I did not care for my freedom. He asked me if I'd take some medicine if he brought it to me. I said I would, so he brought me some Anti Autotox and some pills then. Dr. Wilson had already ordered me brewer's yeast. At first I would not take it, for I'm a little afraid of the people, and I have a good right for when I came to the Department they said they were in my tract. Later another said they were in the muscles of my bowels. And latterly they thought of the gallbladder.

I have been in fact a peep show for everybody. Even the interns had to come to see me and ask about the facts already known to the whole wide world. The tuberculosis men would say "There she is, the kidnapped woman." Dr. Park has had me illustrated in Chicago. I wonder how the said Dr. William H. Park would like to be insulted and put in the Journal and call him or his wife Typhoid William Park.

– Mary Mallon

Perhaps Mallon really did not understand what all the fuss was about. She may have seen her diagnosis as an inconvenience, which she then chose to ignore or deny. Mary's case was an extreme and very public case; she was an individual who refused to comply with social isolation orders from health professionals. The lack of public knowledge on basic health matters, combined with the lack of advances in medical research on typhoid fever, resulted in a problematic, suboptimal situation. Mary was suspicious towards many; she dared to ask questions, challenge whoever crossed her path or got in the way of her paycheck. When it came to her freedom, she was headstrong, and even filed a lawsuit against the New York City Department of Health in 1909 (which came to nothing). However, her existential conditions were very precarious, conditions such as are mirrored time and time again during epidemics and pandemics. Mary perceived her life as bearing no relation to the lives of others. She refused to be told what she may and may not do and resented the way in which

the New York City Health Department infringed on the rights she had thus far enjoyed. Her refusal to acknowledge the ways in which we are interconnected prevented her from accepting the importance of her – as an asymptomatic carrier of typhoid fever – adjusting to the way she interacted with others for the sake of their health. Her lack of trust in medical institutions and skepticism went so far that she denied a great deal of medical treatment for her condition, including procedures that may have allowed her to live a more normal life.

Although the issue of privacy versus safety is nothing new, the COVID-19 pandemic forces us to consider the matter differently. Mary fought against relinquishing her privacy, something which was, for her, synonymous with her freedom. The boundaries became blurred, however, once her privacy and freedom infringed on the safety of others. Resistance to being caged in, of being confined to prescribed limits, is an experience to which one can very easily relate at present.

We turn next to an excerpt from Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a collection of observations and first-hand accounts of an outbreak of the plague that arrived in London in the 1660s. Defoe's journal is painstakingly detailed, on both private and public levels. It describes the goings-on in the streets, the official data and governmental orders pertaining to the outbreak issued to the public. In the journal, he presents many of the regulations to showcase the ways in which they were being disobeyed, describing the disregard of the collective good expressed by many of his fellow citizens. In his account of a rambunctious group of men who refused to adhere to a ban on late-night drinking in pubs, he attempts to talk some sense into them, but to no avail. Today, we see this kind of frustration expressed very publicly on social media: a Twitter or Facebook rant, a picture shaming people who seem to disobey orders, a grumpy window-watcher screaming down at some teenagers congregating below.

The following is an official order, printed verbatim in his journal:

Tippling-houses.

'That disorderly tippling in taverns, ale-houses, coffee-houses, and cellars be severely looked unto, as the common sin of this time and greatest occasion of dispersing the plague. And that no company or person be suffered to remain or come into any tavern, ale-house, or coffee-house to drink after nine of the clock in the evening, according to the ancient law and custom of this city, upon the penalties ordained in that behalf.

'SIR JOHN LAWRENCE, Lord Mayor.

SIR GEORGE WATERMAN

SIR CHARLES DOE, Sheriffs.'

What follows is Defoe's account of the defiant and 'sinful' men who violated these orders.

It is with regret that I take notice of this tavern. The people were civil, mannerly, and an obliging sort of folks enough, and had till this time kept their house open and their trade going on, though not so very publicly as formerly: but there was a dreadful set of fellows that used their house, and who, in the middle of all this horror, met there every night, behaved with all the revelling and roaring extravagances as is usual for such people to do at other times, and, indeed, to such an offensive degree that the very master and mistress of the house grew first ashamed and then terrified at them.

They sat generally in a room next the street, and as they always kept late hours, so when the dead-cart came across the street-end to go into Houndsditch, which was in view of the tavern windows, they would frequently open the windows as soon as they heard the bell and look out at them; and as they might often hear sad lamentations of people in the streets or at their windows as the carts went along, they would make their impudent mocks and jeers at them, especially if they heard the poor people call upon God to have mercy upon them, as many would do at those times in their ordinary passing along the streets.

In Defoe's account we have an example of 'dangerous' submission (potentially deadly to those in the immediate vicinity) rather than of defiance. Their submission amounted to a surrender to a fate they expected would come sooner or later. Their surrender, of course, endangered those around them. The grim state of London at the time was fertile breeding ground for bleak and hopeless sentiments, which only made matters worse, since people saw the uselessness of adhering to the most basic rules issued for public safety. Many felt that there was simply no escaping the plague, and that it was just a matter of time until they would contract it.

In Mary Mallon's case, however, we see 'dangerous' defiance followed by 'passive' (harmless for those around her) submission. The type of submission George Soper described, as exhibited by Mary Mallon after her second arrest and subsequent life sentencing to North Brother Island, was less dangerous than the 'drunkards' in Defoe's story because she submitted to her unfortunate isolation rather than to 'death'. But she also had that option because, though infected, she was an asymptomatic carrier. Initially, however, Mary's defiance was as volatile as the men's submission since she went about her life infecting unsuspecting people. Although Mary may not have accepted her isolation, she did submit to it, thus cooperating in a way that stopped her from endangering any more lives.

In these examples we see just some of the many ways in which people express their discontent with life when an outbreak dictates the daily order, when social distancing becomes exigent and the normal freedoms of everyday existence are restricted for the safety of the common good. It is nonetheless important to take

note of the high risks implied in all our actions during an epidemic or pandemic. Our actions not only affect us, but many of those around us; the web of interconnected links is always present. During an infectious outbreak, we must be conscious about the purpose of various forms of rebellion and about the objectives of such acts of disobedience. Acts of rebellion and civil disobedience might strive to disrupt the current political order or insist that certain voices be heard. Rebelling against social distancing and quarantine guidelines, however, don't "stick it to the man" as much as it puts innocent lives at risk more than they are already. Let's find healthy ways to express frustration.

In this edition of 'Degrees of Separation', I invite you to write a letter in which you express your raw and honest frustrations about life with social distancing. In the spirit of Mary Mallon, the letter may be addressed to a person in power to whom you wish to express your demands. The message may also be addressed to no one in particular. This letter should allow you to set free your frustrations and anger towards social distancing, and to allow such feelings to be felt and acknowledged in a healthy and safe manner. The letter does not need to be long! It can also be written in the form of a tweet, a text message or an email. Consider the following question as inspiration:

What are the most frustrating parts of social isolation, and which orders/restrictions do you find the most difficult to adhere to?

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2020

You open your eyes to the sun streaming in through your window, just like any other day. It is morning, or maybe even noon. You wake up unsure about what you will do that day, about whether or not it even makes sense to wake up as early as you would otherwise do to go to work. You are overcome with the strangeness of the day ahead, the uncertainty of the distant future that lies even further ahead. So many things that provided us with structure have now retreated into indefinite hibernation. How is one to make sense of it all? There are many answers to that question, one of which is that one can't make any sense of the situation. Up is down and left is right, and history is full of precedents showcasing people adjusting and accepting a 'disorderly' order. The 'disorder' may even become the new order. From the disarray of an epidemic comes a reinterpretation of social, political and economic hierarchies; flipping the established order on its head. Those who exercised various types of power over the populace may struggle or perhaps even entirely fail to maintain control and composure. When faced with a merciless outbreak that strikes society in an all-encompassing manner, long-standing fissures in the vessel of society are exposed. Those tasked to protect and help us may prove either capable and competent or helpless and unhelpful. In this edition of "Degrees of Separation" we explore absurdity and disarray under quarantine. What are the structures in society that provide us with a sense of stability, security and, perhaps most importantly, a sense of predictability in our lives?

In extreme cases, a near disintegration of hierarchies can be triggered by an epidemic. One consequence of this is that people lack any behavioral or existential points of reference, which in turn results in a society uninhibited and unchecked. Although a state of complete mayhem may not necessarily always arise, elements of such mayhem are not hard to find. One may interpret the pathogen as something that constantly threatens to become the new hegemon. The condition in which a society finds itself depends on the extent to which the pathogen has 'taken over'. Slight disarray signals that a threat to the normal order and power structures has been detected, and that which has previously guaranteed order is now being jeopardized. Complete disarray, on the other hand, signals that established power structures have been rendered virtually irrelevant, and that the pathogenic hegemon, now having successfully dethroned its predecessors, is dictating life and thus the new order. In such extreme cases, the new hegemon is ruthless and rules

incessantly, belittling and relativizing those things previously deemed unassailable. We contemplate this rare and extreme state so as to better understand its milder manifestations, the smaller glimpses of such confusion that we are able to observe in our lives today, along with the accounts of those from the past.

In "*Das Paradoxe: Literatur zwischen Logik und Rhetorik: Festschrift für Ralph-Rainer Wuthenow zum 70. Geburtstag*", by Carolina Rohman and Gerold Schipper-Hönicke, the chronicles of societal shutdown and confusion are revisited and examined. Many common occurrences are easily anticipated in the reports on closing shops and churches, and people's fear. Looking back, one observes the destabilizing domino effect induced by the first few preventative measures. The closure of non-essential services might be followed by the closure of essential services. State authority can become weaker as resources dwindle. In some worst-case scenarios, the lack of structure, purpose, and hope during some of Europe's numerous plagues led people to lawlessness, barbarity and absurdity.

Rohman and Schipper-Hönicke go on to contend that people become more susceptible to collective hopelessness and insanity during epidemics, when the 'character' of death's is no longer sacred and is instead repulsive, anonymous and collective. Present and future prospects, they argue, dissipate revealing a damaged individual and thus damaged collective psyche. Rene Girard expands further on this dimension in his book "*The Plague in Literature and Myth*", explaining that one of the most striking recurring conclusions drawn from descriptions of the plague is that it is a "process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities." Such destruction, Girard goes on to explain, "is often preceded by a reversal ... Social hierarchies are first transgressed, then abolished. Political and religious authorities collapse. The plague makes all accumulated knowledge and all categories of judgment invalid..." However, this reversal, transgression and abolishment of hierarchies, apparently resulting from a serious outbreak, holds only to a certain extent. The social ostracism and neglect of marginalized groups is often amplified in times of crisis in which these rifts are made clearer. Such marginalized groups then become susceptible to scapegoating and to heightened fear-and xenophobically induced blame. This aspect will be discussed in greater detail in the next edition of the "*Degrees of Separation*".

In times of distress and confusion, creative outlets are essential. Writing is just one of these many outlets. Storytelling, in its many forms, has been a mode of expression and reflection for millennia. Storytelling is as old as time. People have put pen to paper to record and to account for factual events in their lives, to say nothing of embellishing them by creating a whole new reality. Thankfully, these creations, these stories, have survived and can be read by future generations.

The Black Death that ravaged the Far East and made its way to the West throughout the fourteenth century, was a source of inspiration for one of the most famous pieces of literature on the subject of the Black Death, namely, the Decameron, written by Giovanni Boccaccio in 1353.

Boccaccio sets the stage by introducing his characters: during the Black Death of 1348, a wealthy group of Florentines comprising seven women and three men flee the city of Florence to the countryside. They spend two weeks in a Villa narrating a total of 100 stories. Both in topic and style, the stories reveal a marked break with tradition, boldly exploring scandalous topics and taboo themes. The themes range from the witty and silly, to the moralizing and tragic. Erotic and religious themes recur and occasionally overlap. Boccaccio shows that the sense of urgency and freedom to express suppressed feelings or impulses may very well come from the relativizing and dehumanizing effects of an epidemic or pandemic. The way in which one lives, as opposed to how long one lives, is underscored accompanied by a prevalent hedonism. In the 100 stories, societal norms are disregarded and certainly transgressed, thus facilitating readers' vicarious experience of vulgarity and the abnormal by way of character description and narrative structure.

The following text, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, was written by one of the authors we encountered in a previous edition of "Degrees of Separation", namely, by Daniel Defoe. Defoe describes a London street scene during a great outbreak of the plague in the 1660s. At this point in his journal, the city is described as dismal and dark, and the plague had been already raging for several months. Defoe unexpectedly encounters dapper-dressed 'thieves' on one of his regular walks through the city.

A Journal of the Plague Year, by Daniel Defoe:

I was surprised that when I came near my brother's door, which was in a place they called Swan Alley, I met three or four women with high-crowned hats on their heads; and, as I remembered afterwards, one, if not more, had some hats likewise in their hands; but as I did not see them come out at my brother's door, and not knowing that my brother had any such goods in his warehouse, I did not offer to say anything to them, but went across the way to shun meeting them, as was usual to do at that time, for fear of the plague. But when I came nearer to the gate I met another woman with more hats come out of the gate. 'What business, mistress,' said I, 'have you had there?' 'There are more people there,' said she; 'I have had no more business there than they.' I was hasty to get to the gate then, and said no more to her, by which means she got away. But just as I came to the gate, I saw two more coming across the yard to come out with hats also on their heads and under their arms, at which I threw the gate to behind me, which having a spring lock fastened itself; and turning to the women, 'Forsooth,' said I, 'what are you doing here?' and seized upon the hats, and took them

from them. One of them, who, I confess, did not look like a thief—'Indeed,' says she, 'we are wrong, but we were told they were goods that had no owner. Be pleased to take them again; and look yonder, there are more such customers as we.' She cried and looked pitifully, so I took the hats from her and opened the gate, and bade them be gone, for I pitied the women indeed; but when I looked towards the warehouse, as she directed, there were six or seven more, all women, fitting themselves with hats as unconcerned and quiet as if they had been at a hatter's shop buying for their money. I was surprised, not at the sight of so many thieves only, but at the circumstances I was in; being now to thrust myself in among so many people, who for some weeks had been so shy of myself that if I met anybody in the street I would cross the way from them.

They were equally surprised, though on another account. They all told me they were neighbours, that they had heard anyone might take them, that they were nobody's goods, and the like. I talked big to them at first, went back to the gate and took out the key, so that they were all my prisoners, threatened to lock them all into the warehouse, and go and fetch my Lord Mayor's officers for them.

They begged heartily, protested they found the gate open, and the warehouse door open; and that it had no doubt been broken open by some who expected to find goods of greater value: which indeed was reasonable to believe, because the lock was broke, and a padlock that hung to the door on the outside also loose, and an abundance of the hats carried away.

He describes a puzzling scene; an abandoned warehouse has been discovered by a number of women, who take the liberty to go 'shopping'. The warehouse, belonging to the author's brother, had been broken into and was thus open to all and sundry. The women defend themselves by arguing that the door was open and that the hats no longer had any owners, and thus the merchandise was up for grabs. In the midst of a horrible epidemic in London these women discover a means of escape, developing a taste for the playful vanity of an otherwise disrupted life, "fitting themselves with hats as unconcerned and quiet as if they had been at a hatter's shop buying for money."

Many of us have been pushed past our limits these past few weeks. What is the strangest thing you have observed as a result of COVID-19? What are some extraordinary kinds of behavior you or those around you have recently been exhibiting as a result of social distancing?

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Degrees of Separation Part IV

Xenophobia and Othering: Scapegoats in Times of Crisis

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 2020

This Degrees of Separation essay series has touched on some of the many human responses to epidemics and pandemics, ranging from anger and frustration to confusion and desperation. Part 3 covered the phenomena of disorder in times of quarantine, adjusting to chaos instead of striving for a return to the normal order. On the one hand, people may not attempt to rationalize irrationality. And thus, instead of trying to curb or deny the existence of chaos and confusion, they adapt to it as a new way of life.

On the other hand, however, we find a very different approach by people who attempt to rationalize a tumultuous situation by seeking out a culprit for the disruption: A need arises for an unambiguous answer to a frustrating problem, from which, in turn, there arises the need to find a scapegoat. This reaction is very common in crises such as outbreaks, as countless examples throughout history testify.

People are more inclined to blame an outbreak on something easily identifiable before accepting disorder and confusion as the new norm. Seeking scapegoats to assume responsibility relativizes societal turmoil and hardships, whereby the weight of blame is put on something or someone else. Finding a concrete perpetrator seemingly rationalizes a crisis and creates a false sense of clarity.

There are countless examples of scapegoating in times of crisis. In this issue of Degrees of Separation, we scratch the surface of the history of xenophobia during infectious outbreaks. It simply cannot be emphasized enough that the targeting and persecution of selected groups of people during an outbreak has been an extremely common occurrence throughout history.

Here, I by no means intend to summarize in its entirety the deep and vast history of xenophobia in times of epidemics and pandemics, but rather hope to provide some insight by way of a few examples. When examining past and present instances of xenophobia during epidemics and pandemics, we bear witness to one of humanity's greatest shortcomings, namely, the susceptibility to the dangerous 'them' versus 'us' ideology and the concomitant discarding of solidarity and togetherness.

We set off on this journey in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople in the year 542. Constantinople was hit with a devastating outbreak of what became known as the Plague of Justinian. The contemporary ruler, Emperor Justinian I, used the

outbreak to enact xenophobic laws that blamed certain groups of people for spreading the sickness. He issued restrictions on the rights of Jews, Samaritans, pagans, heretics, Arians, Montanists, and homosexuals residing in the capital. Due to the branding of non-Christian and dissident groups as the source of the epidemic, an ineffective system of quarantine was enacted, whereby the movement of infected Christians continued uninhibited, thus causing the pathogen to spread further. An early example of a practice that repeats itself throughout history, Emperor Justinian I's exclusionary quarantine policy threatened public health and safety for purely political reasons.

Throughout Europe's many bouts of plague, Jewish communities constantly suffered from the blame foisted on them for the outbreaks and consequent exclusion and persecution. Conspiracy theories were rampant, along with fictitious narratives as to why and how the Jews were to blame, and what was to be done.

The ravages of the Black Death during the second half of the fourteenth century, bolstered anti-Semitic sentiment by using the Jewish community as a scapegoat for economic troubles and the coming of the Black Death. One such case in Chillon, southern France, clearly illustrates this. A theory was in circulation in Chillon that the main city water well had been poisoned, and, indeed, many people fell ill and died from water obtained therefrom. This was, however, during a time in which the Black Death was infecting and killing many people throughout Europe, including Chillon. The Jewish community of Chillon were blamed for poisoning the well because their own well was uncontaminated. The conclusion was that they, the Jewish people of Chillon, must have poisoned the main well. This explanation fit perfectly into the long-standing anti-Semitic narrative, which claimed that Jewish people were always plotting against and sabotaging other communities, especially Christians. The Jews of Chillon and surrounding villages and counties were tortured for confessions after being arrested. With the ensuing arrests and alleged confessions, the Jews were brutally killed, mostly by being burned. The accusations about Jewish communities poisoning water supplies were subsequently so widespread that the events in Chillon frequently became common practice, above all, within the German Empire. Mass burnings and executions of Jews condemned for the poisoned water wells and the occurrence of the Black Death, were frequent within the German Empire of the late Middle Ages.

The next example, centers on the insufferable situation endured by the Chinese inhabitants of San Francisco in the years spanning 1870 to the early 1900s. By 1870, San Francisco was home to the largest Chinese population in the state of California. This period was to witness vehement, sky-rocketing opposition to Chinese immigration. The financial crisis of the 1870s, combined with the arrival of

leprosy greatly contributed to the population's willingness to direct hatred towards Chinese immigrants. Leprosy was known as the "Chinese-sickness" in the Hawaiian Islands, where much of the initial information of its arrival came from. Inexperience and lack of knowledge about leprosy, led to hysteria and racist-based panic directed at the Chinese population in California, a culmination of long-standing fear and loathing.

Prominent health officials at the time, John L. Meares and John C. O'Donnell, bragged about their regular visits to Chinatown in San Francisco where they observed and documented what they believed to be the horrible, disgusting and uncivilized nature of the Chinese people. These visits would turn into "hunts", largely popularized by O'Donnell, who would have newspaper reporters accompany him when tracking down and turning over the sick to the authorities as proof of his racist theories. Health officials constantly spewed medically spurious information about diseases, in particular leprosy, syphilis and smallpox. Since, at the time, little if anything was actually known about the nature and transmission of these pathogens, officials would instead explain the ailments by recourse to racist rationale and by recourse to the Holy Bible. Both O'Donnell and Meares, for example, would often quote from the Bible during their racist rants, Meares fearfully brandishing his bible while walking through Chinatown. O'Donnell drew on anti-Chinese rhetoric on his travels throughout the state of California, propagating his conspiracy theories and hollow medical information. O'Donnell claimed that Asian women, who worked as prostitutes, carried a particular kind of venereal disease specific to their kind, which he referred to as "Chinapox." When expressing his indifference to the lives of the Chinese, O'Donnell went so far as to say, "What odds can it make to a leper whether he dies sooner or later?"

The anti-Chinese movement in California went into full swing with the establishment of "anti-coolie" clubs (coolie being a derogatory term for the Chinese and other Asian migrants) and the normalization of racist ideology among high-ranking figures in contemporary politics.

The San Francisco Illustrated Wasp, a popular magazine of the late 1800s, was well-known for its nefarious anti-Chinese views. The Wasp published deeply racist, anti-Chinese cartoons expressing contemporary racist political and socio-economic views.

In consequence of the actions and statements issued by the San Francisco Board of Health, together with the support by a growing racist population, the Chinese were to become the medical scapegoat of the Pacific Coast.

The Chinese were accused of being inherently filthy, savage and immoral, something which was to lead many to believe that the natural condition of the



This cartoon dates from the May 26, 1882 edition of the San Francisco Illustrated Wasp. It reflects the widespread belief that Chinatown was a cradle of disease.

Chinese was conducive to such diseases as leprosy, syphilis and smallpox. People believed that such illnesses were inherently Chinese and that they brought diseases with them to America, which posed a threat to the "clean and civilized" West. Their presence, many felt, contaminated the homogenous, white population. Chinese prostitution was deemed especially heinous, many believing that conniving, syphilis-infected Chinese prostitutes were purposely seeking out white men to corrupt and ruin them.

In 1880, the pamphlet "Chinatown Declared a Nuisance" was distributed by the Workingmen's Committee of California, including contributions from the Board of Health and Mayor I.S. Kalloch.

"These words are not hastily or thoughtlessly written, but express the deliberate and well-considered opinion of one who, as your Health Officer, has had opportunities of observation afforded to no other individual of witnessing the destruction of life, the ruin of families; children made orphans, fathers and mothers rendered childless; young men stricken down in the bloom of their youth and vigor; all by the willful and diabolical disregard of our sanitary laws, so criminally neglect to report their cases of small pox to the authorities, so maliciously pursue that course of conduct which they know is bringing distress upon our city, by destroying the lives of our citizens, and

seriously impairing the business of our whole community, can only be accounted for on the supposition that they are enemies of our race and people, and in their wickedness rejoice in our distress and sorrow...

The Chinese cancer must be cut out of the heart of our city, root and branch, if we have any regard for its future sanitary welfare. It will be a mercy to the Chinese themselves, as well as to our people to compel them to live in healthier conditions. ... with all the vacant and health territory around this city, it is a shame that the very centre be surrendered and abandoned to this health-defying and law-defying population. We, therefore, recommend that the portion of the city here described be condemned as a nuisance; and we call upon the proper authorities to take the necessary steps for its abatement without delay."

The (San Francisco) Board of Health

I.S. Kalloch

H.J. Gibbons Jr.

J.L. Meares

The horrific statements of these men made no attempt to conceal their brazen racism or utter disgust towards the innocent Chinese community. Steeped in the ideology of white, Western supremacy, their language is utterly oblivious to the fact that Chinese immigrants were members of the society in which they live, and the city to which they contribute. Rather than assuming responsibility for their own inaction and inadequacies, such politicians and health officials blame the people they oppressed for problems to which they were elected to office to solve. Failing to put to right the broken system they had the power to overhaul, Kalloch, Gibbons Jr. and Meares instead pointed their fingers at those living in it.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked America's first limitation of immigration as based on ethnicity or country of origin, thus greatly restricting the number of Chinese immigrants by allowing only healthy immigrants in certain professions.

The Angel Island Immigration station may well be likened to Ellis Island on the East Coast, the site at which immigrants from all over the world would disembark and be processed. The Bureau of Immigration implemented the Exclusion Act on Angel Island, resulting in a specific screening process for those arriving from China. Chinese immigrants were subjected to humiliating and dehumanizing inspections, and families were torn apart by the authorities. Those classified with communicable diseases were separated from the others and indefinitely detained on the island's unhealthy and unsanitary conditions. The station burned down in 1940, which led not to the closure of the station, but to its relocation. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed as late as 1943, whereby severe limits on Chinese immigration continued through to the 1960s.

At this point we take a small leap from Angel Island to Guantanamo Bay. In the 1980s, the world experienced the arrival and explosion of HIV/AIDS. Within the first year of that decade five continents had already been affected, and three years later the World Health Organization held the first ever meeting dedicated to the AIDS crisis. HIV and AIDS became strongly associated with the gay community, and was stereotyped as a 'gay sickness', originally being referred to as GRID (gay-related immune deficiency).

According to the World Health Organization's "The World Health Report 1999," by the end of the 1990s about "33 million people were living with HIV and 14 million people had died from AIDS since the onset of the epidemic." The HIV/AIDS epidemic devastated many communities. The LGBTQIA+ community and the African continent, though by no means the only communities, were among the most acutely affected; by 1999, AIDS was the number one cause of death in Africa. Although the HIV/AIDS crisis reached a peak at the end of the 20th century, it is still prevalent today. We focus here on one specific event in the crisis, without thereby lessening the importance of the magnitude of events, stories and suffering caused by the epidemic.

After the military coup of Jean Bistrand Aristide in 1991, a rush of Haitian refugees attempted to escape the ensuing violence by making their way to the United States. Together with the United States Coast Guard, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) would hastily process and screen the Haitians in order to determine who, and who not, would be admitted to the United States. The decision was based on whether those screened could prove that they were actually fleeing from persecution, and whether their life would be in danger should they return. This policy encountered legal hurdles once implemented in this form, above all due to the threat of mass repatriation. The injunctions for repatriation meant that those Haitians currently being screened had to be held somewhere for extended periods while legal decisions were being made. Those Haitians awaiting their fate were brought to the United States Naval Station Camp Bulkely, at Guantanamo Bay.

In the spring of 1992, it was discovered that certain refugees were being singled out by the INS. These refugees did not belong to the 'screened in' (let into the U.S) or the 'screened out' (not let into the U.S) categories. They underwent additional interviews and were not admitted to the U.S. It then came to light that HIV-positive Haitian refugees were being held indefinitely at Guantanamo Bay.

Due to its actions at Guantanamo Bay between 1991 to 1993, the United States thus established the world's first ever HIV detention camp. Many referred to Camp Bulkely as a HIV "concentration camp." The location of the operation was strategic,

Haitians had no constitutional protection and no rights of political asylum. The INS, along with other U.S. agencies, used The Immigration and Naturalization Act as a defense for their practices, stating that persons confirmed as having a "communicable disease of public health significance" can be barred entry to the United States and, as determined by the Department of Health and Human Services, HIV was considered classifiable under this stipulation. This classification was adopted in spite of the fact that numerous international and national health organizations disagreed about HIV being a communicable disease.

The disgusting state of the camp, which news media brought to public attention, prompted widespread outrage and opposition. However, the INS spokesman at the time, Duke Austin, revealed his lack of respect and concern for the lives of the HIV-positive Haitian refugees by commenting that there is "no policy allowing people with AIDS to come enter the United States for treatment", and that "they're going to die anyway, aren't they?" This not only makes blatantly clear the absolute disregard for the lives of refugees, but for all underprivileged people of color who find themselves infected with a disease or virus. The fact that a number of these refugees were infected with HIV/AIDS was especially problematic at the time, since HIV and AIDS were shrouded in fear and paranoia, much of which still lingers on until today.

In view of the heightened prospect of HIV transmission, incarcerating the Haitian refugees in this dreadful camp was irresponsible and extremely dangerous. Many politicians, including parts of the George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton presidencies, failed to deal with the matter in a timely manner, if at all. The three years that many of these Haitian refugees spent in the camp reflect the reality that what matters is "who" is sick: Whereas Haitians at the camp were given considerable support by AIDS organizations, and by Haitian and other refugee organizations, there was also great setbacks in their admittance to the U.S. Although these Haitians were fleeing persecution in their homeland and simply searching for safe haven elsewhere, the HIV positive status of many of them, when accompanied by racism and xenophobia, made that quest for freedom extremely difficult and painful.

Michael Ratner, a lawyer at The Center for Constitutional Rights at the time, represented the Haitians detained at Camp Bulkely. In February 1993, Ratner described the camp thus:

"The conditions under which they are living, if you can call it that, are out of Dante's inferno--the ninth circle of Hell."

U.S. District Court Judge Sterling Johnson Jr., who also described the conditions of the camp in 1993, went on to declare the camp unconstitutional in June of the same year.

"They live in camps surrounded by razor barbed wire. They tie plastic garbage bags to the sides of the building to keep the rain out. They sleep on cots and hang sheets to create some semblance of privacy. They are guarded by the military and are not permitted to leave the camp, except under military escort. The Haitian detainees have been subjected to predawn military sweeps as they sleep by as many as 400 soldiers dressed in full riot gear. They are confined like prisoners and are subject to detention in the brig without a hearing for camp rule infractions." (Haitian Ctrs. Council v. Sale, 823 F. Supp. **1028**, 1037 (E.D.N.Y. 1993).

As we have seen, scapegoating in times of crisis has many insidious faces. The many faces it assumes, however, take very similar forms. Political and economic dissatisfaction *combined* with an infectious outbreak may all too often lead us down a path of divisiveness, a path of "us" versus "them." Rather than focusing on structural deficiencies that allow certain communities to suffer more than others, or on deficiencies that leave the majority in a public health crisis unprotected, blame is instead directed at those suffering from just such structural inadequacies. This shift of focus not only injures the targeted communities, but society as a whole. Thus, we return once again to interconnectedness. Contributions by all groups and individuals are valuable for the functioning of the system as a whole. **Selective** responses to collective problems neglect the degrees of separation that connect us.

In this edition of Degrees of Separation, I invite you to observe the socio-political climate of the country you are living in. What kinds of xenophobic tendencies discussed in this edition have you observed in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Here are the answers to the questions in 'Degrees of Separation' posed at the end of each essay. Readers from Canada, the United States of America and Austria responded to the questions.

How do you meaningfully connect with loved ones while upholding the rules of social distancing?

Telefon, Videochat

Mit Telefonaten und Treffen auf Distanz.

Through ZOOM and deep listening

Switching from phone to video calls made all the difference to me. Before that I was listening between the words, to the sound of my conversation partner's voice to feel connection, to really relate to how they were feeling. Once I started using video, I realized how much easier it is to connect, once I was able to see their body language, physical expressions, following their facial expressions, even what they were wearing. Video calling is slow. I am much more attentive, focused. The technical delays cause pausing, taking a moment to really understand what is being said, what is being communicated. It is a possibility to connect in a new way. Which doesn't mean I am saying I prefer it to actually meeting up. I miss that. A lot.

I use the phone, email, text, and I live with family.

Über Telefon, WhatsApp, Briefe, in

Internet, phone, and messaging

Taking a walk with my father, watching the sunset, talking.

Going for a walk without hugging, Whatsapp, Zoom.

Phone calls, Zoom/Skype sessions, going for a walk but keeping distance

Phone social media

It's evolving; reaching out to close friends or relatives online or over the phone has been very nice no doubt and an expression of care in the end. I have made calls to people simply because of the situation, where I may not have called them in the first place under normal circumstances. At the same time there is an underlying assumption that being physically together is at least at the moment and possible, and that is actually unnatural. My fear is that digital and virtual communications

become accepted as the norm as opposed to interpersonal physical interaction. Especially with young children when trying to connect with my young child for example; the intentions are all great but it is most definitely not a 100% feeling of togetherness.

social media

I had to familiarize myself with a variety of options for video calling besides the one I have been using for work : Jitsi & Zoom for the family, Microsoft teams , Lifesize for the job. Social distancing has been a fact in my life since loved ones are overseas



After reading the essay over & over, I realized that my previous response was too hasty. What keeps me going are the daily conversations with my faraway daughter! There is one and that's the only positive side effect of this bad situation: I can always reach her! This sounds very self centered but that's what truly keeps me going. She managed to bring such joy & excitement into this isolated time. Her young energy and bravery make me so happy ! There is always a new chapter despite the forced isolation. To see her growing into a true adult and mastering loneliness is heroic!!!

phone, email, text, facetimeFacetime, skypeSkype

Telephone TT

Phone, Email, Social Media, in that order

In what moments do you feel most united with people who you do not know?

Wenn ich die Videos von wütenden italienischen Bürgermeistern sehe.

when we meditate together and sitting in silence- meeting in the heartspace
It's actually the happy moments. When others are experiencing something that makes them smile, laugh. When I see others connecting, sharing a special moment together. That's when I light up, when I feel we are united, even though I don't participate in that very moment, I am just a lucky spectator. I don't feel strange, I feel we are human.

I feel most united with people when we speak about experiences that we have in common.

Wenn die äußeren Umstände schwierig sind.

Shared experiences, common values, and chance.

Wenn man von Fremden im Supermarkt angelächelt oder freundlich behandelt wird

Whenever it is possible to connect with showing vulnerability, in safe spaces.

While braiding a rope with all of you guys every day! :)

When people honestly say, how weird this whole situation is

Supermarkets

I guess seeing people on the street waiting in line those very long ridiculous lines outside of a drugstore now for... Knowing that we are all sharing the absurd and unnatural feelings together. Struggle and suffering always brings people together; and of course this brings up a whole other discussion of demographics and all kinds of other economic social and Yes public health crises which have and continue to have profoundly social disrupting effects on whole communities, broken up usually by economic and racial disparities, even before COVID.

The thought that we are all in this together

When I see people struggling with the same issues of shopping, using the subway to report to an essential job.

when buying food

grocery shopping

T.V. News

Experiencing art or music.

Beim Lesen

What makes you nervous about the future?

Nichts

Dass wir alle so brav und unreflektiert auf die Regierung hören.

that we might not see this big chance of creating a WE-WORLD

I am not so much nervous about my life in itself. I feel very privileged and I am so lucky to be able to live the way I do. But I am nervous about the consequences of climate change, economic change due to the COVID-19 crisis and what it will do to a lot of people around the globe in the following years, not to say decades. It makes me unsure which paths to choose to help transformation to a fairer, securer, heartier, more connected and love-filled world for everyone.

Uncertainty

Narrow minded thinking and group think.

Unsicherheit, wann es wieder Normalität geben wird

What makes me nervous about Future is that I don't understand his artistic strategy to be online with two cameras while he is hosting his Jump!Star singing part.. :)
Not knowing when events will be allowed again and how much this situation will effect me economically in the end. Will there will be still financial help if I get into trouble a few months later, still able to handle the situation now?

Thinking about a really big economical crisis makes me nervous, the social consequences for people who are already at the edge of poverty.

At the same time I see a big potential in this crisis. A lot of people are asking themselves what really matters in live. Maybe it's about finding the joy beyond economical security.

That we can't really make any predictions of how the current situation will effect the future. On the other hand it's not the first 'Ausnahmesituation' in history. Maybe this is the new 'normal' and seeming stability is the new exception?

The mental health

Climate change. and the overtaking of electronic an artificial communication between people. And Donald Trump becoming president for a second term.

is this the new normal

Will life ever return to normal? How will we visit museums, go to restaurants, fly etc.. How will I visit my clients, how will I protect staff at work

surveillance, totalitarian government

The future of our children, the strain of a endangered planet and possible lack of freedom. My daddy gives me hope that the next generation is innovative and can take on challenges

nothing...“nervousness” is not what I feel...I would say “I am unsure as to how things will change in the future”, but that is not the same thing as being “nervous”. The question is leading and is not objective. A choice of descriptive options would perhaps be a more honest way of garnering this data: “How do you feel about the future? (1) nervous (2) apprehensive (3) frustrated (4) fearful (5) other _____.” This sort of wording doesn’t allow for the inherent bias of inferring “nervousness” as the only feeling you might have, and might allow for a clearer view of the participant’s frame of mind.

The unknown

The moral bankruptcy of our leaders.

In this edition of ‘Degrees of Separation’, I invite you to write a letter in which you express your raw and honest frustrations about life with social distancing. In the spirit of Mary Mallon, the letter may be addressed to a person in power to whom you might want to express your demands. The message may also be addressed to anyone. This letter should allow you to set free your frustrations and anger towards social distancing. To allow those feelings to be felt and acknowledged in a healthy and safe way. The letter does not have to be long! It can also be in the form of a tweet, a text message or an email. Consider the following question as inspiration: What are the most frustrating parts of social isolation, and which regulations/restrictions do you find the most difficult to adhere to?

Dear future president, I am writing this letter from the epicenter of the COVID 19 outbreak in the US - NYC. With anger I am watching the blunder coming from our current leader in the WH, the ongoing decay of our public institutions and the racial inequities in healthcare. The wealthy New Yorkers have of course fled the city and have their needs taken care off by low paid workers delivering their fancy food while risking their lives. This crises has swept the failed social system to the surface and will keep haunting us over and over. The perversity of the US healthcare system is glaringly obvious in minority neighborhoods where access to healthcare and decent housing are an ongoing problem while spending billions on military equipment and bailing out corporations. We need a president who will listen to the young generation, who thinks about the planet, who works for ALL of us and who is a Mensch!

I mog nimma. Es reicht.

Scheiß Corona. Scheiß daheimbleiben. Scheiß ollas verboten.

I mog nimma. Es reicht.

Scheiß vernünftigt sein. Scheiß Einschränkungen. Scheiß Masken.

I mog nimma. Es reicht.

Scheiß Grenzschließung. Scheiß Ignoranz gegen Geflüchtete. Scheiß Solidarität, die immer noch ausschließt.

I mog nimma. Es reicht. Echt.

My frustrations with social distancing are more of a longing to be able to walk outside and breathe air of my dwelling. At times it feels as if the walls of my apartment are getting smaller. I do not long to be among people as probably others do. When I did walk among people the street regular stares of people judging you because you are a black man, I don't miss. I do not for long for those moments spent having people size you up to see whether you are a threat or another compliant indoctrinated marginalized citizen. At times I long for the ability just to shop and buy something without long lines. Then again there's some satisfaction knowing that I don't have to worry about someone following me around in a store. I guess I got mixed feelings.

Lieber Shorty,

ich hoffe, dass die unternommenen Maßnahmen, die zu Einschränkungen persönlicher Freiheit und der Wegnahme dummer spontaner Unternehmungen führen, nach der ‚Krise‘ wieder vollkommen aufgelöst werden. Wenn nicht, dann scheppert's. Selbst nicht Reflexion zu üben ist nicht wirklich vorbildlich. Und

Bildung gibt's ja eh keine im Moment, da laufen alle deiner Farbe nach. Lass Kritik zu, und bring einfach bessere Argumente, ha?

Und wie dann alles einfach am Anschober abgeschoben wird, na danke.

Bitte Anstand bewahren, Fragen zulassen, sie beantworten versuchen. Wenn's ned geht, ah ok.

Grenzen bitte auf, zuerst beispielsweise für die von dir ins Herz geschlossenen und dank deiner Dauerpauke Corona komplett vergessenen Geflüchteten auf griechischen Inseln und im Meer am Ertrinken. Thx.

Dein Werner

Many of us have been pushed past our limits these past few weeks. What is the strangest thing you have observed in the time of COVID-19? What are some out-of-the-ordinary behaviors that you or those around you have been exhibiting lately as a result of social distancing?

4 responses

The few people in the street do at times wave ti each other more. Generally people don't take human interaction for granted, outside of their own four walls, as muc as before.

I'm not in the mood to talk to anybody but my daughter, friends are slipping away - maybe we have no adventures to share, no job to complain about? I also ask myself what in the world have I been doing at the office all these years? The world has become tiny because our combined energy that makes this city what it is , has been taken away.

#1. There is no USA. #2. Peace and anger.

Some "out of the ordinary" behaviors I am observing are mothers, fathers, maybe older siblings being out on the grass in the small park across from my house, allowing very little, (and extremely energetic) toddlers and young children the freedom to just run and jump and throw things in self directed games of their own invention. The adults often just look on at first unable to keep up to them, then, eventually join the child in a kind of spontaneous game of chasing and interacting initiated by the child.

Another "out of the ordinary" behaviour I have seen are small groups of people, sitting on the grass, social distancing but still, engaging in conversations and having picnics in the sun, that seem to last all day even! I have seen a rather rotund couple doing exercises that they previously might have done in the privacy (and

secrecy?) of their own home, very un-self consciously it seemed, doing yoga type exercises in this public space.

Before this for the past five years of living here, I only saw this park used by people walking or exercising their dogs or walking through quite quickly on the way to somewhere else!

I love seeing these activities and this "new" kind of use of this space. It reminds me (and my adult son) of the days of "old" (1970's and prior) when people would gather together, maybe on a Sunday afternoon, in these lovely public green spaces to have a weiner roast, potato salad, sandwiches and "soft drinks", maybe in the fall a "corn roast" put on by some office group or family and friends picnics, sometimes maybe even a baby shower or birthday celebration etc. They were almost always intergenerational in nature and so wonderful for everyone who created wonderful memories together through these occasions.

What strikes me, in the question of what are some "out of the ordinary behaviours" is that these kinds of social gatherings have somehow slipped away and have become out of the ordinary!!!! The same with the response of "getting to know a neighbour"! It has slipped out of our collective consciousness it seems as one of the essential ways of just "being" where everyone knew their neighbour, for good or bad, before the rise of suburbs and isolation and fear or repulsion and separation of generations!

In this edition of Degrees of Separation, I invite you to observe the political climate of the country in which you live. What kinds of xenophobic tendencies discussed in this edition can you observe today? Who, have you noticed, is being singled out during COVID-19, and how, according to your personal observations, has this developed over the past few weeks?

Our current political climate encourages the re-emerging of scapegoating science. Conspiracy theories are spreading on the internet, being used by the right wing government and cause confusion and mistrust . Anti- vaccers, nationalists and xenophobic groups are undermining the very professionals who are advising the leaders, doing the research and working on the frontline to save lives. A climate of lies and oppression of journalistic investigations leads us down a dangerous road to an authoritarian regime with no regard for human rights, equality and safety.

Thank you to each and every person who read and interacted with the essays by answering the prompts. Thank you to everyone who tuned into the discussions about the essays and the questions via Jump!Star Simmering's '21 Days of Listening out Loud and Dreaming Wildly' zoom sessions in April and May of 2020. The group of people who met in this space with a readiness to open up to each other in the form of song, dance, braiding and writing, made a very difficult time for us all a lot easier. I hope that the 'Degrees of Separation' essay series has provided you with some historical context and footing; that the questions with their answers inspire you, or just make you feel a bit less alone. For all who read this in the distant future, this was us in 2020. By looking into the past, we reflected on our present, and left a few impressions of it here: for the 'us' of tomorrow.