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## If you have to wear a mask, make sure everyone can still catch the twinkle in your eyes

LOCAL COMMENTARY

MAR 29, 2020

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Greetings, fellow Nashuans, from Prague, where I am hunkered down for the duration, unable to fly back to the U.S. on April 7, as planned. OK, actually, I am currently allowed to fly back (as a white-skinned American with a WASP-y last name, almost trouble free), but Delta may not be providing a plane on that date; I would rather avoid the nine-hour screening line and potential for quarantine; and I could get stuck there, resulting in disastrous consequences here. More on that later. ...

I hope you won't hate me for saying that things are not so bad here. There are no reports of tussles over the last 100-pack of toilet paper at Makro (our Costco), hand sanitizer is still on the shelves, and I have yet to go into any one of the five grocery or convenience stores within a few blocks of my flat and not find everything I wanted, including beans, rice, cereal, pasta and bread. (Which is all stuff I rarely eat. Yikes! It may turn out that avoiding coronavirus could result in dramatic weight gain. Good thing there are still plenty of fresh fruits and veggies and lots of meats on the shelves, too. And I have my bike on a stand and a Netflix subscription.)

Fortunately, though, we shut down the bars and restaurants and stopped gatherings of more than 30 people a couple weeks ago, we can still go to work, grocery stores and pharmacies, get take-out and we can walk, run or cycle in nature. But we have to do those things with a mask on – or at least a scarf or bandana – covering our noses and mouths, even outside.

So, we look like a nation of bank robbers. Speaking of which, are you still allowed to do lobby banking? That must be a little freaky for the tellers. Almost all banking and retail transactions here are by debit card, and all our teller windows are glassed in, so the folks behind the glass are pretty much safe from coronavirus (which is very likely far more prevalent now than bullets would be at any time.)

I must say that the social isolation effects of this are not as hard on me as I suspect they may be on many of you, as I work from my flat, and all but two of my clients are in the U.S., so I am used to being by myself during the day. But it is a little weird, when I am out, not to know the expressions behind the masks, and it is very weird to be in a city that is usually overrun with tourists but now feels almost abandoned.

As with there, though, we still have water, and gas, and power, and internet and hot showers, so it almost feels normal. If those things disappear, then I will be expecting zombies to show up shortly afterward.

I am getting most of my coronavirus updates via Prague Daily Monitor (an English-language newsletter), Google News and the CDC website, as televised updates from the Czech PM are in Czech, which I don't understand well; and televised updates from the U.S. president make so little sense that they might as well be in Czech. Maybe Junior's mommy could translate, but I suspect she'd be baffled, too.

I guess I am better off than a friend of mine back there, who gave up her cable television after years of escalating abuse by Xfinity, and is now relegated to watching a TV set that, in her own words, was *"Mickey Moused to YouTube via a Blu-Ray player by using two different remotes plus an enthusiastic and creative dose of profanity."*

Of course, there is always Facebook, but I abandoned that platform as a New Year's resolution, explaining to friends that it had become the all-you-can-eat-buffet of social interaction for me. By which I mean that though there are a few nourishing items available, the overwhelming number of tasty but totally unhealthy morsels were too much for me to handle, and I was better off simply staying away – I didn't want to be that guy with a heaping plateful of garbage that we all look at and know shouldn't be there.

So, I am keeping in touch with friends in other ways. And I have one who has probably the craziest situation I am aware of. ... She is Italian by birth and passport but grew up in Argentina, moved to Madrid with her mother when her parents divorced, stayed a couple of years and then came to Prague. She flew to the U.S. just before the rise of coronavirus, to do some song writing and music production in Miami, accompanied by her Russian fiancée. And now they are stuck – can't come back here, and can't go to Spain, or Italy, or Argentina or even Russia. I suggested that she and her sweetie should swim to Cuba and ride things out.

On the health front, we do seem to be doing a good job of keeping the coronavirus at bay here. The initial reports from Italy put the Czech authorities on high alert, because Italy is the preferred skiing destination here – easy to get to and way cheaper than Austria or Switzerland. I'd say we're about two or three weeks ahead of your schedule, and they shut down the borders about 10 days ago.

We did just pass our 1,000th reported case (in a country of 10 million) over the weekend of the 22nd/23rd, and had our first reported coronavirus death, of a 95-year-old man who, according to the published reports, *"had been suffering from a series of other conditions."* Honestly, that strikes me as akin to getting the blue screen of death on a laptop still running Windows Vista after clicking a link in an email with the Subject line: Asian Girls Are Waiting to Meet You. No surprise.

What did come as a surprise was the fact, hinted at in the first paragraph of this missive, that if I travel back to the U.S. I may not be able to get back to Czechia on the return date I scheduled. So I have decided to stick it out here until this all passes, or at least until June 24, because I have great seats to see New Hampshire's most famous rock 'n' roll band in Prague that night. Since the tix cost way, way more than the \$5 I used to pay to see Aerosmith at the Harbor Showcase in Sunapee, I am hoping the show will go on.

All for now, with a wish that you are as safe, healthy and happy as you can be during this crazy time. Remember ... if you have to wear a mask, make sure everyone can still catch the twinkle in your eyes.

Casey Holt is a writer and the managing partner of Ideabenders, an advertising/marketing firm with offices in Nashua and Prague.

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