

# Carpe Diem

Category: Contagion

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | March 1, 2020

I grew up hearing about the flu epidemic of 1918—and knowing how contagious disease can affect a family’s history. My 26-year-old paternal grandfather died in that epidemic; he left behind his 23-year-old wife and my dad, not quite three years old. This tragedy determined the trajectory of the lives of my beloved grandmother and dad; it left a hole in our family tree that no amount of time could ever fill.

Because of my grandfather’s fate, contagious diseases, especially the flu, have always frightened me. I am obsessive about reminding people to get a flu shot, and I become frightened when one of my children gets a cold that lingers. I know I cannot keep my loved ones in a plastic bubble, but I do wish I could erect an invisible shield around them to ensure their good health.

And now I must confront the coronavirus. I confess that it keeps me tossing and turning; when I do fall asleep, nightmares invade my dreams. I teach in a university’s Writing Center, engaging with students, from both the United States and abroad, in a very small setting. I love my job, but now I worry that one of my students may be sharing the virus, not just their writing, with me. I frequently ride a public bus. I used to like making up stories about my fellow passengers, but now I scrutinize them to determine whether they exhibit any signs of the coronavirus. When I recently ushered at a theater, I kept dousing my hands with sanitizer after taking tickets from the patrons.

I am planning to visit my daughter in New York City next week. Should I risk riding the Megabus—sitting in an enclosed environment for eight hours with people who could potentially infect me? Should I risk staying at a hotel in a room used by other guests from diverse parts of the world? Should I let fear of contagion prevent me from spending precious time with my daughter?

Yes, I am a worrier, but I am trying to convince myself that worrying will not protect me from whatever fate awaits. I can wash my hands, eat my fruits and vegetables, and ride my stationary bike to remain healthy, but what will be will be.

The most I can do is live a “carpe diem” life, because I do not know—and cannot control—what tomorrow will bring.

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