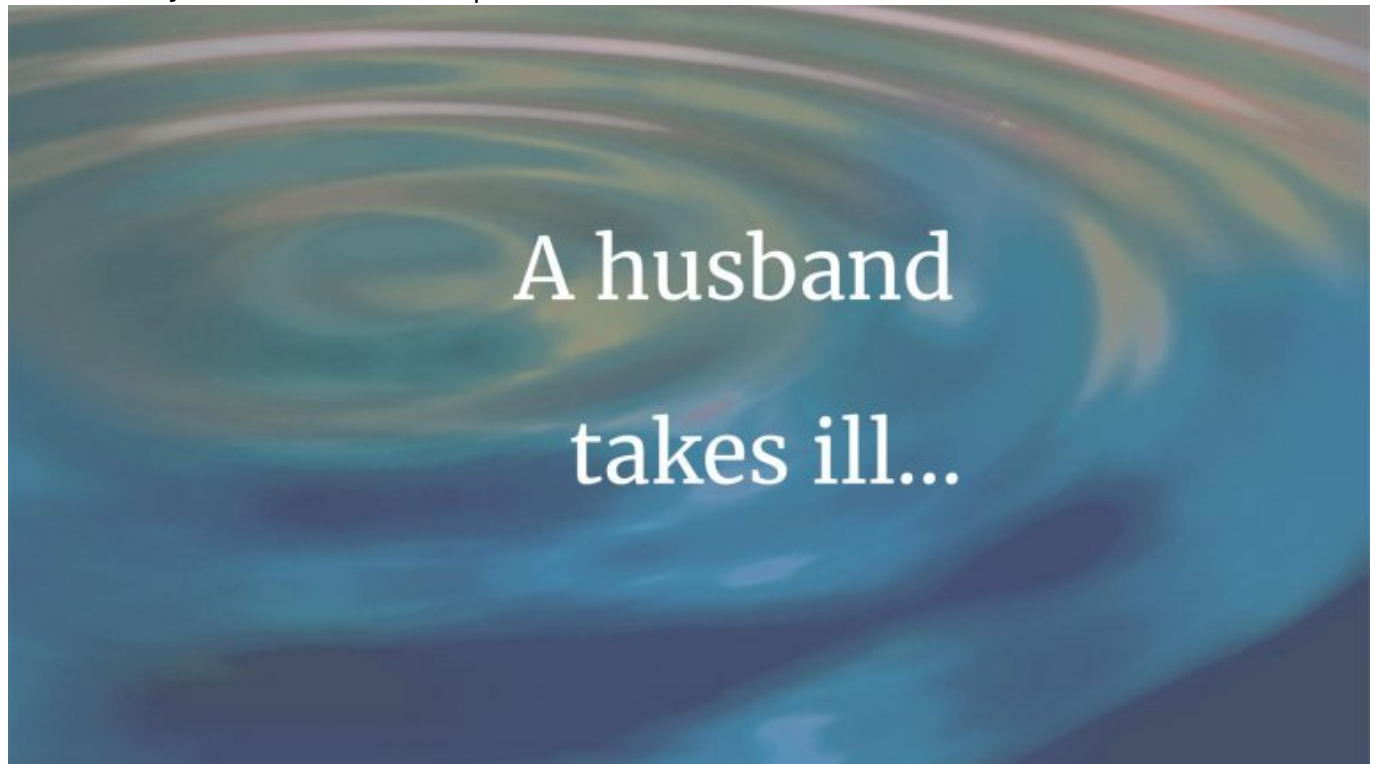


Corona, Contagion, Confusion

Category: Stories

written by Barbara Packer | March 20, 2020



My husband Joel, age seventy-six, has tested positive for the virus—the new big C.

Joel developed a low-grade fever on March 1. We were in San Francisco, visiting our ten-month-old grandson and his parents. They'd all had bad colds, and our grandson was still coughing and producing large amounts of sticky nasal stuff, so I wasn't surprised when Joel got sick. (I figured that I eventually would, too.)

We went to a local urgent-care clinic. A competent physician assistant examined Joel, then assured us that he didn't have the coronavirus: His vital signs were all good, and except for a 100.5° fever, he had no symptoms.

We flew home to New York City on March 2. That was two and a half weeks ago, and Joel has been in bed ever since.

For the first week, his main symptoms were a low-grade fever and fatigue, with no cough or respiratory distress. At that point, he started to feel short of breath and developed a dry, intermittent cough (which he generally gets every winter).

He grew more and more anxious, and by Wednesday, March 11, we knew that we needed to get him to an ER. We chose one where we'd previously had a good experience.

I called the ER to alert them that we were coming and was told that I had to call the State coronavirus hotline first, to get a referral.

Okay, I thought, *no problem*. I called the number and told our story to the woman who answered.

When I asked for an ER referral, she said, "We're not medical professionals, and we can't make referrals."

Wow.

I didn't bother to ask what they actually *do* do; at this point, Joel and I were feeling really worried, and I just wanted to get going.

I called the hospital ER and described my hotline transaction.

"If everyone at the Health Department and the hospitals were on the same page, I think it would help to stem the fear and frustration that we're all feeling," I told the ER responder, trying to convey our urgent need for help while also trying not to sound like I was blaming him for what had happened. My overriding goal was to get Joel into the ER.

"That's the protocol that we've been told to follow," the man responded quietly. He asked Joel's name and age, then said, "Bring him in."

After checking Joel for flu and giving him a chest X-ray, the ER caregivers agreed to send a swab to the Department of Health for testing. They told us it could take forty-eight hours to get the results, and that someone from the Department would call to deliver them.

We heard nothing on Thursday or Friday, although we contacted our doctor and the ER to inquire.

That Friday, March 13, we had a video chat with one of our doctor's colleagues. He asked Joel to remove his shirt. After watching Joel's chest for several minutes, he reassured us that, even if Joel was feeling short of breath, his breathing was not *very* labored—so although he's exhausted, he's not in imminent danger.

Finally, late in the morning on Saturday, March 14, three days after his test, Joel again called the ER.

"Oh yes, your results came in early today," came the answer. "And you're positive."

I can't help wondering *when* they were going to call us. And where was the Department of Health? Wouldn't they want to know our contacts, the flight we'd taken home, and so on?

So far, no one there has reached out to us.

For the past ten days, I've had cold symptoms, with no fever, fatigue or cough. I have, however, been Joel's unmasked, ungloved caregiver, although we do use different bedrooms and bathrooms. I wash my hands so often, I'm not sure that I have many skin layers left.

I can't help but assume that I have the virus; it defies logic that I would have escaped it. A test would confirm it, but because I don't have a fever or

a cough, and test kits are still in short supply, I don't qualify for testing.

I'm seventy-four years old.

Now Joel and I are watching and waiting, hoping that his symptoms will gradually improve—it's slow going—and that I will be one of the fortunate people whose symptoms don't escalate.

I have no complaint about the San Francisco physician assistant; I'm sure she was following the guidelines in force at the time of our March 1 visit. Indeed, she was the very kind of practitioner we would all want—caring, respectful and a good listener.

During our first few days at home, feeling confident that Joel had caught something—but not the virus—from our grandson, I'd attended exercise and art classes, shopped and so on. As soon as we learned that Joel had contracted COVID-19, I alerted everyone with whom I'd had any contact.

Now they're all watching and waiting, too.

It's clear that our country's system of healthcare screening and delivery is broken. We and our fellow Americans are getting to know this personally—and, for some of us, at a terrible cost.

In this most uncertain time, the only thing I know for sure is that the national leaders who have downplayed or dismissed the threat of this pandemic have squandered the chance for a prompt, proactive response—and their delay will cost many people their lives. Politicizing this potential apocalypse is not only inappropriate; it also increases the risk that the virus will spread further and cause more deaths.

I wish that, like doctors, our national leaders had to take an oath to do no harm.

Joel and I will get through this. We're lucky: We have a wonderful network of friends and some great doctors, including a very capable ER doctor who told us how to see if Joel was in respiratory distress (our worst fear) by checking whether his lips or nailbeds looked blue, and recommended we get a small device called a pulse oximeter to monitor Joel's pulse and oxygen levels. Another blessing is that our son-in-law in San Francisco has tested negative for the virus.

And now, while we all are all watching and waiting, Joel and I hope that you and your loved ones stay healthy. For our part, we'll be hibernating for the foreseeable future.

About the author:

Barbara Packer is former chief operating officer of the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, where she engaged daily with amazing, compassionate health professionals for thirteen years before retiring in 2015. Prior to her time there, she wrote professional healthcare materials for physicians and patients. "I subscribe to and support *Pulse*, where I can continue to take part in the 'conversation' that feeds my head, heart and soul."

Update: "For the past two days, Joel has felt a bit better. After not eating much for more than a week, he's now taking in small meals. His fever is gone, and though still tired, he's no longer totally exhausted. I still have a sore throat, but no cough or fever to speak of. We believe that I have a very mild case of COVID-19. And it appears that even Joel's more severe case is on the wane, thanks to time, lots of fluids, sleep—and luck."