

The Last Supper: Experiencing the Closure of Society through a Trip to Chicago

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March 11, 2020: I turn on the news and hear more and more stories about this mysterious virus that is ravaging parts of China and Italy. As a biologist who has taught classes in public health and the way societies respond to epidemic disease, I can't help but notice the parallels to the people from decades and centuries ago in the books I have my students read for these classes. But here in America, life appears to be going on as normal. Rudy Golbert, a player for the NBA's Utah Jazz, has just given a press conference mocking the virus in which he makes it a point to fondle the microphones and touch every surface that he can before leaving the room. At Hampden-Sydney, we are enjoying a well-deserved Spring Break. As for me, I was paying attention to more important things in life: whether I would make my flight to Chicago-O'Hare after a tight connection in Atlanta and whether my beloved Colgate Raiders would defeat Boston University to secure only their second trip to the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament in a generation.

My partner and I are travelling to Chicago so that he can participate in the board meeting of the Association of Athletic Training Educators (AATE) being held at the same time and in the same place as the Great Lakes Athletic Trainers Association district meeting (GLATA). He had to go to work, I got to hang around and relax. As we fly from Atlanta to Chicago, things like COVID-19 feel far away as we talk about carving out some time to take a boat tour of the iconic Chicago River downtown. As the plane touches down, I am confronted with shocking and devastating news: those damn Terriers from B.U. are about to pull the upset on Colgate and deny us our trip to the "Big Dance"! I shuffle through the box score trying to figure out what happened, and as I proceed to flip through the sports headlines I come across an odd story detailing that the Jazz-Thunder NBA game in Oklahoma City has been called off just before tip-off with no reason provided as to why. As we begin to make the long walk off the

plane through the terminal to claim our luggage, I am sad as a sports fan for my team but starting to remember the incessant choruses of fear about the virus that have been permeating society as of late. By the time we get to baggage claim, the reason for the NBA game's cancellation becomes known: the aforementioned Rudy Golbert has tested positive for this new COVID-19 virus (I sure hope someone remembered to sterilize that microphone). Soon after that, President Trump announced from the Oval Office that a 30-day travel ban to and from Europe was soon to begin. We collect our luggage and head to the shuttle bus to collect our rental car, and as the bus departs the terminal the radio station playing over the loudspeakers reveals to us that Tom Hanks, beloved actor and American treasure, has tested positive for COVID while filming a movie in Australia. I begin to get a sinking feeling in my stomach that all of the worst case scenarios we had studied in my classes were about to become very real.

We get our rental car and proceed to the hotel. When we get there, the TVs in the hotel bar greet us with the news that the entire NBA season has been suspended. The next morning is highlighted by college league after college league suspending their play, resulting in the unthinkable: the cancellation of the entire NCAA Tournament (too bad for you, B.U!). Looking back, it is fascinating to see how the start of societal closure and lockdown was largely announced to us by through sports and entertainment. These cancelled games and events were and are, in many respects, the glue that holds our society together, so the sudden loss of them induced a true sense of dread in people and a sense that life was about to change drastically and for the worse.

At the hotel in suburban Chicago in which the meeting was to take place, things went on as planned for a while; however, the board of the AATE hosted one of the first professional Zoom meetings for their member institutions to talk about how higher education and especially healthcare education and health care was about to dramatically change (We didn't know yet how much Zoom was to become an everyday part of our lives, for better and for worse). This was emblematic of a lot of things that happened over the course of the next two weeks: many organizations began to cancel events or close public venues "out of an abundance of caution" (I grew to despise that phrase) while others did not see COVID as a clear and present

danger and pressed onwards. GLATA took the unique position of cancelling their meeting halfway through after everyone was already there, a decision nobody ever really grasped. My clearest memory of all of this was in the form of a dinner out with my partner and his work associates at Wildfire, a family-style steakhouse with several locations in suburban Chicago. The restaurant was packed, the liquor flowed, and everyone had a genuinely good time talking about the meeting and the events of the day. While people mentioned what was going on in the world, it was nothing much beyond its potential impacts on us over the next couple of days. As it worked out, this was the last traditional “night out” that I would experience for over a year. We did not realize it while sitting at the dinner table, but gatherings like the one we were having were about to become *verboten* for the foreseeable future.

The next day, my partner and I went downtown and had our boat tour. By this time, life had become completely surreal: there was a genuine sense of waiting for the inevitable wave of virus to sweep down on us, but yet life in this major downtown area appeared to proceed as normal. We were still able to go into shops, take a tour, and all the other things a tourist could expect to do, for at least one or two more days (as it turned out, most of these things shut down within days of our visit). It was a lovely day, but the perfect weather and good times could not help but be shadowed by what one could sense was coming in our lives.

As we went to the airport to return home the next day, we got a starker picture of “the new normal” (another phrase I came to despise). All food and drink services at the airport were starting to remove anything involving self-service or public handling of items. A young woman struggled to balance eating with the wearing of a not-yet-ubiquitous N95 facemask. My phone filled with messages with confused students wondering about what would happen to the rest of the semester (it was completed online) and concerned colleagues struggling to figure out how to do their jobs on a virtual basis. Looking around O’Hare that day, one got a sense that things were not going to get back to normal for a while. In retrospect, I am grateful for having had this opportunity to be travelling during this utterly unique time in history to get a sense of how society struggled to come to terms with a once-in-a-lifetime disruption to itself.

Postscript: Colgate won the Patriot League title in 2021 and got that trip to the NCAAs a year late. All's well that ends well, I guess-or has it really ended?