



In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

Hurts like a banshee

I've been wanting to write a column for weeks. Folks around town have asked about Part Two of my musings on the book "In Defense of Elitism." Well, some stuff came up.

Health has a funny way of keenly focusing one's priorities. Medical care and emotional well-being float to the top, right up there with family.

Can't drive, due to vertigo? Meetings and errands are limited. Can't type, due to excruciating pain in the hand? Writing assignments lie fallow. (The dictation software I'm reluctantly attempting to use just offered up, "Writing assignments life fellow." Sounds like a new faculty position at Cambridge.)

Ain't got health, or, as my computer would have it, "Eight got health?" Ain't got much. Many of us are thinking about that these days. If we are not worried about the state of our own bodies, we

are worried about spreading viruses to vulnerable people in our community.

Today, as I write this, St. Charles has announced the first case of COVID-19 coronavirus in Central Oregon. People are dying far away. Closer to home, events and gatherings are being canceled right and left (I use those particular words with intention). It's hard to focus on "elitism" with all this going on.

The uncertainty is maddening. As of today, my son is still instructed to go to school, so it seems fairly likely that my family could get the virus. I like to think that our particular health issues won't put us at risk for being seriously damaged by this thing.

Nagging at the back of my mind, though, is the knowledge that I could be wrong. We could pull him out of school, hole up out here in the woods, and disappear. It might be better for us. It might be better for our friends and compatriots, some of whom are older.

If the virus grinds school and capitalism to a halt, my son and I could have fun. Health allowing, and assuming that the grownups didn't have to work much, we could do real things. Bake muffins and build forts. Sing songs and read books.

We could spend some time writing our play, "Butterbean! The Musical."* Experiment with new uses for the pine needles we gotta rake up, or heck, just burn 'em as usual.

On the other hand, we might drive each other nuts. When our family lived in a

small travel trailer, on the road or in the woods, I sure had some omg-get-me-out-of-here moments. Though we were in motion, our tiny circle of togetherness sometimes made me stir-crazy.

Holing up might be over-reactive, self-indulgent paranoia. Might lead to a fear-based, isolated life where relationships beyond our immediate household are reduced solely to what technology can deliver.

We've seen how technology has affected our society, weaseling its way into our every interaction. It ain't pretty. It's splintered us. It's set us up to be heavily, relentlessly manipulated—for political gain and financial profit.

People's conversations used to be meaningful, private or small-group exchanges, punctuated here and there by the public talk of books, newspapers, and lectures. Now interpersonal conversation on all levels is extracted by Big Data corporations.

Relationship is beautiful, natural, maybe even sacred. A true connection between real human beings emits a holy spark of wonder and joy.

But now, relationships are fodder for mind control and advertising, thanks to our reliance on our ever-spying phones, apps, and devices. Read Jaron Lanier's "Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now" or Doug Rushkoff's "Team Human" if you think I'm exaggerating. Or just cheat and check out their

TED talks.

If I hide out in my pines, conducting work, friendships, and community relationships via Internet—would that be a noble sacrifice for the betterment of humanity, slowing the spread of the virus? Or just another capitulation to media paranoia and social fragmentation? Or, as the computer prefers, "social fermentation"?

Realizing that my alleged column is going nowhere, I indulge my habit of checking my email too often. A message arrives, a friend wondering whether the spring equinox walk at Sisters Community Labyrinth on March 19 will be canceled.

C'mon, I think. It's usually just a handful of people, not trapped in an airplane or a big city. We'll be outside, where mountain air circulates. Won't that be safe?

It occurs to me that I won't have to hole up completely in the weeks ahead. Maybe we can socialize outside, under the pines. That's my favorite place anyway. We could even turn off our personal tracking devices, errr, I mean, our phones.

My word-count is way over and my hand hurts like

heck. Knowing I overuse the word heck, I type "hurts like a —" into the environmentally friendly Ecosia search engine. It pops up hurts like a mofo, a knife, a thorn, and a banshee.

Hurts like a banshee? Is that really a thing?

I prefer columns that are well-written, thought-provoking, nicely edited. I sure don't have that in me this wild, confusing week. Maybe next week everything will settle down and I can get back to contemplating elitism and other abstract issues.

For now? I'm right here, in my difficult but miraculous body, surrounded by trees that smell of sun-heated vanilla and birds that chirp and chatter—achingly aware that all this is a powerful gift, one that can be taken away at any moment.

**If you happen to be a composer/arranger who wants to work for free on a mother-son musical about a fictitious small town in Oregon—by all means, get in touch! Also, anyone who wants to share how they're dealing with the virus, or with their technology and devices, is welcome to contact me, too. Yes, via email: tiffany@plazm.com.*

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