

Story Miller’s coronavirus chronicle

Editor’s Note: This is the third installment of the diary that Story Miller, who grew up in Richland, wrote from her home in Italy, where she has lived since 2012. The first installment was in the Herald’s April 9 issue, and the second was published April 11. Both are available at www.bakercityherald.com

Week 6 & 7: Numbers, Healing and Rationalizing the Fear that Drives Instinct

It’s hard to imagine that this is Week 6, that literally one month ago, I was being drowned by my hectic working schedule and balancing family life. I was really down on myself as I’m a perfectionist in everything I do and I just couldn’t keep up; I was slowly being consumed by the rush of First World society. And then it all stopped. Just. Like. That.

Being on lockdown has had a personal perk for me — the joy of waking up without having to face the rush of getting ready for work and relishing in the fact that I can have my coffee in peace and quiet before the other members of the house start stirring. How therapeutic! And now I realize why Mom was always annoyed when we kids woke up earlier than usual and invaded her alone time!

That dark Friday in Week 5 left many citizens unnerved and the following days weren’t much better. But the good news is, we might, just might have reached our peak in the outbreak, seven weeks after realizing that we were in trouble. People have been relieved in hearing that at least the death toll was only around 750 today!

Who says that anyway? Seriously, please internalize the deaths of 750 people for a second. That would be about a quarter of the town I live in and just in one day!

It is unsettling yet morbidly fascinating in the way people have been considering the death toll numbers around the world. We take a superficial comfort in the fact that 750 is less than the day before, as long as we aren’t one of those less fortunate souls or their nearby relatives. It’s almost, in a way, an evolutionary blessing that the average human mind does not digest the concept of large numbers, especially when considering population and death toll.

Very few of us can claim that we’ve seen 750 dead at one time and therefore it is abstract in our ability to reason effectively unless we internalize it and relate it to our immediate lives. It makes one question our personal mathematical capacity for compassion and empathy. Are we truly short-sighted in only being able to see beyond our own immediate personal rights, family, town, city, or county as a human race?

Reading through Facebook comments or listening to left and right political bickering, whether it be in Italy or the USA, would suggest just that. Yeah, it’s a lot of people but they’re over there, far removed from my special little life. I’m not part of those numbers ... For now. A chill runs down my spine as I realize that my thoughts have just echoed that of a Jewish author’s personal recount of the Holocaust. Is this how society allowed this atrocious chapter in human history to happen, under the noses of normal, God-fearing citizens?

My thoughts are interrupted by dogs barking and a loudspeaker blasting an incomprehensible message in Italian. I mumble a few choice words and look at my watch. It’s 8:30 a.m. This idiot is going to wake everyone up! (I need to intervene on



Story Miller’s daughter, Lamia Pizzetti, celebrates a bilingual Easter with her paternal grandparents, Gabriella and Eber, in Italy.



Story Miller, who grew up in Richland, has kept the American Easter tradition going for her daughter, Lamia Pizzetti.

your behalf right here and translate routine differences — Italy and its culture generally functions about three hours later than an Eastern Oregon routine, so equate my 8:30 a.m. to your 5:30 a.m.)

The obnoxiously loud voice gets nearer and I’m able to make out a couple words. Prior to the outbreak, this is how my small town ran its advertising — a guy hooks a loudspeaker to his car and repeatedly and abhorrently bleges a repeating message about whatever he’s peddling. Instead of peddling, he’s now blasting popular propaganda — ordering people to stay home, save lives, change your daily habits, reduce your shopping trips, be a part of the solution, do your part, etc.

In another moment, it really is a humorous observation and those who have come to visit me and experience the “pleasure” of getting blasted with advertising have always rolled their eyes and laughed at the “cultural experience.” Regardless, before COVID-19, he usually waited until 10 a.m. and I clearly haven’t had enough coffee to find this message amusing and sure enough, people start stirring in the house. My personal time has come to an end. Time to get the Little Miss ready before closing myself in my office to deliver online lessons and search for ways that will allow me to teach online once my contract finishes. Perhaps COVID-19 will open up more opportunities for me to teach American children online without having to be physically present in Oregon!

Anxiety in the household has remained high but has evolved. Rather than fear of the virus as felt in the first two weeks, as well as stir-crazy irritation in having to stay home in weeks 4 and 5, people are now anxious about how to financially make it in the next few months. And yes, the jokes of divorce and disappearing husbands/in-laws are definitely circulating the internet with a slightly

truthful tone!

The nation has decided to extend the strict lockdown until May 3. Despite already being in an economic crisis, Italy has fought hard and succeeded in maintaining a strong, localized base economy in agriculture and manufacturing, which has been able to keep the country relatively stable during the outbreak. Don’t misinterpret me at this point. People are hurting financially and this economic crisis will have long repercussions. People are frustrated and angry. People want to go back to work so that they can provide for their family.

Despite everything there is an important apperception that is holding everyone together. A collective understanding that we need to work together as a community if we are to help our friends and neighbors make it out alive. It is for this reason that sometimes, despite being so far away, Italy can feel like the Eagle Valley I knew when I was growing up. Perhaps it is the overwhelmingly older generations in both locations that foster parallel mentality of coming together and helping one’s neighbor, despite profound situational differences in the Wild West’s homesteading culture, and the need to reconstruct after both world wars in Italy.

If we can take anything positive out of this pandemic catastrophe, it is the fact that perhaps the world, especially citizens in First World nations, start to remember what it means to be a true member of a community, rather than passively existing in a superficial concept of community.

My husband and his parents are anxious just like everyone else. Enrico and his father’s generational trade — watchsmithing and jewelry — are definitely not essential. Like much of Italy, we also rely on tourism and every summer, we transfer his father’s store up to our

“Italy and its culture generally functions about three hours later than an Eastern Oregon routine, so equate my 8:30 a.m. to your 5:30 a.m.”

mountain location in Molveno to sell watches and jewelry to the numerous tourists who visit the Alps. It is also our place of refuge because the summer months in our little hometown are insufferable between the three types of mosquitoes active both day and night and the suffocating 95% humidity in 100-degree heat. There is talk about this virus lasting well into the summer, or at least the protective measures society has taken to contain its rapid spread. I hear my husband and his father talking in elevated tones (more elevated than the normal Italian loud I’ve grown accustomed to). Just like everyone else in

Italy, well, let me rephrase that. Just like everyone in the world, we are going to face some serious financial hardships this year alongside the numerous businesses and industries.

However, there is no sense in stressing too much because the fact of the matter is that there is really nothing we can do to stop the spreading of this virus except to stay home. The weather has been absolutely stunning — sunny and 75. People have been breaking the lockdown rules more frequently and who can blame them? However, others, acting in fear, have been heckling and photographing these offenders from their windows while turning them into the police and/or publicly blasting them on Facebook. This band-wagoning is particularly discerning because it is clear that in their well-intended desire to maintain safety, they are betraying their neighbors and invading privacy.

Do they understand that I was walking to the store today — my first time in two weeks? We keep reminding our friends to stay calm and not turn this into the Salem Witch Trials. Civility, compassion, and understanding, can it be maintained?

In fact, this tempting beautiful Easter weekend has prompted some Italian governors to get humorously creative in how they are working to enforce the stay-at-home policy. We just got wind that down in the south, the governor of Messina has been flying drones, armed with heat-sensing devices, and a recording of his voice yelling profanities along the lines of, Where the (blank) are you going? Either you go home or I’ll kick you in the (blank). We all lightheartedly laugh at the direct colorful-

ness of Italian culture despite the haunting realization that this isn’t much different than Big Brother checking in on you.

Just to clarify, Italians are not really ones to mince words and I often tell my American friends and family who have visited me to not worry about offending an Italian because it’s most likely they’ll offend you first! As long as the topic isn’t about food or soccer, Americans are culturally much more sensitive than Italians, which, by the way, got Enrico into loads of hot water during the first few years of our marriage ... and still does. For example, in most cases, the underlying yet resounding rule in Eastern Oregon is that you eat what’s put in front of you and be grateful. If you put chicken and pasta together, believe me, you’ll hear about it! So just FYI, chicken Alfredo is NOT authentic Italian.

Because the weather has been gorgeous and a general shift of acceptance has settled over the family, some beauty has emerged for those of us not directly affected by COVID-19. We’ve been able to turn our restless energy into productive projects that we simply never had time for before, like sorting through boxes of junk stored in our wooden tool shed; things that were salvaged and stored from the 2012 earthquakes. The shed itself has also been neglected since the earthquakes and has been in dire need of sanding and staining. It’s been a perfect project for my husband and father-in-law and there is no better time than now to do it. Father-and-son bonding has been the result and it has been good for them.

Story Miller’s chronicle will continue in the Herald’s Tuesday, April 21 issue.

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