

Matthew Walter

## Where I Live, No One Cares About COVID

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In November, my wife asked me whether I had seen an article with the remarkable headline “Is It Safe to Go to Thanksgiving Dinner?”

“Is that from last year?” I asked.

“No, it’s a few days old,” she said, her voice sinking to a growling murmur. “These people.”

5 I am old enough to remember the good old days when holiday-advice pieces were all variations on “How to Talk to Your Tea Party Uncle About Obamacare.” As Christmas approaches, we can look forward to more of this sort of thing, with the meta-ethical speculation advanced to an impossibly baroque stage of development. Is it okay for our 2-year-old son to hug Grandma at a Christmas party if she received her booster only a few days ago? Should the toddler wear a mask except when he is slopping mashed potatoes  
10 all over his booster seat? Our oldest finally attended her first (masked) sleepover with other fully vaccinated 10-year-olds, but one of them had a sibling test positive at day care. Should she stay home or wear a face shield? What about Omicron?

15 I don’t know how to put this in a way that will not make me sound flippant: No one cares. Literally speaking, I know that isn’t true, because if it were, the articles wouldn’t be commissioned. But outside the world inhabited by the professional and managerial classes in a handful of major metropolitan areas, many, if not most, Americans are leading their lives as if COVID is over, and they have been for a long while. In my part of rural southwest Michigan, and in similar communities throughout the country, this is true not  
20 despite but without any noticeable regard for cases; hospitalization statistics, which are always high this time of year without attracting much notice; or death reports. I don’t mean to deny COVID’s continuing presence. (For the purposes of this piece, I looked up the COVID data for my county and found that the seven-day average for positive tests is as high as it has ever been, and that 136 deaths have been attributed to the virus since June 2020.) What I wish to convey is that the virus simply does not factor into my  
25 calculations or those of my neighbors, who have been forgoing masks, tests (unless work imposes them, in which case they are shrugged off as the usual BS from human resources), and other tangible markers of COVID-19’s existence for months—perhaps even longer.

30 Indeed, in my case, when I say for a long while, I mean for nearly two years, from almost the very beginning. In 2020, I took part in two weddings, traveled extensively, took family vacations with my children, spent hundreds of hours in bars and restaurants, all without wearing a mask. This year my wife and I welcomed our fourth child. Over the course of her pregnancy, from the first phone call to the midwife a few months after getting a positive pregnancy test until after delivery, the subject of the virus was never raised by any health-care professional, including her doula, a dear friend from New York.

35 Meanwhile, our children, who have continued to attend their weekly homeschooling co-op since April 2020, have never donned masks, and they are distinctly uncomfortable on the rare occasions when they see them, for reasons that, until recently, child psychologists and other medical experts would have freely acknowledged. They have continued seeing friends and family, including their great-grandparents, on a weekly basis. As far as I can tell, they are dimly aware that “germs” are a remote cause of concern, but only  
40 our oldest, who is 6, has any recollection of the brief period last year when public Masses were suspended in our diocese and we spent Sunday mornings praying the rosary at home.

45 The CDC recommends that all adults get a booster shot; I do not know a single person who has received one. When I read headlines like “Here’s Who May Need a Fourth COVID-19 Vaccine Dose,” I find myself genuinely reeling. Wait, there are four of them now? I would be lying if I said I knew what all the variants were or what differences exist between them. (They all sound like the latest entry in some down-market action franchise: Tom Clancy’s Delta Variant: A Jack Ryan Novel, Transformers 4: Rise of the Omicron.) COVID is invisible to me except when I am reading the news, in which case it strikes me with all the force of reports about distant coups in Myanmar.

50 Granted, my family’s experience of 2020 was somewhat unusual. But I wager that I am now closer to most of my fellow Americans than the people, almost absurdly overrepresented in media and elite institutions, who are still genuinely concerned about this virus. And in some senses my situation has always been more in line with the typical American’s pandemic experience than that of someone in New York or Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles.

60 The best example of this fact, apart from the agita about holiday travel, is outdoor masking. Prescinding from the question of whether there was ever any meaningful evidence in favor of outdoor transmission, let me point out that until I found myself in Washington, D.C., on a work trip in March, I had never seen anyone wearing a mask outside. For someone who had never worn one in any situation, it was bizarre to find thousands of people indifferently donning these garments outdoors, including those walking alone or in pairs at night after leaving bars or restaurants where they had presumably taken them off. It was even stranger seeing people recognize one another in the street and pull their masks down casually, sometimes but not always before stopping to engage in conversation, like Edwardian gentlemen doffing their top hats. I came away from this experience with the impression that, whatever their value, masks long ago transcended public health and became a symbol, not unlike IN THIS HOUSE WE BELIEVE signs or MAGA hats. This, no doubt, is why in my part of America, the only people one ever sees with masks are brooding teenagers seated alone in coffee shops, who seem to have adopted masks to set themselves apart from the reactionary banality of life in flyover country in the same way that I once scribbled anti-Bush slogans on T-shirts. The survival of such old-fashioned adolescent angst is, at any rate, deeply heartening.

75 As far as my wife and I are concerned, an atmosphere of parochialism hangs upon relentless adherence to CDC directives. By European standards, hand-wringing about masks in schools is as silly and absurdly risk-averse as the American medical establishment’s insistence that pregnant women not drink coffee or wine. Indeed, there is something small-minded and puritanical and distinctly American about the whole business of obsessing over whether vaccinated teachers remove their face covering during a long school day. (When I read such things, I experience the same secondhand embarrassment I felt upon witnessing an American tourist in Rome ask a waiter at a trattoria to remove the ashtray from the outdoor table at which the employee in question had just been smoking.)

80 I am always tempted to ask the people who breathlessly quote what various public-health authorities are now saying about masking and boosters whether they know how the National Institutes of Health defines a “problem drinker”? The answer is a woman who has more than one “unit” of alcohol a day, i.e., my wife and nearly all of my female friends. These same authorities, if asked, would probably say that considerable risks are associated with eating crudos or kibbeh nayyeh, or taking Tylenol after a hangover. (This is to say nothing of cannabis, which is of course still banned at the federal level.) My point is that sophisticated adults are generally capable of winking at overly stringent guidelines. In the case of COVID, many are not. I wish I could convince myself that for once in my life with COVID we were actually experiencing a healthy break from the usual pattern, according to which the latest silly novelties—no-fault divorce, factory-sliced bread, frozen meals, and, of course, infant formula—are adopted enthusiastically by the upper middle classes, who then think better of them by the time the lower orders come around.

But I am afraid that the future, at least in major metropolitan areas, is one in which sooner or later elites will acknowledge their folly while continuing to impose it on others. I, for one, would not be surprised if for years to come it were the expectation in New York and California that even vaccinated workers in the service industry wear masks, the ultimate reification of status in a world in which casual dress has otherwise erased many of what were once our most visible markers of class.

After all, you never know how they spent their Thanksgiving.

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