

Dark Days

By Yvonne Groseil

I want to talk about the bad days last March and April. The dark, cold, empty days. The nights when the city was so quiet that I couldn't sleep. The way people passed each other quickly, furtively aware, not the usual New York automatic glance, registering awareness absentmindedly.

Streets were empty. *The New York Times* reported later that 40% of the population in my zip code left the city. There was so little traffic that the ambulances rarely had to use their sirens-- often just a warning beep at the intersection instead of the usual howling siren heard from blocks away. No one stopped to chat on the street and people walked alone. Only essential stores, food markets and drugstores, were open and whole blocks had dark storefronts.

March is always gray in New York, but this was the grayest March I have ever seen, and I have lived in Manhattan all my life.

It was a time of figuring out the new normal every day, creating new habits. We learned to look down at the floor in the grocery store to see where one was supposed to stand. We wrapped a scarf around the face before going out—masks were scarce at first, then expensive (\$10 for 5 blue paper disposable masks/one package to a customer.)

Whole aisles in the supermarkets and chain stores were bare. The entire row of frozen food cabinets in the largest local supermarket was empty. We joked about the scarcity of toilet paper and bought what we could find at any price (\$2/roll for single-ply, only one to a customer).

Television gave us new dreadful numbers every day, deaths always going up. The news showed us ambulances pulling up at hospitals that had no room for the patients.

My friends and I shared our deepest fears: for one, it was the image of herself dying on a ventilator with no one to hold her hand; for another, it was watching on TV the preparation of graves for mass burials on Hart Island off the Bronx. I still shudder at the memory of the black body bags being stacked in the refrigerated trucks because the morgues were full.

Day by day, we figured it out by ourselves and with each other. Standing 6 feet apart became a habit, even waiting for the light on

the street corner. As masks became available, most people wore them. We all listened to Governor Cuomo's news briefings. As he learned more about the best practices, he advised us about them. He never hid the numbers or tried to downplay the seriousness of the situation, but he made us each feel empowered to protect ourselves and others by our actions: masks and social distancing were our tools. The Governor showed true leadership as he enforced a quarantine at the first known hot spot in Westchester County and brought together the governors of neighboring states to develop common policies throughout the commuting area.

It is a lot better now. New York City has had more than a month with less than 1% positivity. The days are warm and sunny, and the sidewalks are busy. People are eating in the streets, at attractive little pavilions created by restaurants, and soon indoor dining at 25% of capacity will resume. Schools are reopening. People are relaxing, walking around in small groups. Masks have become a mere fashion accessory for some: worn under the chin, hanging from one ear, around the wrist, or carried in purse or pocket only because stores require them. Construction projects have resumed. There is traffic in the streets again: cars, trucks, buses and now more bikes and scooters than ever before. The normal steady background hum of the city is returning.

Many of us are still wearing masks and social distancing. I hope we can maintain this progress and never return to the dark days.

Yvonne Groseil holds a PhD degree from the New School for Social Research. A lifelong New Yorker, she attended Hunter College High School and Barnard College. She has worked in retailing, publishing, and non-profit legal and academic associations. Yvonne has been active in community organizing, especially for tenants' rights. A Master's Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) led to teaching undergraduates and graduate students at Hunter College, CUNY, where she was an adjunct assistant professor and an active member of the union, the Professional Staff Congress. Hobbies include gardening, photography, reading, and talking back to political programs on TV, as well as participating in the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS). Her current research is on US public responses to the covid pandemic, as well as continuing work on women's organizations and historic home preservation.

This essay was sent to SDIS in September of 2020.

Reprinted from *COVID-19: getting through with wit and grit*, published by the San Diego Independent Scholars. (<https://sdscholars.org>) © Yvonne Groseil