

Anosmia

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I am not presenting my paper in my home tonight because there I have a wife, a daughter, and a son who collectively consume bandwidth at an alarmingly high and continuous rate as well as two dogs one of which barks frequently and loudly at the slightest incitement including newly delivered Amazon boxes. Instead, I am in the offices of my small perfume company.

I have reasonable hope that my squirrely wifi mobile hotspot will handle the bandwidth load, with little or no jittery stutterings caused by insufficient buffering. If it doesn't, I blame T-Mobile ex-ante.

The room in which I speak tonight is where I store my raw materials: over one thousand bottles of aroma chemicals and distillations of flowers, grasses, fruits, woods, spices, herbs, and other substances found in nature. The origins of these essences encompass all parts of the globe from countries large and small, from every continent except Antarctica. Surrounding me are fragrances held dear by societies throughout the history of Humankind. I am lucky to be able to begin each day welcomed by an olfactory orchestra waiting to be conducted.

One day I arrived at work and the orchestra was silent.

Late in the first week of December of 2019, my wife became ill. She thought she was

catching a cold or maybe the flu. She retreated to bed for an expected two days of discomfort. Two days stretched into a week of debilitating symptoms, after which she began to improve.

As she regained her energy, I was overtaken by whatever had possessed her the prior week. Aches, pains, fever, persistent coughing, severe exhaustion, and shortness of breath consumed me. It felt like a particularly terrible flu but without a trace of nausea. I slept sixteen hours or more per day. Walking to and from the bathroom less than ten feet away from my bed winded me. Wakefulness consisted of chills and aches and a struggle for breath amidst echoes of nightmarish dreams persisting in my fevered consciousness. What initially presented itself as the common flu morphed into a week of wondering if I was going to die or perhaps if I wanted to.

When the onslaught finally subsided, I returned to work. I opened the door to olfactory silence. I smelled nothing. In a bit of a panic, I immediately opened multiple bottles of the strongest smelling essences and perceived nothing, absolutely nothing. Throughout the day, I returned to the bottles, sniffing with the same results. My illness had rendered me a perfumer who couldn't smell.

I kept the situation secret so as not to alarm my wife. Day after day, I tested my sense of smell with no change for almost a week. Then, slowly, the bottles began to reveal their contents. It took two weeks before my sense of smell fully recovered.

Although my illness forced me to miss two Club meetings including the annual Holiday celebration, I was able to enjoy our family's traditional itinerary of meals and gatherings. Life had returned to normal. A new year beckoned optimistically.

Then, in January of 2020, reports of an outbreak of a respiratory disease began to surface from China including seventeen deaths from this new and alarming virus. A few days later, my sixteen-year-old son's friend from Beijing ominously remarked that if the government admits seventeen deaths, that probably meant seventeen thousand. I thought the young man's statement was both alarmist and hyperbolic. Shortly thereafter, China completely sealed off Wuhan, a city of over eleven million people and the source of the new virus. Cities don't get sealed off because of seventeen people dying of anything unless that anything presents an existential threat. Perhaps my son's friend had not exaggerated.

The spread of the virus dominated headline news as pockets of increasing infections and deaths developed worldwide. International leaders and medical institutions struggled to understand the approaching pandemic with tremendous uncertainty and varying degrees of success and failure. The numbers of infected rose as Europe become the epicenter. Images of overwhelmed medical facilities filled the media. Health systems around the globe scrambled to prepare for the worst eventualities in response to models that forecasted the possibility of horrific scenarios ahead.

One day, in early March, my wife returned home from her retail job exhausted. By the next morning, she was delirious. We donned masks and exercised extreme caution to make sure she was isolated from the rest of the household. A couple of days later the covid test was administered to her. She was told that the results would be available in three to five days. The tension and anxiety in our house grew to a fevered pitch as we retreated to separate rooms, doors shut to ward away the illness. We waited seven days for her results while experiencing the highest level of household anxiety we had ever

experienced. Patience had not worn thin, it had disappeared. Her results were negative. Our catharsis was positive. It felt like we had participated in a Schroedinger's Cat experiment gone well. We realized that we had experienced a dry run for what might yet come to visit us in the future.

Then in late March, the lockdowns began around the country. Schools closed. Businesses deemed non-essential also closed until further notice. The unemployment rate skyrocketed. We witnessed disturbing images flickering on our ever-present screens of sick people struggling to survive while those who were to succumb in hospitals languished in separation from their loved ones.

People flocked to grocery stores to stock up on necessities, with toilet paper oddly at the top of many people's shopping lists. A week after the initial lockdown, my son and I ventured to the grocery store to find an astonishingly empty array of shelves in every department. It brought to mind the images of Soviet Russia that adorned television screens decades earlier. Many wondered if we were at the initial stages of an economic breakdown. Anxiety grew nationwide as we hunkered down in isolation for God only knew what to come.

In response to the open-ended duration of the lockdowns, digitally able schools moved to the soon-to-be ubiquitous technology platform Zoom as well as others. Businesses migrated to work-from-home models facilitated by the same platforms. Three-dimensional interaction had been supplanted by a two-dimensional variant.

I am not a fan of Zoom meetings. They are echoes of what has happened in the past. They are a degraded digital arrangement of electrified pixels showing what someone

looked or sounded like a very short time ago, the time it took for silicon circuits to translate light and sound waves into binary code, compress that code into discreet packets of transmittable data that wind their way through glass fibers or copper wires, hurled into space to bounce off of hurtling satellites orbiting the planet and return to be decompressed by your set of silicon circuits in the whirring machine in front of you and then finally arranged with relative accuracy projected onto the electrified pixels of your screen and your set of speakers.

Unlike a face to face conversation, each person is in an oddly disparate setting. Light radiates in varying intensities and hues from differing angles. Sound is received on waves not generated by the speaker, but rather *a* speaker in your computer whose volume and tone can be adjusted by you. The shadows I see are not the shadows you see. The sounds I hear are not the sounds you hear.

It is amazing that such a technology exists, and in a not too distant past might be considered a magic trick, but it is nonetheless an abstraction, a dislocation, a recording. It is in fact the case that what you are seeing and hearing right now is a recording, one that may have been produced a few months ago or a few nanoseconds ago.

During the pandemic and its accompanying anxiety, it has not been Zoom that has ameliorated the stress of isolation. Many of our fellow citizens increased their alcohol or drug intake, while many more sought out the comforting and sometimes soporific distractions provided by Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, and other visual media available through the internet.

As a family we watched an inordinate amount of video content, almost all of it recorded,

as live events had all but disappeared. We decided to not watch any nightly news broadcasts since there was nothing but anxiety-inducing speculation to be found there. Along with the rest of the country, we binge-watched numerous series some of which were time well spent although most of what emanated from our wide screen display proved less than intellectually edifying. Slowly, our stress levels diminished.

It would be impossible to tally the number of hours we spent together absent-mindedly getting through our days and evenings. I would rather not know as I suspect that the number would induce guilt for wasting so much time. Yet in retrospect, it was not time ill spent. Those hundreds of hours together in the same place, while trying at times, were hours that under normal circumstances would not have existed. During our months of anxiety and isolation, we learned a little bit more about each other, but more importantly, we learned how deeply necessary we *are* to each other.

It is not lost on me how banal that sounds. I will not advise anyone to stop and smell the roses, but I would suggest that we do not need to stop to smell the roses because we are always surrounded by them and the only thing that prevents us from smelling them is disease.