

Yea Though I Shop Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

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About This Mid-Week Newsletter

This originated as a long note on Facebook, and the follow-up comments. I'm going to skip talking about politics or media and just go ahead and send it out as a special mid-week newsletter issue, in the hopes that it might help folks who are trying to deal with their own grocery-shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Monday

Today was a long day. I had not gone to a store in about three weeks, but today Grace and I did a whole lot of grocery shopping. Joy has been running a number of errands for miscellaneous supplies including produce like apples, and supplies for gardening, but Grace and I hadn't been doing any of our regular grocery shopping. So, list in hand, we set forth.

Sixteen gloves, two homemade masks, a few bleach wipes, four stores, and a *mountain* of groceries (filling up my entire car), we were done. Ten people (including seven kids) eat a lot of food! But we are confident that we won't actually need to shop for food again for two to three weeks.

We still have not received our food benefits and don't expect to for another two weeks or so. I also have not actually received unemployment payments yet. So we had to spend cash. But fortunately I have stopped paying almost all of our regular expenses for the time being, including our mortgage payments, so we had some cash.

While I previously went out to vote in Michigan's primary wearing gloves and distancing myself from other people, this is the first time I've tried to juggle all the safety protocols including maintaining distance, handling my mask safely, handling gloves safely, handling my debit card safely, handling receipts safely, handling grocery carts safely, and last but not least, handling the groceries themselves safely. It's frankly exhausting and a bit unnerving.

I'm now going to include some notes on what we did, and some shopping locations in the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti area. I realize these may not be of a lot of interest if you don't live here, but perhaps some of the advice is applicable to places in other areas.

The Ypsilanti Food Co-op

The co-op in Ypsi has a small space but it is quite active and well-stocked. They seem to be doing the best they can, given the cramped size of their facility. It was not crowded, with only a few people in the store, but it is hard, if not impossible to truly maintain safe distances there. Staff was restocking while people were shopping, which also created traffic jams. Almost all customers had masks on. The staff had masks, and had clearly been trained to stay out of people's way. I was impressed that when I needed to punch in my PIN, the cashier got out of the space so I could do it. Still, I think it is inherently a little risky to go into the store, so if we need more things from the co-op, we are going to see if we can do a curbside pickup.

The co-op seemed to be fully stocked. We found some nice frozen vegetable items. They also had bags of polenta, which I was excited about, so we brought one home. They had large bags of split red lentils (dal). These last a very long time, cook quickly, and are tasty and high in protein, so I was happy to bring them home. They also had packaged yeast, at a time when yeast seems to be hard to find in most stores, so we brought home a large package. We have not been quick to jump on the home baking bandwagon, but Grace is getting a sourdough starter going, and we will also try making some yeast breads.

Trader Joe's

Trade Joe's in Ann Arbor seems to be doing quite a good job keeping their staff and customers safe. They are only letting a few people into the store at a time. They are sanitizing carts, and giving customers sanitized carts. The staff greeted customers and spoke to them about their special hours for seniors. The staff all had masks and gloves. There was a line outside the store, with marks on the sidewalk spaced six feet apart (I think that is inadequate, but at least they are doing that). Most customers were wearing masks, although some weren't. It seems like twenty-somethings and seventy-somethings are the offenders here, and I can't claim to fully understand why; some younger people are extremely casual about maintaining safe distance. There were no special shields or barriers installed at checkout although they did have marks on the floor to keep people from crowding the checkout lines.

We went to Trader Joe's not for large quantities of food but for a few things we couldn't find elsewhere, and some specific things that make our locked-down life more bearable, such as crackers, cheese, salami, and a lot of their chocolate items such as dark chocolate peanut butter cups and caramels. We needed to restock on treats, because I got some a few weeks ago, and when we were having

a particularly depressing evening, after dinner I'd bring up some chocolates for dessert. We also looked for a few specific things that Joy has been trying to find, such as Annie's Cream of Mushroom soup, but in vain. Grace brought home a few potted herbs to add to the garden.

Costco

Costco is doing a great job on safety protocols. On a Monday, the store was not very crowded at all. They were sanitizing carts before letting customers take them. The staff seemed all to have adequate protective gear and they were all being careful. They have installed plexiglass shields at checkout to prevent customers from breathing onto staff and vice-versa. Staff members were wiping these down. They even had shields for the people checking receipts, so they didn't have to touch the receipts. We held the receipt up to the plexiglass panel, and they read it through the panel. They weren't taking returnables, and so I put them in my cart, but they asked me not even to bring the box of empty cans into the store for safety reasons. That impressed me.

Costco was completely out of raw eggs and toilet paper. They were out of their big bags of Bob's Red Mill steel-cut oats, and we go through a lot of that. They also seemed to have no crackers at all, which disappointed me because I was hoping to score a couple of their big boxes of their "Crunchmaster" multi-grain crackers. These are a little vice of mine. Alas. This wasn't a big loss, though. They had just about everything else we came for. So from Costco we picked up many, many things, including water softener salt, potting soil, ground bison, sausages, bagels, bread, roti, tortillas, lunch meat, falafel, vegetables, and a chicken pot pie. The trip was so large we needed two carts, and Costco's carts are far larger than regular grocery store carts.

Gordon Food Service (GFS)

GFS is a restaurant supply store that is also open to the public. They have a few locations around this area. We went to the one on Carpenter Road. Specifically, we wanted to get some of their large packages of spices (cumin, for example — we go through a lot of cumin when we are cooking bean dishes, as it is practically a requirement for most traditional dishes involving lentils or black beans). But we were also looking for some specific types of salad dressing and soups, and we also picked up some ham hocks to use for adding to pots of beans.

GFS was doing very little to maintain safety. The staff members had gloves, but no masks. They were not sanitizing carts, or metering customers, and had nothing in place to try to enforce distancing. Several times, customers burst in with no masks or gloves and blew past us with, apparently, not a care in the world.

This was very disappointing. We got our cumin and a few other items, but given their apparent disregard for the safety of their staff and customers, we will not

be going to GFS while this crisis lasts, unless we hear that they have drastically improved things.

The Mechanics of Shopping

Handling our PPE and trying to maintain safety without any training in this is taxing. Grocery shopping is usually a fairly automatic thing. I usually go to Costco after work on Fridays, at about 7:30 p.m., the last hour before they close, and the store is usually not very full. I know where everything is at Costco. I can buzz through the store quickly. But trying to do any of this with our full safety protocols in force meant constantly trying to remember if my gloves were fresh or not. There is a lot to remember: remember to wipe the car door handles, remember not to touch my mask with my gloved hands after touching other things, remember to strip my gloves off safely by turning them inside out, etc. All of this is mentally taxing. At Costco, I had to go back to the car to take the returnables back out, and with all this other stuff in my head I couldn't remember where we had parked, and so did the stupid wandering-around-the-parking-lot-looking-forlorn dance for a while.

I feel that this gave us a small taste — admittedly a very small taste — of what it must be like for health care workers, dealing with all this PPE while also having to fear for both their safety and their patients' safety. After several hours my homemade mask was soggy and would not stay up, and that made it hard to breathe through the mask, so I was winded and feeling stupid until we finally left Costco and I could get it off my face. Then it kept sagging, no matter how tightly I tightened up the elastic on the back. So if we do this again in a couple of weeks, I will have to either take several masks, or try a different mask design.

Grace talks about how the key isn't to always do every part of the protocol perfectly, because it is hard, if not impossible, to do it all perfectly, but to make sure to do all of the parts, providing for a little redundancy. This is not really my field of expertise, but I trust her thinking on this issue, and her repeated admonitions that “gloves protect us, masks protect other people.” (Even if they aren't really medical-grade masks, they help to some extent).

When we got home we stripped off all our outer clothes and washed thoroughly. Then we wiped down all the groceries to sanitize them before we put them away. This was quite a project and we were frankly pretty exhausted by the time we got to the end of it.

We're doing our best to keep everyone safe (including the people we wind up near, out in the world). I wish more of them would take this seriously — I wanted to yell at some people “HEY! YOU SHOULD ASSUME THAT GETTING NEAR ME MIGHT BE FATAL TO YOU AND EVERYONE YOU GO NEAR FOR THE NEXT MONTH!” But I decided that might not go over very well.

When we got everything home, the kids wiped down packages with bleach wipes.

We tried to assume that every single package or bag could be contaminated with virus particles. It isn't so much that we are worried that the food itself is contaminated — we don't think that is a big risk, except possibly for fresh vegetables, and everything will be cooked. We are not buying pre-packaged salads, though. I'm not entirely sure what Grace is doing with sanitizing fruits such as apples and oranges. Maybe I can get some notes on that written up for next time.

Q & A

On Facebook, when I wrote about this big grocery outing, I got some questions, so I'll include the questions and my answers here:

QUESTION: Did you use sixteen gloves because you went to four stores? What kind of gloves did you use?

Yes, two people, so four gloves per store visit. After leaving each store and loading the groceries into the car, we stripped off each set of gloves (turning them inside-out) before getting into the car and handling our keys, the steering wheel, the gearshift, etc.

The gloves are flimsy disposable latex gloves from Tractor Supply and come in 100-glove boxes. I'm not sure where they might be available now; Joy stocked up on gloves in the weeks before we locked down.

QUESTION: How did you use the bleach wipes?

I had a bleach wipe inside a glove in my shirt pocket and used it to wipe down the hand grip on the shopping cart, the pin pad, my card before and after, and then the car doors after touching the latches with my still-gloved hand, and also my phone. Basically, anything I touched with a gloved hand that might have touched a contaminated surface. I also used them on my hands after tearing a glove, which is not really advised because the bleach on the wipes is rough on the skin, but a torn glove is a minor emergency.

Joy's Notes on Other Stores

Joy has given me permission to quote her Facebook notes, reporting on other stores where she's been shopping recently. Here are her comments (lightly edited):

Tractor Supply

They've gotten better with the curbside pick-up. You can order and pay online. They text you when the order is ready, which took less than an hour. You can call when you arrive, and they bring the order out. I lift the gate on my van, and ask them to let me close it, so they have no need to touch the vehicle at all.

On a previous trip there a few weeks ago, the person came up to my window and insisted that I needed to sign — and had no mask or gloves. Recently they have improved things further so that I did not need to sign anything. The young woman who loaded the van was not using *any* PPE, and asked if she should leave the paperwork in the back with the goods.

This time part of what I was wanting there was garden seeds, which I wanted to pick out, so I needed to go inside. There were few shoppers, so distancing was easy. Carts are not sanitized, nor do they provide wipes. I went back to my van to get another wipe to clean the handle and kid basket of the cart. The fellow at the register was wearing a mask, but they do not have the shields that many stores have installed at the registers. I held up each seed packet for him to scan and dropped it into the bag, then took the bag myself when the transaction was complete.

Fresh Thyme

Before noon on a Monday, the store was fairly busy. They have sanitized carts separated from returned carts. Most customers were wearing masks and gloves. Staff were not. For the most part people were distancing. Much of the produce I was after was available in the small handled clear tote bags they often have bulk produce in, so I was able to quickly get the large volume of apples that was one of the primary things on my list. Fresh produce was the main thing I went there for and they were well stocked. Frozen vegetables were pretty much wiped out, unless I wanted edamame. Paul and Grace were able to pick that up at Trader Joe's (I think that's where it came from). **[Paul: did we get edamame at Trader Joe's? I don't even remember... with both of us and I puttings things into the cart, and the staff bagging them, we probably bought things that I didn't notice.]**

They really need to get a better system for feeding customers into the checkouts. There are markings on the floor, but without extensive reconnaissance you can't tell how many registers are open or how long the lines are. Initially I thought there was one line, and that one would go to the next open register when one reached front of the line. Not so. I'd waited a good while in that line and when I was second in the line, still unable to see that there were multiple lines, the register for the line I was in closed. No direction was given to the folk in the line I was in, which had grown quite long behind me. Soooo, we all had to go the the end of other lines. This was unnecessarily frustrating. Don't bother with their "online shopping" — it's just a way to make a list.

If I go again, I'll try to go during their senior hour, which I think is first hour on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Home Depot

I placed a small two-item online order on Saturday. Even though you pay online, they still require you to go inside to pull up documents and sign, before pulling the items out. The cashier did offer to sign the electronic pad though. They have cordoned off entrances and only let a certain number of customers in at a time. There are marks on the walk for spacing. The staff was not wearing any PPE. Carts were sanitized by staff before they were given to customers on the shopping side. There were separate lines for shopping in store and pick-up orders. When I got there at about 5 on Saturday, the shopping line was kind of long, while the pick-up line only had two people in front of me, but it was *very* slow. Folk that got in the shopping line after I'd been in the pick-up line got in before I got to the head of my line.

A dual reason for online ordering was to have help loading the large, heavy bags of soil. A glitch in the order meant I got one rather than 4, but they are really heavy so I still needed help. The cashier I had was put out by this request, and it was not clear that staff was going to be there anytime soon to help, so I decided getting out quickly by doing it myself was the way to go. They now have you exit only by the door that is at the other end of the store from customer service where you are processed for pickup orders — past the registers with a long line of customers waiting to check out. Passing the folk in line, it is not possible to stay six feet apart [**Paul: a lot of stores have these kinds of problematic bottlenecks, which I have never really had to think about before!**], especially if a staff person is standing in the path taking to another customer. Gah! The odd thing is that I would have had less problem distancing before all this, and getting things brought out to my vehicle hasn't been a hassle in the past. Thus, Tractor Supply will be preferred for garden supplies. I'm curious about Lowe's.

About the Ypsilanti Food Co-op

In the weeks leading up to this when Grace and I were doing most of our topping-off of the pantry in preparation to shelter in space, I did a final purchase at the co-op by phoning in an order, giving my credit card number, then calling when I arrived, and they popped it into my open hatch. They now have an e-mail address to request that. I love our cozy co-op, but not going inside there now.

Joy's Shopping Protocol

I wear gloves, mask, use sanitizing wipes, hand sanitizer, sprays — all the things. I carry just what I need — no bags, no purse, no phone. My credit card is wrapped in a tissue. I tuck a wipe in the door handle of my auto to be used when I return to it. I have a list written out. A mask you don't need to futz with is a must. I've suggested Paul use one of my little stash of surgical style masks when the need arises. (Left over from when I was working on my old lead-laden house). I like the type he used today [**Paul: which Joy made from an old**

t-shirt, cinched behind my head with an elastic hair tie] for around the house and yard to protect our family, or maybe a situation like walking in a park where I might want to pull it up if I see someone whose path I might cross, but yeah, especially if you have a beard, these knit cloth ones will likely get damp.

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