

Boiling Hot Hose Water and the Basil Explosion

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Monday

Grace and Paul Get Tested

Yesterday was a kind of unwanted milestone. Grace and I both went to an urgent care clinic in Ann Arbor to get tested for COVID-19.

The trigger was that Grace had a mildly elevated temperature, over the course of two readings spaced several hours apart.

Early on in the pandemic, Grace and I were checking our temperature daily. Our cheap little semi-disposable digital thermometer stopped working after a few weeks. It had a dead battery. Thermometers and pulse oxygen meters were exceedingly hard to find. I wasn't able to find the right replacement batteries at stores, so I eventually ordered some replacement batteries online. They took a month to get here. And the thermometer is very flimsy — really, it was designed to be disposable, but I did manage to replace the battery without breaking the battery compartment, so it is working again.

All three of the adults in the household have also had a very mild sore throat for the last few days. My chest is aching a bit today. This isn't rare for me, especially during this time of year. I often get a slightly sore throat and aching chest on days when the air is full of ozone or particulates. And it's also well into allergy season, which can give me a raw throat from post-nasal drip, even if I'm not sneezing. So there are several likely explanations other than “oops, we've got the 'rona!”

The *context* which led us to worry that we might actually be infected included several events over the previous week. There was my potential exposure at my workplace, via our team lunch and one team member who refused to wear a mask. There was the IKEA trip I mentioned before, where we were exposed to un-maskers who wore masks to walk in and check out, but in between, removed them. This happened just a couple of days before Governor Whitmer signed the executive order mandating masks in all indoor public places. And last Wednesday, Grace took Elanor in for a second sleep study, in which both of them stayed overnight at the University of Michigan hospital.

Those are the three possible points of contact with other folks that we consider to have put us at elevated risk. We also have gone into stores a few times over the last couple of weeks. We did our big, every-three-weeks shopping trip to Costco. I walked into a UPS Store franchise location to send a couple of packages, including a book that arrived in poor condition and a laptop memory upgrade I was sent by mistake. But in both of those places the customers were carefully maintaining physical distance and wearing masks, so I think it is unlikely that we might have contracted the virus during these outings. And we've been continuing to aggressively sanitize our groceries and quarantine our mail.

So we've been watching for possible symptoms, maybe with a bit of hypochondria thrown in. I think a little hypochondria is not uncalled for at this particular moment in time.

Anyway, we arrived at the clinic and discovered that the waiting room was quite full of masked people waiting to be tested. So we signed in, and went outside to wait. We didn't have to wait all that long. I think it was about ninety minutes. When we went in the waiting room had cleared out considerably. We both had both tests available — a nasal swab, not the pharyngeal swab I've read about that involves sticking a swab way back into the sinuses, and a blood draw for an antibody test. I'm assuming that our insurer will cover both tests, but we'll find out. We were told we should hear the results of the swab test within two or three days, but it would take a week or so to hear the results of the antibody test.

At the clinic, Grace's temperature had returned to normal, because of course it had. So of course we're second-guessing our decision to go to the clinic for tests, since the clinic itself seems like a likely place to pick up the virus.

So, we're nervously waiting for test results, and watching for any other symptoms that might crop up. Any little ache or cough or sneeze now has an unasked-for and unwanted significance. I'm not planning to leave the house for the next few days. We've been taking extra vitamin C and D and eating a lot of garlic. Will this help? I don't know, but I do know that eating a lot of garlic produces an immediate improvement in the various aches and pains in my joints. So we're going to keep it up. And it also helps encourage physical distancing!

A fringe benefit of growing a garden full of herbs is that it is very easy to test whether I seem to be losing my sense of smell. So far the answer is "no." And there are also plenty of dirty diapers that confirm this in a less pleasant way.

We'll see what happens. I don't think there's really anything else we can and should do until receiving further information, either in the form of test results, or in the form of noticeable changes in our health.

On Tuesday afternoon, Grace and I heard that our antibody tests were negative. And on Wednesday evening, we heard that our nasal swab tests were negative. So that is something of a relief, although we are left wondering if we might need further tests in the future.

I ordered a couple of new thermometers, which we hope will be more accurate than the old thermometer.

Wednesday

The kids finally made some more bread this week (we've been asking them for several weeks to make more bread). They made it with a combination of white King Arthur flour and that whole wheat Indian chapati flour I mentioned acquiring at Costco earlier. To compensate for the lack of gluten in the chapati flour, we added some wheat gluten powder. They included a seam of everything bagel seasoning in each loaf. The result was really good, a part-whole-wheat bread with a soft crumb and a very nice flavor. I toasted it and ate two slices with the last of my thyme butter and the combination was terrific.

We've continued to have some very hot days this week and there has been a lot going on. Veronica and Joshua were in online choir camp each weekday this week, with daily Zoom calls, and so I had to provide tech support for that them.

Wednesday in particular there was a lot going on. In the morning, the installer was scheduled to come at ten to put in our dishwasher. We had to get everyone out of the main floor of the house. At two minutes to ten, when I told one of my sons to go play outside and he dug in his heels and said "I'm not going anywhere," I blew up at him and was not kind and gentle in getting him out of the house. But Grace and I believed it was a matter of everyone's safety to give the installer some distance.

We've got a working dishwasher again, and that's a nice thing to have, given the number of dirty dishes we produce each day. It doesn't wash everything, and it doesn't clean the floors and tables and counters, but it does reduce the amount of hand-washing to a slightly more manageable amount.

A bit later that afternoon, we had more people over at the house. A team from U-M hospital brought an oxygen concentrator machine and some portable tanks and a bag, and the associated tubing and child-sized nasal cannula, and showed Grace how everything works. Elanor has sleep apnea, of a sort that is not obvious to an observer. She is supposed to sleep with the oxygen cannula on. So, at night she can be hooked up to the machine. If we take her for a long car ride, she's supposed to travel with the portable cannister on in case she falls asleep in the car (which usually happens on long car rides). She doesn't really enjoy this.

In the "things that make you go 'hmmmm...'" category, we noticed the carry bag for the oxygen cylinders, which was probably used by someone else before us, reeks strongly of cigarette smoke.

Later on Wednesday I had to record Veronica and Joshua singing, and also prepare some photos and artwork. This time there were two parts for each of them, a melody and a harmony part. Again their instructor assembled the

results into a video in which all the students are singing together. Again, it's bittersweet because we would love to hear them sing together in person.

Elanor's first evening with the oxygen concentrator machine was not much fun. Three times during the night, every few hours, the machine started emitting a loud alarm tone. Elanor, Veronica, and Grace all sleep very deeply, as do the boys, so apparently I am the only one who wakes up when the alarm goes off. Each time, for lack of any better ideas, we just turned the machine off and then back on again in a minute or two.

The folks who set up the machine hadn't mentioned an alarm to Grace. I thought initially that maybe it would generate an alarm if the cannula came off of Elanor's face, but it wasn't that — it can't sense that. After making some phone calls on Thursday Grace was given some things to try. The machine apparently needs to be placed well away from a wall so air can circulate from the vents on the back, or it will overheat. So following that advice it seemed to work somewhat better the next night, but the alarm still went off once (if I recall correctly — sometimes it is hard to remember being woken up in the middle of the night).

It seemed to work better on Friday and Saturday nights. We're not sure what that means. If it keeps happening we will ask them to swap it out with a different machine.

Grace says that now that Elanor is sleeping with the extra oxygen, even though she tends to pull the tube out of her nose, she already has noticeably better behavior during the days. Since I was downstairs in my office during the days on Thursday and Friday, she is in a better position to judge than I am. It does seem like she is behaving better at bedtime, though, and spending more time making happy screaming noises than upset screaming noises.

Garlic Soup

Grace cooked a recipe from *The Ralph Nader and Family Cookbook: Classic Recipes from Lebanon and Beyond*. The recipe calls for 52 cloves of garlic. We doubled the recipe. No, we didn't actually peel 104 cloves of garlic. We had no real success growing garlic this year. So we had purchased ten small packages of pre-peeled garlic cloves from Trader Joe's for the occasion (and we still have a lot left over!)

The recipe calls for starting by braising the garlic in oil, which mellows it out considerably. The garlic goes into the soup, which has a chicken broth base. We set the oil aside to use later. The recipe also calls for cream, but we used coconut milk. It was really quite delicious, and not nearly as pungent as one might think. It's an interesting cookbook and we want to try some more recipes! Of course it helps that I have loved Middle Eastern food for years.

Boiling Hot Hose Water and the Basil Explosion

When I've been able to get out and water the garden, I have to run the hose for a few minutes before I spray the water on the plants. The hose has been sitting in the sun and the water is hot enough to burn me.

There's lots of news from the gardens — there are new things happening every day. The sweet red cherry peppers are producing fruits now. Every evening when I walked down the driveway to get the mail I walked by these pepper plants, and they had a little treat for me, a ripe red pepper, to pluck and eat on my short walk.

We've been getting a lot of cucumbers from the cucumber plants, and the zucchini plants are starting to produce enormous squash. We chopped up a couple of them along with a small eggplant from our CSA and pan-fried them in the garlic oil left over from making garlic soup, then turned off the heat and threw in some chopped lime mint leaves and a generous sprinkling of oregano flowers. This was a bit of an experiment, as I've been trying to figure out what to do with some of the types of mint we're growing. To my taste, it was a success — the citrus notes in the lime mint went very well with the zucchini, and I could eat the piquant little oregano flowers on just about anything, possibly including ice cream.

We have so much basil. We grew a number of types, as a grand experiment, and although some of them started slow, ultimately they all grew like crazy. So we've got a couple kinds of plain old basil (just called "basil" on the tags, probably a Genovese variety), lemon basil, lime basil, Thai basil, cinnamon basil, licorice basil, spicy globe basil, and purple basil. I've been asking my friends to please, come take some basil! Or maybe a bushel. We will even deliver. It seems unlikely that piles of basil plants harvested in the sun would become a likely vector for COVID-19, but of course I can't guarantee anything, and people have to decide for themselves what kind of risks they find acceptable.

We made some excellent pesto with the just-called-basil variety. There is enough for a *lot* more pesto. We also hacked down a heap of the lemon and lime varieties, and combined them to make another pesto. The result was interesting — the lemon and lime varieties have more subtle flavors than the plain old basil, but they really do have lemon and lime citrus notes, and so the result tastes like it has lemon and lime zest in it, and smells surprisingly a bit like 7-Up or Sprite soda. It's a bit of a solution in search of a problem for us, though — what's the ideal pairing for a pesto with a mild citrus flavor?

Clearly more research is needed, not to mention more pesto! I've got a whole book of pesto recipes, including one specifically for Thai basil. Maybe a pesto isn't really the best use for the lemon and lime basil. Maybe it's something completely different.

We are hoping we will be able to refill our garage from the pods in our driveway very soon, and get a second freezer up and running in the garage — we had the

outlets wired for it some time ago. It's blueberry season and we'd like to freeze pounds and pounds of blueberries, and I'd like to freeze herb butters and pesto, so we can taste some of this wonderful, horrible summer in February 2021. But unfortunately the Paul Davis Restoration Company has not been returning our calls.

They completed the garage ceiling repair some time ago, but they don't seem to be in a hurry to finish up the job and get paid. We just hope they aren't going out of business. What would happen then? I guess we'd have to move everything out of the pods ourselves and have the pod company come pick them up. Then we'd probably put the money we were paid by our insurance company into escrow in a savings account for a while, and see what happens. Our insurance company, Liberty Mutual, ought to have some kind of procedures for what to do when a contractor goes out of business. But unfortunately Liberty Mutual is *also* not returning our messages, and we are wondering if perhaps they are in trouble too, due to the Midland-area flooding.

Sunday

Tomatoes

There are a lot of tomatoes on the way. The tomatoes in the kitchen garden bed were a mess, since they had been knocked around in storms and we have not been able to give them daily maintenance. So we had to do a fairly radical pruning. They are covered in green tomatoes, so we had to harvest some early. We'll see if any of them will ripen. We might try frying some green tomatoes. The two plants are Amish Paste and Black Crim. The Amish Paste aren't really good for eating raw — they are hard and taste starchy — but really shine when they get fully ripe and are then rendered down into paste — they were bred to make truly delicious tomato paste. So I'm not sure what we're going to do with unripe Amish Paste tomatoes.

Cucumbers

Some of our cucumber plants have also been having a rough time, while continuing to produce cucumbers. Really, without daily maintenance of these fast-growing vines, and occasional storm damage, it is easy for them to get out of hand. At least one of the plants in the kitchen bed seemed to be sick with powdery mildew, and many of the leaves were shriveling up and dying. So this evening I hacked off all the parts that looked sick and Grace and I de-tangled the plants. In the separate cucumber bed, where the pyramid of support sticks keeps tipping over, we again de-tangled the plants and got the supports anchored back down into the soil and then attempted to wind them back up and over the top of the pyramid. It was getting dark, so we couldn't do any more tonight, but as soon as possible I want to tie them to the supports. I don't know if they will stay there. They are an unruly bunch. If we attempt a cucumber bed in one of the

fire rings like this next year, I think we need to build some much taller and much more secure supports, anchored outside the beds and not inside them. And we need to have better ways to anchor the plants to the supports. The supports we used this year are mostly smooth, and the stretchy plant tape loops we used to tie the plants up keeps sliding down. I think I want to build some things out of wood with short cross-beams every foot or so.

Assorted Garden Gossip

The borage is probably a goner — it took a lot of storm damage and we really needed to splint it back up, but didn't get to it. Given how large the plant is, the stems are surprisingly light, hollow, and fragile, almost like they are made of styrofoam, as if they had been designed to be fake prop plants rather than real plants.

The thyme and sage and rosemary and oregano plants and other herbs are mostly coming along nicely, except for the ones that we expected to die back — cilantro and chervil especially.

I am planning to make a round of different kinds of herb butters and freeze them — another thyme butter, and maybe a chive butter, and maybe some other herb butters. I was hoping to work on those this weekend, as they don't really take very long, but, well, between the sleep deprivation and lots of other activities, much of the weekend seemed to get away from me.

The epazote attempted to take over the entire kitchen garden bed. I may have mentioned that we hacked off ninety percent of it. We have a ridiculous amount of epazote drying. It turns out epazote thinks it is a tree. So, next year we might want to find a different spot for the epazote.

The pineapple sage is going nuts and so we need to figure out something to do with it.

The sunflowers are over ten feet tall now, although they still don't have flowers on top. I think they may flower soon.

For some reason, all four of our lavender plants seem to be dead or dying. They seemed to shrivel up and blacken from the ground up. Some of the creeping thyme varieties seem to be suffering the same fate. We're really not sure what went wrong. Too dry? Too wet? Too hot? It's unclear. If we attempt to grow lavender next year, we'll try it in a different spot.

The leeks are doing very well and starting to develop that nice alternating-leaf braided appearance that I love so much. They aren't very fat yet, but I pulled out a few to thin them, and we ate them anyway. If things continue to go well we might have full-sized leeks to eat as late as November. I haven't made any attempt to heap up soil around the base of the leek plants to keep the bottom of them white. Maybe next year I will grow the leeks in a separate fire ring bed and try that.

The scotch bonnet pepper plants are finally starting to take off and produce fruit. So in another month or two we might have some very hot little peppers to make salsa or perhaps a jerk sauce.

I've been confused by the slow progress of the paprika peppers. They were very early to flower and produce large fruit, sticking straight up from the plants. But these fruits were a very pale yellow, almost a cream color, and didn't look at all like the deep red peppers I expected. I was wondering if these were actually a yellow or orange variety, because apparently such things exist. I wondered if we should pick the fruits now, since they didn't seem to be getting any larger. But they are just now starting to develop deeper yellow and orange color, and so it looks like they will turn red after all, but it may take a while yet. So I'm still looking forward to drying and grinding some beautiful red paprika peppers, if all goes well.

We've never grown corn before, so we weren't very clear on how to tell if it is done. There are a number of ears on the corn plants in the kitchen bed. The silk has turned brown. So I pulled one off to get a look at it. It looked and felt pretty fat before I picked it, but it's really still quite scrawny. So the corn needs more time. We might not get much corn.

We've also got one big, healthy-looking lemongrass plant. And we've got lots of cayenne peppers and coconut milk. So I feel some kind of Thai curry coming on... maybe made with some of our frozen bass and fish broth?

Last night when I was harvesting a zucchini from the sprawling zucchini bush in the corn bed, I found out the hard way that the weeds that had grown up all around it were stinging nettle. I got stings all over my hands. At first I thought I was being bitten by ants or stung by bees. I've never had nettle stings before. I guess every squash has its thorns.

We haven't had nettles on our property before, but it seems that the topsoil we had delivered must have been loaded with nettle seeds, waiting for the right moment to sprout up at once. When it isn't causing pain, nettles make a great green for cooking and they are loaded with nutrients. Blanching the young leaves in boiling water quickly will make the tiny stinging hairs wilt or dissolve immediately, so you don't have to worry about the leaves stinging your mouth. We will have to try harvesting them deliberately and cooking them with one of our dinners this week.

Grace also likes nettle tea, although I don't really care for the flavor. I used to take dried stinging nettle leaves in capsules as a treatment for seasonal allergy attacks, and it worked quite well, although I had to take a lot of capsules and the effect only lasts a few hours.

The stinging sensation is painful, but fortunately it seems to fade pretty quickly, and it improved quite a bit after I washed my hands with soap and water.

Now if only we can get a reasonably good night's sleep, and start out the week not exhausted.

Have a great week, and stay as safe as you can!

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