

Standing at the Edge of the World

by Phyllis Chesler



Standing at the edge of the world as we have known it, people are still strolling, biking, hiking, and running all over America, some arm in arm. I've seen them on television, I've heard about them from eyewitnesses. Tourists are still visiting Times Square and taking photos with the Naked Cowboy and *hugging* the Giant Panda. Absolutely no one is keeping a proper distance. And in [Clearwater Beach, Florida](#), thousands of young people have flocked to the beaches, crowding together, laughing, swimming, without a proverbial care in the world.

Are we fiddling as Rome burns? Has panic made us reckless, desperate?

People, myself included, are taking risks, both small and large. Although I've cancelled all meetings, both social and professional, I still allowed a close friend to come for dinner—even though she was sneezing quite a lot “due to allergies.” Both I and others who are in my life, have allowed staff to come in. Many people are taking elevators, taxis, and car services, without knowing who else might have been there before them. Judges, police, fire, and health care personnel are taking serious risks because it is their “duty” to do so, as my son so gravely said.

We are moving towards a total lockdown in NYC. The governor and the mayor are busy fighting over who has the right to order it. Allegedly, synagogues and ambulatory surgical centers have both been asked to prepare to accept non-virus patients so that hospitals can focus on those who require virus-related care.

Visions of row upon row of beds in tents during previous wars and epidemics appeared before my eyes. For a moment, there I was, in the American Civil War, and in the trenches of World War One. Easy to do after you've seen Ken Burns's [films](#) and Sam Mendes's extraordinary film [1917](#) which should have swept the Oscars, but did not.

The Board of my building has just issued some “immediate changes.”

All repairs in apartments are suspended other than building emergencies; no move-ins or move-outs are permitted; all interior renovations/alterations are stopped; all exterior construction will be stopped; all deliveries: food, newspapers, packages, must remain in the lobby; for those unable to pick them up, a staff member or a volunteer will bring the food to your door; representatives from Verizon or Spectrum are not permitted to enter the building to perform repairs; the exterminator will not be visiting the building for the foreseeable future.

While the medical situation is indeed dire, the fact that quiet will now prevail near me is a tremendous blessing. I have had to endure simultaneous and constant drilling and hammering at the front and sides of my building, often right outside my window; from the apartment right above mine; and from the adjacent building. Of course, I would gladly accept the horrendous noise if that would prevent even one death.

Another unexpected and more major blessing: The canals in Venice are no longer murky, they are clearer than they’ve been, one can now see fish underwater. The air is also less polluted and white swans are now roaming the canals. And why? It is believed that the [lack of tourists taking boat rides](#) “has allowed sediment in the canals to settle at the bottom.”