

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

It's not over, it's just getting starting.

Risa Denenberg · Friday, July 23rd, 2021

On July 4th, the temperature reached 104 degrees Fahrenheit where I live on the Olympic peninsula in Washington state, near the bay and surrounded by state forest lands. I've heard that during the gargantuan heatwave that befell the Pacific Northwest (Washington, Oregon, California, and British Columbia) between June 26 and July 6, more than 800 deaths occurred that might be attributable to the punishing heat. The autopsies are still rolling in. Some were more at risk of death than others, notably the elderly and farm workers. Elderly folks often live alone, and many are shut-ins without mobility to get to a cooling center. It is difficult to imagine working outdoors under these conditions; some growers have turned to harvesting during the night. Most people living in the Cascadia region do not have, and have not needed, air conditioning; we're likely to calling a day "hot" if the temperature reaches 75 F. Although at risk due to my age, I was spared because of various types of privilege, I work indoors in a climate controlled environment, my own home is near water and trees, and most relevantly, I am not a person of color or poor.

I am closely following breakthrough COVID infections. COVID may indeed be a pandemic of the unvaccinated, but it is foolish to think it will remain in small conclaves where vaccination rates are low. People are out and about, and spreading variants of the virus that are much more transmissible. While COVID deaths in vaccinated individuals are a very small percentage of the total number of vaccinated individuals (159 million in the US), the CDC reports 5492 hospitalizations and 1063 deaths in COVID-positive, vaccinated individuals as of 7/12/21. Some of those deaths may not have been attributed to COVID; still the CDC estimates that COVID deaths in fully vaccinated people is likely to be higher than their current count. I was vaccinated in December 2020 as a healthcare worker. No one can tell me how long that vaccine jab from 8 months ago will protect me. I am still masking indoors and distancing, and I hope you will consider doing the same. And talk to people who are hesitant to vaccinate, see if you can persuade them to get the vaccine.

There is something very unsettling about the confluence of these escalating COVID variants and the explosion of weather events around the world. Remember Katrina? These deadly events are coming faster and harder. Climate change scientists seem to agree that the extreme weather events we are seeing right now—heatwaves, flooding, fires—are a result of climate change. Related or not, the Florida high-rise-on-the-beach condominium collapse would seem to remind us how pitifully behind the US is in managing our "infrastructure." Or considering how we should be building, traveling, and living in light of these interrelated crises. The flooding of cities in Europe and wildfires wiping out entire towns in California and Canada should certainly remind us that in the humans-vs-weather events, mother nature has the upper hand. These events are begetting

waves of climate refugees now; soon the waves will be more like tsunamis. We can make drastic changes now to avert worse catastrophes later—changes that involve addressing racism and economic disparities, reducing waste, lowering carbon emissions, ending the rabid accumulation of possessions and wealth, and taking care of each other and the earth we share with other living forms—but my guess is that we won't. Sorry, I'm not feeling very hopeful today. It's a crying shame.

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