



Catherine Chatfield

# Magical Thinking

A short story to remember - what I was doing, thinking and responding to the first major pandemic in 100+ years

## Traveling in the time of COVID19

First, a definition of "magical thinking"... a term I was introduced to in reading "The Year of Magical Thinking" by Joan Didion which uses [magical thinking](#) in the [anthropological](#) sense, thinking that if a person hopes for something enough or performs the right actions that an unavoidable event can be averted.

Dec 31, 2019: A pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, China was first reported to the WHO Country Office in China.



Jan 10, 2020. We fly to FL to spend 48 hours with some very dear friends who retired there last year.

We visit Gilbert's Bar House of Refuge, where shipwrecked sailors could find sustenance in an era when there wasn't a lot of help around on Florida's east coast. Then time for seafood.

Jan 13: School officially begins.

I am teaching HSEM F434 - a course on All Hazards Risk Analysis. I am taking ED F677 - a class on Digital Storytelling. Like most new beginnings, all seems hopeful.

Jan 28. We drive to CT for a week while my middle stepdaughter has a double knee replacement.

Feb 8: We arrive in Paris to celebrate my 60th bday - something that had been planned since last July. I usually don't concern myself with how I celebrate birthdays - I'm not concerned about my age, and I'd prefer to think about every day as a celebration. However, since my 50th birthday had been celebrated in a hotel in rural PA by myself during an intense snowstorm while I was working at Sanofi Pasteur as a contractor to help build their next flu manufacturing facility during the avian flu epidemic - I had decided that it was time to change that thinking and to create something a bit more memorable. Paris is certainly memorable.

We get there without incident and are upgraded to the executive lounge when we arrived (thanks to being the slow time of the year as well as a Hilton Gold member.) My brother and SIL come in from Heidelberg to spend some time with us. We walk 16000 steps a day, eat croissants, drink red wine and lose weight. Life should always be so good!

While we were there, we heard about 2 COVID19 cases, a father and daughter who had recently visited Wuhan. The father died - the daughter lived. On Feb 16, extremely windy weather changes our flights back to the states. We end up in an entirely different airport and say thank you to Uber for rescuing us!



Is it just me, or does Mona seem a bit off balance?

You can now visit virtually <https://www.louvre.fr/en/visites-en-ligne#tabs>

Feb 10: Birthday dinner at Les Deux Magots w brother and SIL. No, they don't serve maggots there. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les\\_Deux\\_Magots](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Deux_Magots)

Feb 11. The disease caused by the virus is officially named by the World Health Organization as COVID19.

The virus causing the disease is identified as SARS-CoV-2. [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it)

Feb 12: Stepdaughter is DRIVING 2 weeks after double knee replacement. OMG!!! She is amazing!



The catacombs - souls from Paris's series of bubonic plagues - their graves are moved deep underground where the marble used to build many of Paris's buildings had been removed.

You can now visit it virtually as a result of COVID closure <http://catacombes.paris.fr/en/virtual-visit#>





Hot Chocolate at Angelina's! Out of this world!  
Sorry, this is not something that you can do virtually!

Feb 21. Dentist and doctors appts for mother and me and a trip to Costco. TP and coffee scored!

Feb 26: I create a coronavirus channel on our class Slack channel, setting it up as a single repository of coronavirus risk management articles. I have no idea that soon I'll be posting articles daily and even hourly. I have no idea if they're using it or not. But it will certainly be an interesting timeline if and when I go back to it.

Feb 29. My 89 YO mother, who lives with us, has a visit with her podiatrist. He asks us what we're up to. I tell him that we're starting to shop in anticipation of quarantine. He laughs, saying oh that will never happen. I wonder if he's laughing now.

Mar 1: The Louvre announces it is closing due to COVID19. Phil and I just look at each other in amazement. How were we so lucky?

Mar 7: Mother orders several of her favorite pot pies. I make chicken soup, black bean soup and lasagna for the freezer before we plan to leave the next day. The freezer is not quite full. One more trip should do it. Dare I say that we have two fridges and a chest freezer for 3 people? Keeping the gas tanks full. The contingency planner in me thinks we'll be ok!

Mar 9: UAF Spring Break starts



Mar 9. We have driven to Burlington, VT to watch our granddaughter's wife defend her PhD thesis and to celebrate her success. Two days later, the University of VT closes its doors due to Covid-19. She's one of the last to give a public defense this spring.

Mar 11. WHO declares COVID19 to be a pandemic.

I talk with another girlfriend in FL. She had been planning to come see the cherry blossoms with her stepdaughters this year. She ultimately cancels the trip and I am relieved. In the meantime, she's hosting dinner parties with only 8 people?????? sigh....I know she knows better. What can I say? Denial is strong in all of us!

PS. We chat on Mar 31. Her neighbors have COVID. She has stopped the dinner parties.

So many people have been practicing magical thinking, that it wouldn't impact the US - that it was only an Asian dz. I personally think it's magical that we were able to do all these things before the world essentially shuts down. Our upcoming plays and events will ultimately cancel or postpone (so sad not to be seeing Sting), but we've been able to be with family and create good memories when it counts and no one has become ill yet.

Mar 12. UAF extends spring break to send students home and move all classes online. I make minor changes to my online course and stand amazed at what my elearning colleagues are going to be asked to pull off in 1 week's time.

Mar 12. Larry Hogan, the governor of MD, closes schools. Mother won't be going to her zumba and weight classes at the Senior Center any time soon.

Each day that follows implements more and more restrictions to physical distancing. I now refuse to call it social distancing. We are social creatures and while distance will save our lives, social distancing never will.

Mar 14. It's a mad dash to get all the errands done. You can feel the impending closure in the air. Starting early in the morning to get to CVS to refill a prescription, mailing packages and buying stamps, liquor, bird food, and of course, more groceries!

Coming home to corned beef in the slow cooker. Yummy!

Mar 16. I start a new job at the Smithsonian Institution. My new role will be to focus on Enterprise Risk Management, but we're in Crisis Management at the moment. It is a tad chaotic, since the Federal Government is moving into maximum telework and I don't have any equipment. My boss is leading the Covid Command Comms Team. My response is "how can I help?" I'm now on the team. I'm happy to provide some resiliency - these folks have been working really hard for 5 weeks now.

The metro is nearly empty. The time between trains keeps expanding each day as more and more operators call out sick. More and more services keep shutting down. I get my loaner computer set up by Friday.

Mar 20. My husband sends me a tweet. Les Deux Magots has closed due to Covid19 [https://twitter.com/sir\\_camble/status/1241043743689637891/photo/1](https://twitter.com/sir_camble/status/1241043743689637891/photo/1) Again, we are amazed at our timing, seeming to move between crises.

What I marvel at is that my husband wasn't that excited about going to Paris and now all he can do is send me news articles about places we saw when we were there. I call that success! Where shall I take him next? Petra?

Mar 21. My students are starting to get deployed. Being that many of them are in the emergency response business, these deployments are wreaking havoc with their lives, their health and their education. How will they balance it all? How can I support them?

Family is concerned. The number of phone calls and texts increase within a very short period of time. Time to reach out to the quiet ones to make sure that they are ok.

Mar 22: Giant Panda Mei Xiang Is Artificially Inseminated at the Smithsonian's National Zoo <https://nationalzoo.si.edu/news/giant-panda-mei-xiang-artificially-inseminated-smithsonians-national-zoo-0>. Is this the start of the COVID19 baby boom? Only time will tell.

Mar 22. I pay one tax bill early - before the other refund comes in. What happens if I'm too sick to pay it? Why am I have such morbid thoughts.

I shred a bunch of old files and clean my desk. I am grateful for time to declutter. My nesting instincts always kick in when I spend a lot of time at home. I consider how to fit a reading chair and perhaps a standing desk into the office. Thankfully, Ikea is closed and I'm too cheap to pay delivery. This will work for now.

I wrap up my tweet assignments. We take a hike at the canal. We buy dinner from one of our favorite bistros - using curbside pick up. We tip well, hoping they will make it.

I start reading "A Gentleman in Moscow" as recommended by both my husband and my mother. We are watching less TV, not more. We have too many books to read as it is!

The Tidal Basin (where most of the cherry blossoms live) is officially closed. Too many people who can't practice physical distancing! Find a cherry blossom cam, people! <https://www.mymcmedia.org/bloom-cam-provides-live-look-at-cherry-blossoms-in-dc/>

Mar 23. Grateful that I'm finally teleworking again. I have been so afraid of bringing home the virus to my mother and being the cause of her demise. Grateful to be in the house, to have lots of supplies, to have electricity, that none of the family and friends have any symptoms of illness yet, knock wood. Germany, OR, VT, CT, NH, CO, CA and FL are all checking in ok.



Mar 24. No this is not a picture of a dead dog - just being playful!

The dog comes down with kennel cough. Really, Kali? Everyone else is OK and you have to get sick? The vet comes out to the car to talk with us and carry her in. We pay by phone. Fortunately, she's working her way through it. Note to self - perhaps it was the stress of being boarded 4 times in the last two months? Good thing you don't have any immediate travel planned - oh wait, you wouldn't be going anyway!

My friend, who is a recently retired occupational physician, decides she is going to join the volunteer medical reserve and asks me for a reference. I tell her only if they promise to provide Personal Protective Equipment. Otherwise, I tell her I have to give her a bad reference to save her life.

Mar 25. MD and DC indicate that all non essential businesses must close.

There is a run on gaming stores and puzzles across the country.



Mar 26. Mother wakes up at 2 am, finding it hard to breathe - seems more heart related than COVID19 since no fever or cough. I call 911 to transport her to hospital, but no visitors allowed. We talk on the phone after she's admitted. They don't give her a COVID test since she doesn't have a fever. I go in at 530 to admit her and drop off a book and her medicines. The EMT told us to bring her own medicines since the hospitals aren't sure about their supply chain at the moment.

It's odd to be working but since the hospital isn't allowing visitors due to COVID19, I can't visit her so I'll see if I can add value elsewhere. I'm really concerned that I can't be there because she doesn't remember what they say and she doesn't have any paper or pencil to write it down. I'm frustrated to be unable to help her directly. I send an email to her GP and decide to practice gratitude that the hospital was able to take her.

Later that day, I drop off a care package with her brush, eyeliner, lipstick as requested as well as the paper and pen. Also potato chips, chocolate and gin. Unfortunately, the nurse won't let her have the gin. Ah well, the martini will need to wait.

Thank goodness for the farmers who are continuing to plant - I will need to find a CSA and/or farmers market to support this month. It may be time to reread Animal, Vegetable Miracle, although I don't think I'm up for raising turkeys.

People are getting creative - using UV light to disinfect used masks and figuring out how to sew new ones.

Clothing companies like Eileen Fisher are offering to sew clothing for hospitals.

Mar 28: Jose Andres is rocking it again with World Central Kitchen's response to those in need. I make a series of donations to WCK, Doctors without Borders, Heifer International, KIND and our local food pantry.

Sign KIND's petition to Close the Courts! <https://supportkind.salsalabs.org/DOJEORPetition/index.html>

People are blaming the bats and the pangolins, but what about holding ourselves accountable as we adversely impact their environment. Again - what magical thinking to consider ourselves separate from the world. Risk management teaches us how everything is connected. One perspective that this is a wake up call for us to reconnect with the earth.  
<https://www.alwayswellwithin.com/blog/coronavirus-urgent-message-world>.

Mar 27: Mother is officially diagnosed as having had a heart attack. Her own cardiologist is on the case. We are feeling better about the prognosis since they want to treat with drugs, not surgery. They'll keep her for observation and she should be home in a few days. GP responded to my email.

The right people are in the right place at the right time. I'm feeling relieved.

We're planning for her to return home on Sunday. We'll see the doctors next week to get the new plan of action on her medications.

We're still unsure of how this turns out so I have to be OK with the uncertainty of not knowing. I sense my denial with what will be the inevitable outcome for all of us. Talk about magical thinking! I also know that she's had a really good life. My only goal is to be there for her at the end, whenever that might be. And yet, for others, that's not the case. People are dying in isolation. Ebola was a similar situation. So sad!



Mar 27: A video by a critical care pulmonologist at NYC's Cornell Weill Hospital caring for COVID19 patients. A lot of good info compressed into a single video.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YitWZj9QhdQ>

Mar 28: I talk with my cousin who is an occupational health nurse. She tells me that LA is seeing a new strain that involves GI distress with no temp. Two of her daughters had to run up to NYC to pull stuff out of the dorm rooms so that housing would be available for visiting nurses. Because of my cousin's job, she can't have the girls return to her house, so they have to quarantine elsewhere. My sister sends me an article that doctors are seeing heart issues associated with COVID. That was helpful (not!)

At the very least, communication, right or wrong, is much faster than it was in 1918.

Be safe out there!

Mar 28: I post the weekly slack assignment for my students, asking them about how games can inform risk communication. I include our Haiti game for their considerations. I'm really looking forward to seeing their reactions.

Mar 29: Mother is home. New meds, a chocolate milkshake and a shower make her feel like a new woman. Guess it was not yet her time to go. We are grateful.

Wrapping up my thoughts for now...

More magical thinking:

- Carnival making the argument that cruise lines are not high risk - Are you kidding me? They are bigger petri dishes than schools - at least kids and teachers can go home! At this point, I'm not sure I'll ever go on a large cruise ship!
- People thinking we'll be back in business by Easter - hold the pep talk for the emergency responders and medical staff who are putting their lives on the line. The stock market will recover. There are many people who will not
- That this is going to impact people and areas of the country equally - already there are articles that suggest we'll lose more Democrats than Republicans since the cities are being hit sooner. But people are escaping to the countryside so what would the protective nature be then?
- That I am always going to be able to avoid disaster...Because this one, I'm not going to be able to avoid - it's going to impact us all!

So what are the opportunities and questions?

- Medicine will change with the increased use of telemedicine. I wonder if CVS will do the same with their minute clinics. This is certainly a capability that the VA and private insurance companies have been working on for a number of years now. Our vet closed their doors on 3/27 due to staffing shortages and indicated that they were trying to develop a telehealth capability. I'm not quite sure that the dentists can pull this off.
- Will we be able to get needed products like tests and respirators and vaccines to market quicker? What role will 3D printing play in making supplies?
- Education will definitely change. Going on line - will that create a faster retirement plan for those who don't like this venue? How will the brick and mortar schools survive? Why is UAF killing the Online Education program? Is education all moving to look like the University of Phoenix? If so, what happens to research? How can I use this to enhance my teaching skills and my students' competencies?
- News and other media outlets will change - What will local news look like?
- Techlash has stopped for now. Will we figure out how to increase access to the internet for those families that don't have it now?
- I wonder if people will like the environmental changes enough to reduce the pollution?
- Which non profits will survive and how?
- Will there be an increase in farmers markets?
- Will there be a large scale switch to bidets?
- Will people continue to wash their hands?
- Why are some auto companies running commercials when no one is driving anywhere? Yes - I get it - a lot of people buy a new car with their tax refunds. Some organizations were locked into their advertising budgets - would they have been better to just have paid the bill and not advertised?

What do I think about Defoe's idea that a pandemic brings out our common humanity?

This is change at a revolutionary, rather than an evolutionary, speed.

Change management is a science unto itself. Those who practice denial and magical thinking and who always need to be in control will find this transition very difficult.

Those who can embrace the positive aspects of how this could enhance our world going forward - both in technology and in its humanity - will be the most successful in making the change.

It is heartening to see that in this digital age, people are still finding ways to connect and do things for others. I am seeing so many good things in terms of neighbors helping neighbors. Some of the stories are absolutely amazing. It's not simply about buying groceries for others - it's about the constant checking in - are you safe - what do you need - even if it's only a conversation.

Thankfully, the media recognizes that too and is including the good stuff as well as the stuff that is harder to take. WAPO is running the Optimist page on a weekly basis. Free and discount access is available from a number of providers to make sure that the news is not limited to the few - making it as democratic a distribution as possible.

What practices can we put in place for ourselves (exercise, music, meditation, sleep, chocolate) so that we stay strong for others in the community? This is a marathon, people. Take your rest as you need it and don't expect yourselves to be perfect. We all need a place to retreat to and feel the pain of the change, the loss, the transformation to the new normal.

In the meantime, the public health folks continue to advocate for us all and fight this war on the front lines. We would be in much worse shape without them. Find a way to thank your favorite healthcare professional now!



All we really need...

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_7xMf1p-irg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7xMf1p-irg)