

# **The Ugly Beauty of the 2020 Covid-19 Pandemic**

## **By Robert Sturtevant**

This morning I awoke to find a text from a friend containing a word puzzle. You remember the kind, the word, SAND inside a square: SANDBOX, and so on. There were 24 of them. I figured most of them out and replied. Then I forwarded it to my family. Later some of us announced things like, "I just got number 11! Off-level!"

I hadn't seen this kind of puzzle in as long as I could remember. But they were pretty common back 40 years ago, or so, when I was growing up. You'd see them in places like the newest edition of Reader's Digest brought home from a weekly trip to the grocery store or Parade Magazine in the Sunday paper, when parents would languidly wile away the morning carefully reading each section, page by page and kids would sprawl out on the living room floor to see what The Peanuts Gang was up to or what misfortune Dagwood was encountering.

Later in the morning I was reading an email newsletter I subscribe to. It mentioned there has been a boon in home baking. The yeast and flour companies are seeing unprecedented sales. I already guessed this. A couple of weeks ago I got the last bag of all-purpose flour off a shelf at Stop & Shop and they were out of yeast. Practically everyone in the house has made some baked good, or another. Friends are posting proud pictures of their delicious looking breads and confections. I baked, what everyone agreed, was the best cornbread ever!

We've lived in our neighborhood for over 20 years where we take frequent walks. Usually, when we do, we don't pass another person. Now, we often pass several. People we've never seen before. Most of the time, when I look out the front window, someone is walking or bicycling by. A sight that was previously rare.

People are posting photos of their completed jigsaw puzzles and art projects on social media. I'm cleaning out my home office desk and finding "important" documents I saved years ago that are now meaningless and can go in the recycle bin. I've dug out and reread saved birthday, Father's Day, and anniversary cards with the thoughtful and loving words of my family and friends. I went fishing on a weekday. I've had lengthy telephone conversations with family and friends who I haven't spoken to in months, or even years. I painted part of the exterior of the house that was necessary for over a year. I painted the downstairs bathroom ceiling. I hadn't noticed how badly it needed it. My son and his girlfriend are playing a never-ending game of rummy 500. I think they're up over 5,000 points. I started running again after an almost two-year hiatus. My daughter has cleaned and vacuumed the entire house. Twice. My wife is reinventing the 43-year-old extracurricular grade school education program she is the director of.

After losing our beloved 12-year-old German Shepherd almost three years ago, and literally hundreds of family conversations about getting a dog, we got an eight-week-old German

Shepherd puppy a few days ago. She brings with her abundant smiles and laughter to the house and is keeping all of us very busy.

In some ways, I haven't been this relaxed, productive, and carefree in a long time. Even though some of us are trying to work and study from home, and I got laid-off from my job and am trying to job hunt in a terrible market.

It occurred to me, despite the horrible cruelty of this disease and the resulting pandemic, that has impacted practically everyone in the world, there is beauty and humor to be found. People instinctively and intuitively know what to do to adapt, survive, and remain mentally and physically healthy. Gifts have been delivered to our door. There are heroic healthcare workers who are members of our extended family creating miracles by waking up and going to work, bravely facing the obvious risks.

I never anticipated something like this could happen. I now know there are experts who did. When the pandemic was announced on March 12, 2020, I didn't know what it meant. I knew what the word meant, but I didn't know what the impact on my life would be. I'd never heard of "social distancing". I never would have guessed stores would run out of toilet paper, disinfectant cleaners and disposable gloves. I didn't have a stylish face mask. Now, thanks to my sister-in-law, I do. She works for a sports apparel company that made national news by staffing their vacant 200-plus person manufacturing floor with a skeleton crew working at a safe distance from each other making masks and gowns for the healthcare profession. She sent us some.

Over the past six weeks or so, we've gone from reasonable caution to extreme precaution in reaction to the advice of experts we've read articles from and heard on the news. We have friends who have lost loved ones to the coronavirus. We've had family members who have been sickened by it, some seriously, but gratefully, they survived.

Yet, somehow, there is joy and humor. My wife and both children have birthdays each a week apart in April. As I write this, we are planning a birthday dinner celebrating our son's 25th birthday. Normally, we'd be out at a special restaurant of his choosing. Not this year. But we're making the best of it.

I don't know when normalcy will return or what it will look like. But I do know, someday, perhaps years from now, I will look back at this time, and, hopefully, will have more fond memories than sad ones.