

Dr K's Stay-at-Home Story

April 11, 2020

My husband and I are travelers. Our year always seems to revolve around trips – big summer trips, sometimes big trips during the winter holidays, every other little trip in between. We are cyclists, and many of our trips are planned around bike routes and bike trails, how to get our bikes to where we want to ride, or where we will rent bikes in some locale where we can't figure out how to bring our own. Doug starts planning trips way ahead, sending me links, asking me for input. This is baked into who he is.

As the news of the COVID-19 pandemic ground itself into our awareness through January and February, I started to realize that people were talking seriously about canceling all kinds of travel plans. I was supposed to attend a writing professors' convention in late March in Milwaukee, which isn't far from us (we live in the west suburbs of Chicago), and Doug and I were planning to add a couple of days onto that trip, bring bikes, and hopefully do some exploring. If the weather was bad, there would be plenty of cool things to do in Milwaukee, right? The week following the convention was my college's spring break – a great chance for a guilt-free, work-free long weekend to play.

By the first week of March, though, shit started getting real. I was seeing emails and tweets and all kinds of doubts from others who had planned to attend that convention – people who had chronic illnesses or had vulnerable family members were already saying, I'm not going. Others said, it's not right to attend a convention if only certain healthy people can go – I'm not going. I started to doubt. They had a point.

On March 12, the convention organizers actually canceled the convention, so that was the end of that – but Doug said, we can still go to Wisconsin! We have our hotel reservation, we have our bikes, let's go. But I didn't think so. I was a little quiet about it... I wasn't sure what was the best way to convince him it wasn't safe to go at all. He can be very stubborn, and he is smart, too, so he's used to getting his way – he can persuade me almost anything!

That same week, both our schools closed their campuses (I teach; he's a grad student), and the Chicago office where he had an internship also closed. I became deeply aware of our age – we are both 59, barely under the cut-off for "seniors" who would be more vulnerable to serious illness.

Over the next days, conversation about our so-called spring break went on in fits and starts. Doug would say, what's our spring break gonna be? And I would respond, I think we need to stay here, honey, we can go on bike rides around home. Once or twice he mentioned going away overnight... and I did not push back hard, not wanting to start a fight, but I would say something like, I don't know if that's really gonna be ok.

Finally, I heard him talking on the phone with someone, saying that he didn't think it would be safe to go away overnight. He had had an idea about camping... but all the DNRs were shutting down their facilities. No restrooms or showers. And hotels did not seem safe enough either, he said. Then I knew I had waited him out long enough... that fight was already over. Whew.

Then came the press conference. Governor Pritzker of Illinois went live at his press conference on Friday, March 20 and announced a statewide stay-at-home order that would take effect the next day. After he made his announcement, he introduced a doctor, one of his public health advisors, Dr. Emily Landon, saying that he wanted the public to hear from one of the people who helped him make up his

mind that this order was the right thing to do. Dr. Landon gave a short but clear explanation: staying home is the only way to keep *everyone* safe. It's not just about keeping yourself safe, she said – by staying home and slowing the spread of the virus, we are helping *everyone*. Within a few hours, Dr. Landon's name and a video clip of her remarks was popping up on my Facebook and Twitter feeds. People were getting the message. The idea of staying home was spreading, hopefully faster than the virus.

Another week of strangeness went by. We started having "classes" in Blackboard Collaborate. Ordering groceries for delivery or curbside pickup. Doing appointments and meetings by phone or in Zoom. It was exhausting, hard to focus. I was sick with a cold. I was very unproductive that week – but I was sick enough that it was hard to care.

And then, spring break came. Much of the weather was terrible, which is normal here, but Doug and I did get out on bike rides – only twice. We had to plan carefully, since no public restrooms are open anywhere, and we could not assume we would find water or be able to safely buy food along the way. I was still sick, and the second day we went out, it was too much for me, and I spent the entire next day resting.

And that was it for travel. For now, and for maybe a very long time. Doug is focusing on other things for now – and you know what I miss the most right now? I miss him planning our next trip, sending me links and suggestions and asking me what I think.