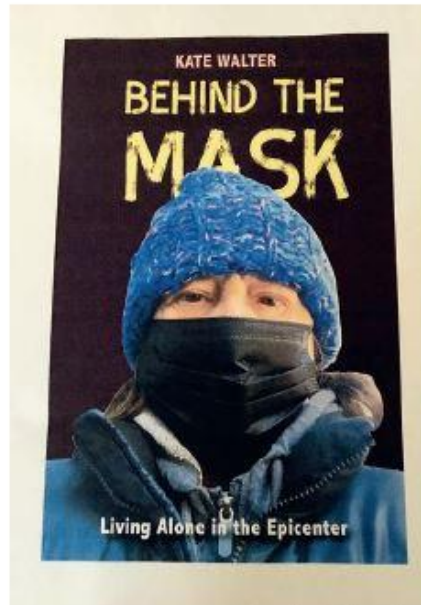




Behind the Mask: Living Alone in the Epicenter

Reflections on a New Book by Kate Walter



WHEN DO I GET MY LIFE BACK?: the author in limbo with no end in sight. Photo credit: Kate Walter.

By Catherine Revland

Nearly two years have passed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Westbeth writer/resident Kate Walter's account of this time of traumatic stress, grief and loss couldn't be more relevant, especially for people like herself who went through the ordeal alone. This article is not a review, because the subject matter is too close to

home for objectivity. Instead, it is a selection of touchstones from her book that evoked "me too" moments of familiarity for this writer. It's human nature to avoid looking back on painful experiences, but Walter has revisited them for us: "I'm happy to move on and enjoy daily life again, but I never want to forget."

Her story begins with the shutdown of New York City, transformed into a war zone where defenseless residents did battle with a mysterious, deadly, and invisible enemy. This state of combined helplessness and fear soon had a name, Coronaphobia—which people who fled the city for safety can never comprehend. Walter's description of her panic attack after touching the "enter" button on a cash machine without wearing her latex gloves will resonate with the many who stayed. For them the most scary thing about COVID was that it was unprecedented, unlike any other catastrophe they had endured. "I witnessed 9/11 with the Towers burning and falling," the author writes. "I lived through Super Storm Sandy, when the Hudson River rushed up my block. . . . But they brought us together as we helped our neighbors. The virus forced us apart."

Despite the anguish of an enforced isolation that was seemingly without end, Walter also recalls moments of jubilation—hanging out her window at seven o'clock each night to cheer the health workers, waving at a family of noisemakers across the street, kids drumming, parents clapping. The results of the November 2020 elections were another moment of joy—"People were dancing in the street. Biden won! Our national nightmare is over!"—only to find out the following January that it had just begun. "Like COVID, it wouldn't go away."

"Have a Good One"

Then, after eleven months of pandemic fatigue, everything changed with the announcement of a new kind of vaccine that would soon be available without cost to anyone who qualified. But nothing COVID-related came easy. Walter describes the excruciating ordeal of getting an appointment online—crashing web sites, hours spent nailing down time slots that vanished into thin air—but

she got lucky when she secured a February appointment at the Javits Center, where men and women from the National Guard were directing thousands of people through the largest vaccination center in the country—"Turn left at that soldier over here, turn right at that soldier over there."

After receiving her vaccination the author says, "I was so relieved I almost cried." As she headed for the exit a soldier told her to "Have a good one."

"You too," she replied. "Thank you," feeling so grateful that she kept thanking staff members during the rest of her visit.

And then came the day she pulled down her mask and felt the sun on her face for the first time this year. Change was in the air. The city was slowly coming back. Although it was sad that so many mom-and-pop stores like the beloved Golden Rabbit were gone for good, a number of restaurants were reopening, having managed to survive through the winter. While the author was having an outdoor lunch at La Bonbonniere her waitress, an older woman, called out to a couple passing by. "I got the Pfizer!" she told them. "It made me feel like a tiger!" The couple started laughing. "You were always a tiger." "But now I'm a young tiger!" she replied.

It was good to hear people laughing again.

You Can Plan on Me

Thanks to the spectacular success of the vaccine, the lifting of travel restrictions, and Dr. Fauci's recent blessing, this holiday season has already become a long-delayed season of joy that couldn't be more different from the aching loneliness of just a year ago. It adds a new meaning to Bing Crosby's old familiar "I'll Be Home for Christmas" of World War II—another awful time. "You can plan on me," he croons, with a promise of snow, mistletoe—the works.

Have a good one.

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