

THE WEEK THAT AMERICA CHANGED

CORONAVIRUS

Taking stock of strange days

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Associated Press

Change came to the United States of America during the third week of March in 2020.

It did not come all at once, though it came quite rapidly. As had happened in other lands, there was no explosion, no invasion other than a microscopic one that nobody could see. There was no fire, no flood, no famine. There were no barbarians at the gates.

Change came quietly in most towns and cities, because the change was one of withdrawal, a shutting of municipal and regional and national doors. The weather was the same weather. The streets were the same streets. The emptiness fell bit by bit, piece by piece, until the most crowded of places became some of the most ghostly.

Some stopped going out in the evening. Then in the afternoon. Then all day. Some stopped getting haircuts, and some stopped cutting hair. Some stopped going out to eat, and some restaurants shut their doors except for takeout and delivery.

Some, many, most stopped going to school. Home became the primary landscape. Those who worked outside the home became those who work in the home, or became those who did not work at all.

It was like 52 pickup, that sort-of-kind-of card game where someone throws up the deck and it lands all over the place, and when the cards are retrieved from the floor they are the same cards but in an entirely different order. Some are upside down. Some are facing backwards. Some are bent at the edges.

stacked, row by row, as home offices came into shambolic being. Overnight, the verb “to Zoom” roared out of corporate settings and into basements and kitchens and living rooms where it had never been used before.

When change came to the United States of America last week, as it had to China and Italy and many other places already, it swatted some much harder than it did others, depending on where you lived, how much you earned, who you were. When change came, it came in many measurable ways that people who measure things are still just beginning to measure. Medical numbers and economic numbers will tell the biggest share of that story.

But change came in unmeasurable ways too, and those are harder to capture. Yet they are just as real, and their stories are contained in the people who stayed home and didn't do what they usually do.

Change came in drunken drivers who didn't crash. In shots that weren't fired and bullets that didn't pierce flesh and organs. In first kisses that didn't happen. In skies that weren't as polluted. In trips of a lifetime that weren't taken. In inspirations that didn't strike, conversations that didn't take place, photographs that weren't snapped, videos that weren't made. Maybe most of all, in dollars that weren't able to be earned and lives that weren't able to be saved.

Holdouts remained, as you would expect in a culture built on individualism. Young people, confident in invincibility, grinned and played on spring break beaches. In states where governors restricted movements and commerce, people bristled and said it went too far, did too much, damaged the livelihoods of too many. Jobs started disappearing, deleted from the landscape in batches as if it was a

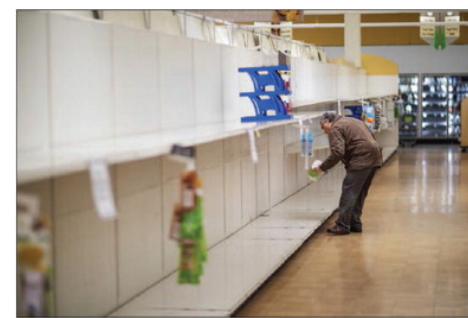
The television and the internet, already many people's hearths and constant companions, burrowed even deeper into lives. Heads talked. Experts laid out numbers. Flatten the curve became an incantation. Officials promised and parried and thrust.

In this particular week of change, the fiercest debate centered around two key notions. One was how to react in the strongest way possible. The other was whether reacting in the strongest way possible was actually most of the problem.

Some tried to tell the story of this change as one of obviousness and common sense. Some seemed sure that the country they had loved and known and, for some, fought for was disappearing before their eyes. In the United States of America last week, the events themselves came fast and loud and fierce, unfolding as invisible organisms marched their invisible and perilous march. But change came gradually and, sometimes, inaudibly.

The thing about change is that sometimes it requires an inventory to measure it. In many cases, the people who are changed are the ones to do that inventory.

That may not happen here, at least not immediately. The changed, those who would undertake that inventory, may be too busy for a while. Because the fourth week of March in 2020 is now here, and more change is coming.



Wade Warner picks up a toilet paper roll at a Stop & Shop supermarket on 3/22/2020

Delivering a pizza became an act of bravery. Supermarket shopping became an activity of anxiety, both because of what people might not be able to get and because of what people might accidentally touch. Toilet paper became a source of stress and a recurring joke. Some people came to fear that anger was coming and others grew deeply angry that fear was coming.

Those who could work at home sat by the glow of their computer screens, which became a collage of pixelated portals into other people's living spaces. Tiny images of people's colleagues were

tactical move in a city-building video game.

The people in their homes, on the inside AP looking tentatively out, struggled with the change. Groceries were bought and sometimes hoarded. Images of empty shelves, shared online by the tens of thousands, produced even more distress. Family relationships were suddenly placed under stress by proximity and unease. Wi-Fi clogged, struggled, slowed. Hands wrung over income-tax deadlines until, to great relief, they were pushed back.

Time, or at least the notion of it, changed too. Thursday seemed like Friday, or maybe Friday seemed like Tuesday. Weekday melted into weekend. Lunchtime sometimes decided to arrive in the late afternoon. For some, happy hour, if you could still call it that, came hours before the afternoon rush hour, which was OK, because by Wednesday in many places that was gone, too.

during hours open daily only for seniors in North Providence, R.I., on Thursday.