

Journal of the Plague Year

When Everything Changed

“You want to hear God laugh? Tell her your plans!”

— Yiddish Proverb [Slightly modified]

1. The Beginning: Austin

The year that was to be so different from our expectation began quietly, in Austin. Linda’s sister, Mary, died on March 9th after a long decline. We were saddened by her death, but grateful for the end of her suffering. We had already planned to be in Austin before embarking on the first of *four* planned birding trips, a return to Costa Rica. We thought we would visit the family in Austin before heading to Houston by way of San Antonio,

where we planned to meet up with some old birding friends.



Linda's Hand near Baby Rabbit in Marilyn's Garden

That didn't work out. The virus outbreak in China could not be contained, especially by an incompetent President. Suddenly, international travel didn't seem like a good idea. Claire emphatically insisted that we return to San Francisco *immediately*. While we dithered, Costa Rica closed their airport. We took the next plane back to SFO with 23 other passengers. Then we quarantined for 14 days before being allowed to join the rest of the family in rural Mendocino County. We stayed there for most of the rest of the year, returning to our urban condo only for medical and other appointments — and to collect packages.

We stayed with Abe and Marilyn in Austin, where we managed to save a baby rabbit from the ravages of various pets.

2. Mendocino County

When it comes to Sheltering In Place (SIP), we had an ideal getaway location: Claire and Ron's “weekend” home, *Purple Haze*. Thanks to several expansions it now handles 4 adults and two young children well. In fact, we had already agreed to meet there as part of our disaster plan.

Near tiny Philo, a [Census Designated Place](#) (CDP) in the western end of Anderson Valley, Purple Haze sits atop a hill surrounded by mixed conifer/oak woodland. The house, originally a 2BR, 1BA cabin is now a 4BR, 2BA establishment with a new dining room in addition. This arrangement lets both Scarlet and Nico log into remote school from different rooms, a nice touch.

Our daily routine begins with an early rising in order to get some crucial tasks done before the kids' class time. Starting at 5:30 we let the cats out for a quick constitutional, then let them back in for a short nosh before they head out again. (Cats rule!)

The next step in the morning: making coffee for all the adults. Then, we grab time on the internet. The network access falls into the “[dog walking on hind legs](#)” category, working not admirably, but working nonetheless. The speeds supplied by Sonic's fiber links in San Francisco are a fond memory. Here, a good connection works at 10mbps down and 2 up. When the kids get on, even that tends to dry up. Zoom meetings have to be scheduled carefully to avoid the dreaded message, “Your Internet connection is unstable.”

We use the time on important (Linda calls these trivial) tasks:

- Updating Quicken to see what money we didn't spend on frills such as birding trips.
- Downloading the Times Crossword, which we solve with the help of what Claire calls *cheating*.
- Solving the Daily Challenge in Microsoft Solitaire. Each day presents 5 different types of Solitaire to solve. Except for November 25, 2016, Jim has a perfect record.
- Starting on the Spelling Bee in the Times, which is addictive. Ruth Gass, a friend in San Francisco, and Jim collaborate after they both reach the Genius level. Their goal is to find every word. Occasional failures often involve a "[helve](#)." That word stumped both as neither had ever encountered it. Now, we use that for any obscure word we don't know.
- Doom scrolling thru the day's news.

Of course, that's not all we did. Like many people we cooked a lot during the lockdown. Early on, we found that all-purpose flour became a hot item. Ditto yeast. In desperation, we ordered flour from Costco, which arrived in a 20-pound sack. We still have some left.

Linda decided to try some "gluten-free" Bisquick someone had left on the pantry shelves. They didn't turn out as expected.

The kids' favorite dish, pineapple fried rice, was better, and always a big hit. This one has shrimp and veggies.



All this eating required some extra exercise to avoid the common "Covid 19" weight gain. Social distancing doesn't work with the fridge.

Linda took to clipping small dead branches for kindling for hours at a time. Jim preferred to just walk four laps: down to the lower gate, onto the road, up to the upper gate, repeat. The vertical difference, 40m, is enough to get the heart rate up. If the cats decided to tag along, the loop changes into out-and-back so the felines won't think about going onto the road.



The climb is harder than it appears!

When we wanted something more challenging, there was the walk “up to Clow Ridge.” The ridge is a short distance along the road, then a killer climb to the top, guaranteed to leave older people huffing and puffing.

We took the kids to a preserve about an hour’s drive away where we fed a giraffe.

We also managed to do some birding. Jim practiced “birding in place” daily. (See below for more.) One day Linda and Jim snuck out onto the public highway, driving to Boonville to take Mountain View Road to the coast. Once, a long time ago, we saw our only Mountain Quail along the road, plus a Sooty Grouse, and have tried for a repeat without success. This morning, we *heard* a Mountain Quail’s loud call from a great distance.

We decided to take the scenic route home along State Highway 1 and pulled into an overlook on a whim. There we found two nice photo ops:



Song Sparrow Singing

A Song Sparrow sang from the top of a small bush. This may be the best photo of this bird.

While we were watching, a Wrentit showed up. This is a very shy bird that you usually hear without seeing it. So, when this one came into full view, we were delighted to capture a stunning photo.



Wrentit



Linda and Jim Birding in Hendy Woods

We also went birding several times to Hendy Woods State Park, a lovely spot a short distance from *Purple Haze*. Of course, this required the new birding outfit as shown in a photo taken near one of the huge redwood trees. Most of the time we were the only people in the park, which was closed for camping much of the year.

Several times we also visited one of our favorite places, Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens, near Fort Bragg, with Scarlet and Nico. After the visit, we stopped for pizza and ice cream at a nice takeout spot in Mendocino. The Gardens were best when the Dahlias were blooming. The kids loved taking pictures of their favorite flowers and insects.



Dahlia Bloom with Tiny Native Bee



Woolly Bear Caterpillar

3. Things we did during the pandemic that lots of other people did

- Skipped haircuts. Jim's hair grew and grew. During one Zoom call with old friends, he commented that it was a cross between Steven Pinker and Einstein. That drew the correction that he was "a spitting image of Andy Warhol." Linda asked me to delete this photo.
- Watched Ron and Pete Stoddard set up an above ground pool for the kids to cool off in.
- Wondered if the fires would get to us. They didn't, but they were close enough that we scampered back to SF, where the sky looked like this at 11:00 a.m. on September 9, the 110th anniversary of my Grandmother's birth.



Andy Warhol?



Sky from Our Back Deck at 11:00 on 9/9/2020

For several years we have felt that Climate Change, or Global Warming if you prefer, is the greatest threat to our planet. This year showed exactly what we have to look forward to: hurricanes, floods, fires, droughts. When asked what we think is the most important issue facing us, we have answered, "Climate Change. If we don't fix that, nothing else matters."

Of course, there are many other problems:

- COVID-19, together with the inequalities it has made so abundantly clear.
- Racism.
- Declining support for democracy around the world.
- Donald Trump and all he represents.

4. San Francisco

When in San Francisco, we often went birding at Heron's Head Park about a 10-minute drive from our condo. This became our *patch*, a spot we birded often and came to know well. Some of the best photos from our visits are below. The Townsend's Warbler seemed to be lost. It is usually found in conifers.



Black-necked Stilt at Heron's Head



Common Raven Claiming his Perch



© Linda Hargrove

Male Bufflehead Duck. Check the colors on Head



Surprise Townsend's Warbler at Heron's Head



Reading Email and Ignoring Great Blue

We also tried birding at the San Francisco Botanical Garden, where Jim noticed that not everyone there was as entranced with a Great Blue Heron. This woman seems to be reading her email.

Exercise in San Francisco is easy. A walk "around the block" involves climbing the equivalent of several flights of stairs. San Francisco is *all uphill*.

5. Birding in Place

Jim adopted the habit of birding from one spot on a daily basis. The spot came to be known as Grandad's Chair. On Halloween, faced with the lack of trick-or-treating and a plethora of candy, we organized a treasure hunt for the kids, hiding candy at 20 different locations. Each hiding spot contained a clue to the next spot — as well as some candy. When the clue was for Jim's favorite spot, both kids came rushing over, afraid that Grandad might have consumed all the candy hidden there. Most of it was OK, though he extracted a small *tax*.



Manzanita Tree seen from Grandad's Chair

The chair looks over a cleared area with a large, lovely Manzanita tree. Here's a photo taken from the chair.

During the summer, a gentle breeze appeared every afternoon about 2:00 pm. This was enough to set the world's finest wind chimes swaying. These chimes are perfectly tuned, so that the tones blend into a subtle, pleasing sound.

Most of the birds seen from the spot are the *usual suspects*: California [Scrub] Jays, Acorn Woodpeckers, Dark-eyed (Oregon) Juncos, and a sizable flock of Common Bushtits.

One bird that refused to show itself for a long time was a Pileated Woodpecker that called repeatedly from the nearby woods, but stubbornly hid itself from sight. One day, it finally flew across the clearing.

6. The Heist

The adventure began quietly. Claire called from San Francisco asking if we had moved some of her stuff. "No, it was right in front of the closet," we replied. "Well, it's not here now. I think someone stole it."

Later, the list of stolen objects grew:

- Jim's Hoodie from the San Francisco Zoo — bought during a trip when he was inadequately clothed for one of the coldest parts of the city. He received TWO new hoodies for Christmas: one a replacement from the zoo; the other, emblazoned with the slogan, "It's what I do. I cook and I know things." BTW, Linda is wearing Jim's original Zoo hoodie in the Big Tree photo.

- Our birding telescope and tripod. We found this missing the first time we planned to go birding.
- Two “rollaboard” bags. We discovered this when we started packing for Philo.

Claire noticed that a door from the outside to the garage was unlocked. We never use that door because it is too difficult to get past the mess inside. “The kids must have left it open,” we concluded.

On a later visit, Jim noticed that a lockbox holding keys to the outside door, as well as our unit, was missing from the railing. We had put it there for the dog walker that came for Chipper, our beloved poodle, now only a memory.

That discovery changed everything. We quickly arranged for a locksmith to change the locks on an emergency basis. Before the locksmith arrived, we had a second crisis. We had started locking up everything compulsively, something not previously done.

Early one morning when we were alone in town, the internet was not working when we got up. Jim descended to the garage to reboot the broadband connection. Linda came out onto the landing to see if he succeeded. The door behind her swung shut and perversely locked itself.

There we were: Linda in a nightgown; Jim, a robe. We had no key for the door, no cell phones. Various methods of dealing with the door failed until Jim simply broke it open. (Some people are amazed to hear this!) One more thing to get fixed. The result was a complete cancelation of our plans for the short visit. Instead, we oversaw changing the locks while fixing the door.

Phoey!

7. New Birding Equipment

Of course, we did not even consider the option of living without a birding scope. Fortunately, Mendocino has a wonderful store, *Out of This World*, which carries optical equipment in addition to lots of clever toys for all ages.

We jumped at the chance to support the local merchants and wound up with a new scope and tripod as well as a new set of binoculars that caught Jim’s eye.

Jim maintains that the binoculars are the finest he has ever owned. The telescope is a new design that allows you to change the objective while keeping the eyepiece, with all the focusing and zooming housed in a watertight part. Jim insisted on the 65mm objective for travel. Linda wanted the larger 85mm lens. Maybe later.

8. New Appliances

Like many of you, we spent a lot more time in the kitchen than we were used to. Cooking became an important aspect of staying sane during the Pandemic. Jim has complained since the early days of our residency in San Francisco about the appliances that our unit came endowed with.

So, we decided to get new appliances. That turned into a drawn-out ordeal. We got a “free consultation” from Best Buy and ordered a new refrigerator, stove, and microwave. Hoping to reduce our carbon footprint, we decided on an electric range after being told that the existing circuit was adequate.

This was our introduction to “supply chain problems” and lots of delays. The microwave was unavailable. The range was removed, but the electric range required major new circuitry. We opted of gas instead. Another delay necessitating some nimble logistics to cook the Thanksgiving meal.

Now, we have a great new refrigerator and a nice gas stove. The new stove has a “proofing” setting for the oven, a great addition for baking bread.

The microwave is literally falling apart, but still boils water and heats leftovers. Further work has been postponed until 2021.

9. The New Church Saga, Volume I and II

With time available for anything, Jim decided to tackle the second volume of his series of novels about life after the Collapse. He wrote first book several years ago, mainly 2010, but this one represents a commitment to pursue the vision further.

Thus far, the story is eerily prescient — Taking place 50 years after the Collapse caused by a global pandemic (using an engineered virus) that wiped out 90% of the population. Unlike most *post-apocalyptic* stories, the series focuses on the effort to rebuild a better world. On the whole, it is optimistic, in a guarded way.

Linda says it presents a feminist view of the future, which was unintended. That's what happens when you spend your life with several of them around.

The “Last Days” of the old regime began in 2024, with Trump's re-election amid widespread voter fraud on his part. It reached a crisis in 2036.

One of the aspects of the rebuilding is the emergence of the New Church, a sort of a Mulligan by a god no one takes seriously. The protagonist, a 30-year-old woman named Hypatia, is proclaimed the Second Messiah, who is also somehow the returned Virgin of Guadalupe despite her argument that she fails the main qualification. The Church spreads regardless of her efforts.

Among the features of the new way of looking at things:

- Sex is fun. None of that guilt. Too many children at the wrong time, though, can be a problem, so practice birth control. (The New Republic of Texas has a thriving trade in this area.) In addition, all reproductive decisions are left up to the women — full stop.
- God is not helpful. She has left in disgust. We're on our own now.
- Trade is essential.
- “We reach consensus through rational inquiry,” is the oft-quoted first line of the Austin Consensus. It is the only line ever quoted.
- Cannabis is worth cultivating. Good for trading. Good for lots of things.

The second volume follows the further adventures of Hypatia as well as her daughter, Chloe, who despite her youth becomes an important official of the NRT.

10. Tidbits

- Did you manage to see the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter on the Solstice? We had a fabulous view from the top deck of the Condo. We managed to find the pair in our birding scope. On the second night, December 22, the air was drier, and we were able to see the rings of Saturn and the Galilean moons of Jupiter clearly. Worth the effort involved.
- We've been receiving spam using the “Contact us” form on the website. We may have to disable that feature. If you need to contact us, The Other Jim Hargrove should be easy to find on the Internet.
- Hope you are well. Stay safe! 2021 has to be better than 2020.
- Check out the photos for the year in the Albums section.