

When the Servants Become the Masters

I speak for myself, but I know that I am not alone. I have been a street vendor in the City of New York for 20 years and my livelihood has been destroyed. And there are some 10,000 vendors in the City of New York whose livelihoods have similarly been destroyed, not by the Coronavirus, which is bad enough, no, my livelihood has been destroyed by Orders of the Governors of New York and New Jersey, and the Mayor of the City of New York. I have some advice for all of these public servants and it is this: GET OUT OF THE WAY.

As I read the Constitution of the United States (for which a good many red, white, black and blue corpuscles have been shed over the years), and as I read the Declaration of Independence—it opens with the words, “We the people”. It does not open with, “We the essential people.” There is no asterisk at the end of either document to the effect that in time of emergency “all bets are off.” Both charters were intended to be a check on the powers of government and those who govern, not an invitation to expand their powers. We are, or at least, we, as Americans, were intended to be a community of equals. So, I was outraged when I heard Governor Cuomo utter the following words early on in the crisis, when he proposed hazard pay for essential workers “because they don’t have the luxury of sitting at home.” These last words are vile to me. I am not sitting at home, nor are the millions of others who are locked down watching their livelihoods being destroyed—we are not sitting at home voluntarily, but rather, because you, dear Governors and Mayor have ordered it. The word “luxury” does not begin to capture the meaning of what I and my family, and my fellow working citizens are now enduring. It is not a “luxury” to watch, as what you have built and worked for, for years is destroyed. Your ORDERS are also not “voluntary”, another word Governor Cuomo used in one of his daily riffs on the pandemic.

It is also of no assurance or re-assurance to me that Governor Cuomo repeats the words, “I get it, I get it, I get it” when he refers to the plight of those of us who wish to get back to work, as he “re-imagines” the future of our City and States. In fact, the Governors and Mayor don’t get it. If they did get it, they would not have issued the orders in the first place. In fact, these governmental orders have made what is a hellish crisis demonstrably worse, not just now, but for the future as well.

Like many citizens, I was deeply touched by Governor Cuomo’s reading of the letter from the farmer in Kansas about the pandemic, and his enclosure of a mask in the letter. In case I wasn’t deeply touched, NBC news broadcast the Governor’s reading accompanied by the music of “America the Beautiful”. And after I was deeply touched, I became deeply angry, and I will tell you why.

Nearly two years ago, my daughter and I stood with about 25,000 other people at the New York Port Authority Bus Terminal at 41st Street (the police had to stop more people from entering the building for fear that its four floors would collapse) and we all watched in amazement (if not bewilderment) at how a 3” snow event could utterly paralyze the streets and transportation

hub of a great City. Now the officials who serve on the Port Authority and administer it are appointed by the Governors of New York and New Jersey. Do you know what happened to the officials who oversaw that evening's "festivities"? Nothing. Indeed, I regret now, since I see how moved they are by letters, that I did not send a letter to Governor Cuomo and Governor Murphy enclosing therein a shovel. Nothing happened to any of these officials because the 3" snowstorm was perceived by them to be just one of the things that we as commuters are expected routinely to endure to "toughen" us up.

Oh yes, we are "tough" here in New York and New Jersey. "Tough, tough, tough"—these words have been repeatedly used by the Governors and Mayor exhorting us to carry on through this crisis in the name of "toughness".

My question is this: If you can't handle a 3" snow event, how can citizens trust you to handle a pandemic with all of its challenges and nuances?

If you think the aforesaid example was just an isolated "toughness" drill, think again, as not too long ago traffic was paralyzed not for a few hours but for days for mile after mile after mile at the George Washington Bridge, (another Port Authority creation), stalling not just traffic and trucks, but emergency vehicles and ambulances as well before the Port Authority, who administers the Bridge, figured it all out, and managed, after 5 days, to move the dozen cones which caused the problem. Five days to move a dozen cones.

Another question: As someone who has been "toughened up"—if it takes those of you in positions of authority 5 days to move a dozen cones, why should I or my fellow citizens trust you with the authority to manage a pandemic, to properly care for the sick and dying, or to accurately measure something so sophisticated and complicated as an "infection rate."

If government is incompetent to manage what amounts to a simple "crisis", why in the world should the citizenry wait for you to figure out a far more serious and sophisticated crisis, a pandemic, let alone manage the dynamics of an economy, the health of which we all rely on.

No, you tell us, this time is different—this is a big calamity—and don't forget, you remind us, unlike the previous free flow of traffic incidents which were small scale, this time, "We are all in this together." How many times we have heard this, "We are all in this together". "We have never seen anything like this before". "We have never seen this before". It is the litany of the historically illiterate; my fellow citizens, it is the lullaby of the incompetent. It is a song I choose not to sing, and I will tell you why.

In listening to Governor Cuomo tell it ad nauseum that he is in possession of "the facts, the facts, the facts, the data, the data, the data, the truth" (as if he had a monopoly on it), Governor Cuomo always weaves into his briefings references to his family's wisdom. I think his best reference was to his grandmother whose words of advice he quoted to the effect that "what do you know about nice"—you know about "nice when times are hard—that's when you

find out about the character of a person”—an observation with which I think we would all agree. That’s the beauty of it.

Well, I’ve got family too. In 1915 or thereabouts, Charlie Mysak and his wife, Mary, emigrated from Poland to America, and about the same time, Tony Rutigliano and his wife, Delores (Dora) emigrated from Italy to the United States. The Mysaks settled in Bensonhurst, and the Rutiglianos settled in Sheepshead Bay, a few miles away, both in Brooklyn. Charlie and Tony are my grandpas, Mary and Dora, my grandmas. Charlie was a cook and Tony was a barber. The year is significant because, as they settled in to find work and raise their families, what came their way was the 1918-1919 Flu pandemic. This pandemic would cost millions of people their lives worldwide, and caused the death of 600,000 Americans.

I loved my grandparents. They were not what you would call “highly educated” people, each of them had only a rudimentary knowledge of English. I got to know my grandpas very well, and I can tell you this. If some government official had walked in Tony Rutigliano’s barber shop in 1918-1919 and told him, “Tony, you’ve got to close your barber shop because of the flu virus, but the guy who sells booze at the corner can stay open because he’s essential and you’re not”, Tony would have punched him in the nose! And Charlie would have done the same thing, given the same direction. I’m proud of that. I’m proud of my grandpas and the wisdom they passed down.

By the grace of God, and certainly not the public authorities at the time, the Mysaks and the Rutiglianos survived the pandemic, the outbreak of polio, and the Depression, too. And between them, they sent six sons to fight the Nazis and the Japanese in World War II. The Mysaks and Rutiglianos fought in the Army, the Navy, the Marine Corps, and the Merchant Marines. My Uncle Frank won a bronze star fighting with Patton in France and Germany. My Dad, Joe, as a Marine technical illustrator, helped to design the maps (from aerial reconnaissance) used to bring the fight in the Pacific. My Uncle Eddie, after the war, went to Columbia University where he founded a world-renowned Speech and Hearing Clinic at Columbia that named the clinic after him when he passed away from pancreatic cancer at the age of 56. My Aunt Clara went on to teach her whole life in New York City public schools. She was a kind and brilliant lady filled with wisdom and good cheer.

These are my people and their story is not much different from millions of other Americans and New Yorkers. They worked, lived through, and survived the pandemic of 1918, the polio epidemic, the Depression, the War, the 1957 and 1968 pandemics, all of which tragically killed even more people than those infected, afflicted and killed now by COVID-19.

Do you think these people did not love their neighbors, that they did not empathize with or care for the sick and the dying?

Governor Cuomo is fond of saying when there is even a hint of someone disagreeing with his Executive Orders, or what he has done and is doing in New York: “I can count the bodies.” Well, I can too, Governor, and my people did, and so did their friends and neighbors, as did all

Americans. They counted the bodies too, and sadly, there were even more bodies to count then than there are now. If you had told my Aunt Clara or her sister or her brothers, or my grandpas and grandmas that you were going to close schools and libraries, bookstores, restaurants and barbershops and keep liquor stores open (because they are essential), you would have had quite a fight on your hands. And I'm proud of that, too. Where did their toughness come from—this toughness that you and other Governors and Mayors draw upon as though it were your own limitless reservoir.

The toughness came, not from the “experts”, but from the common experience of humanity. The toughness came from the fact that in the face of paralysis and death itself these people worked and endured, and that, through all of the crises I have heretofore described, it never occurred to the public authorities at the time to shut down the economy around them, not the great leaders—Woodrow Wilson, Al Smith, Herbert Lehman, Franklin Roosevelt, (who suffered from polio himself), Dwight Eisenhower—not even the less greats, Jimmie Walker, Robert Wagner or any of the others—none of them shut it down. Schools, libraries, Broadway shows, entertainment, barber shops, restaurants, industry and every other form of commerce adjusted to what you, our modern “leaders” call the “new reality”—and they carried on. Why? Because all of the leaders I've referenced, wise and less wise, Democrats and Republicans, knew instinctively and intuitively that a people's commerce, their livelihoods, whether it was a cook or a barber, or a doctor or a lawyer, these leaders knew that a vibrant economy, or any economy, was necessary to endure the crisis, whether it was the flu pandemic, contagious disease or virus, war or depression, or as Jack Kennedy put in on April 27, 1961, 59 years ago, “What is the point of our surviving if our traditions don't survive with us.”

The tough people who survived these crises, do you think they were stupid or heartless, that they didn't know how to count bodies, didn't know how to look after themselves, their neighbors, didn't know how to wash their hands, take precautions to the extent they could.

Why is it that our current crop of leaders has so little faith in us, and so much confidence in their experts and themselves: “We've never seen anything like this before,” they say. When it comes to danger, people, we have seen it before, not once, but many times, and each time and every time, we worked through it. What we have not seen before is the arrogance of leaders and their experts who believe they can “re-imagine” (that's the word Cuomo uses) and manage our future better than we can.

In the last months I have actually listened to the Governors and the Mayor. Here in the New York and New Jersey metropolitan area we get about 6 hours a day of it, and during the early presentations, I heard Governor Cuomo (he being the leader of the pack in terms of rhetorical volume) say repeatedly, “I am responsible, I am responsible, I am responsible—you want to blame someone, blame me, I am responsible.”

Okay. Here goes. At the outset of the crisis, we were all told that if we felt sick, we should stay home. And not long after that, we were told, millions of us, that even if we were not sick, we

should also stay home (“shelter in place, lockdown”). Governor Cuomo would then go off on one of his riffs about it being necessary to have a coordinated, statewide, indeed regional, comprehensive approach to managing the pandemic. And the reason for this was that the virus did not respect borders: “You think it is going to stop in New Rochelle”, or the border between New York and New Jersey—this virus does not respect borders, and he repeated it over and over again—as though he was arguing with someone who was saying that the virus did respect borders. In argument or rhetoric this is what is called setting up a strawman, part of what CNN and the New York Times characterize as Cuomo’s “brilliant” style. Given these wondrous reviews, I can, I assure you, that someday soon, some clever publisher will anthologize the Governor’s “fireside chats” (they are really more like lectures) and you will be able to count the times he repeats the border argument.

Now, I am only a humble bookseller, but I know, dear Governor, that viruses spread—that’s what viruses do, when they are unchecked by a vaccine as this one is. This being the case why would you then, by Executive Order, order everyone to stay home. If you order the healthy, the young, the uninfected (if there are any) to confine themselves with those who feel sick, or felt sick, or just confine themselves altogether in high-rise apartment buildings and multi-family dwelling (that predominate New York), what on earth could possibly make you think that the virus which, as you say, doesn’t respect borders, is now going to respect houses, or apartments or apartment buildings. And when these same people whom you ordered confined, venture out en masse to visit their pharmacies, supermarkets, and liquor stores, what would possibly make you think that the virus was going to respect these “essential” places or the people working therein. Indeed, in the early days of the pandemic, and for that matter, even now, I have never seen supermarkets so crowded, and I have actually witnessed liquor stores with lines outside awaiting entry to these already crowded emporiums.

I have news for you and CNN and the New York Times—your Order was a formula for spreading the virus. Indeed, if you actually look at your treasured charts and data, data, data—you will see that following your ordered lockdown, the rate of infection increased dramatically as did the hospital admission. And sure enough, in one of your riffs about facts, facts, facts, truth, truth, truth, and counting the bodies, I actually recall, so many briefings ago, hearing you say, “Gee, maybe I made a mistake in ordering everyone to lockdown.” Not maybe, Mr. Governor.

You don’t have to be a first-year medical student, or a student of past pandemics, to know that you don’t congregate masses of people in enclosed spaces in the face of a pandemic. But you did. You ordered it. Tony Rutigliano would have a word for this and it is one I think you will understand: “STUNAD”!

As a citizen, of course, I have other questions. I find it particularly difficult to understand how any public health system which spends billions of dollars on public health administration, health officials, directors of hospitals, administrators—all of whom know, or should have known, the history of pandemics and the challenges they pose—how many of these officials could not adequately supply the basics in terms of equipment, gowns, masks, gloves to those who would

most need them in helping the sick, or caring for the dying. The Swine Flu, H1N1, are not exactly ancient history. You think it is “nice”, that was your word, that the farmer sent you a mask, and it is, and it’s a beautiful, effective, rhetorical device in your presentation, even without the music, but then as I thought about it in the context of what public health officials are supposed to know about viruses and their ability to spread in densely populated areas—it seemed to me, sort of pathetic that in New York, where we pride ourselves on the greatest health care system in the world, we would need the farmer’s mask. If it was a question of money, how could you, as a 3-term governor, and Mr. DeBlasio, as a 2-term mayor, call for and allow for the expenditures of 300-400 million dollars to establish congestion pricing in New York City last year? \$300-400 million buys a lot of masks and a lot of equipment. I can count, too. Maybe you could send the farmer an autographed copy of the legislation, as traffic congestion won’t be a “problem” here in New York for a long, long time.

But these are questions for another day, I suppose, and we will see in the future as we review what happened here, how many public officials, hospital officials, nursing home administrators, will come forward to say, as you have said, “I am responsible”. And we will also see what happens to them, if anything.

A few final points. There is a radio here (1010 WINS) which broadcasts regularly your exclaiming, “we’re going to kick Coronavirus’ ass”. I’m sure it was spoken by you with good intentions. I attended the 1964 World’s Fair and I remember it with fondness for its optimism and faith in the future in terms of medicine and technology. If you would have told me in 1964 that in 2020 we would still be losing hundreds of thousands of American lives each year to Cancer and Heart disease (both my Mom and Dad died of cancer), I would have been very disappointed. Given that more than 60,000 Americans have died in this pandemic, somehow words like, “we’re going to kick Corona’s ass” seem a little lame in the absence of a vaccine. So far the only asses that have been kicked are the millions of people who have been put out of work, and it occurs to me that if you are going to kick any disease’s ass in the future, if you are going to save any lives in the future (I can count the bodies), it will take a vibrant, dynamic economy to do it.

I hear you are now working on gauges, checking the gears so that they properly mesh, performing, gathering the testing, contact-tracing numbers, contemplating the various phases of re-opening. I will put this to you and the Mayor: Freedom built New York, and the absence of freedom is killing it, and will kill it.

You will excuse me from listening to future broadcasts because the other day you finally reached the ultimate peroration. In response to reporter’s question whether the models you used to issue your Executive Orders were wrong (in fact, they were), you proclaimed, “We changed reality.” Of course, dear Governor, you didn’t. For the reasons set forth here, you actually made things worse.

The other day I heard you say, "this is turning into a political brawl" as though politics could and should be avoided. You know, there should have been a political brawl in this matter. Politics, as I understand it in our country, is a discussion between citizens concerning the scope of the powers of those we elect to govern. I don't recall being consulted, and I'm sure the millions of unemployed workers were not consulted before you and the Mayor started pressing the emergency buttons destroying our livelihoods. We, not you, have to live with the consequences of that decision and now I am told that we, not you, have to wait while you, not we, re-imagine our City and State.

Not that you asked, but here's my politics. You don't know me; you don't know my family. When I was waking up at 5:00 am and returning home after 11:00 pm, I don't recall seeing you at my bookstand. If you don't mind, I'll re-imagine my own life, and I know a lot of other New Yorkers and Americans who feel the same way. We will pursue our own happiness. We are better at it than you. And when the next wave comes, and the next virus comes, and it will, there better be a political brawl before millions of us are ordered to sit it out.

And I'll close with a question that in our country no free man should ever have to ask a "public servant": Can I get back to work now?

GET OUT OF THE WAY!

Very truly yours,



Charles J. Mysak

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