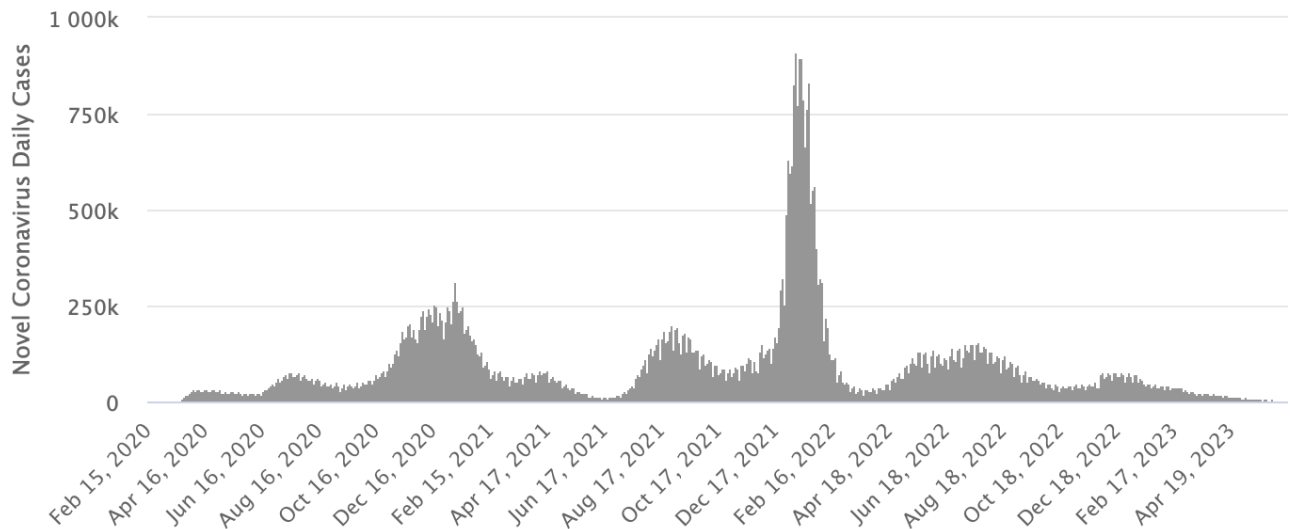


Letter 45: COVID Strikes Close to Home

July 11, 2023

Dear Daughters:

Over the last months, new Covid-19 cases in the United States have continued to occur at the low rate we saw when last I wrote – a few thousand new cases a day nationwide. That’s not nothing, of course, but nothing to be particularly scared about either.



That’s certainly what I thought, as I set out on a trip to Italy to attend your wedding, Nikki. The three-year pandemic is finally ending, I told myself, and our family can get on with living our lives. Barb and I both wore masks in the airports when travelling to Italy, but when we arrived for a few days sightseeing before joining the wedding festivities in Tuscany, we dispensed with masks and just bounced around Rome. Dinners were exciting, in tiny restaurants on narrow streets with fantastic food and wine. This was exactly the life we had been missing for three years! Caitlin, you joined us for our last Roman evening, and we got to finally meet Cody, your very impressive boyfriend. He and I read the same books! Much fun – and no thought that evening of COVID.

A Tuscan Wedding

For their wedding, Nikki and Matt rented a villa located way out in Tuscany's wine and olive growing countryside and hosted a wedding weekend. Great fun, every minute of it! Sue, you couldn't come, as our new granddaughter is only a few months old, but I tried to send lots of pictures so you could be there in spirit. Guests came from all over the world – mostly from the USA and Australia (Matt's home), but others from Germany, Belgium, South Sudan, Thailand, and more.



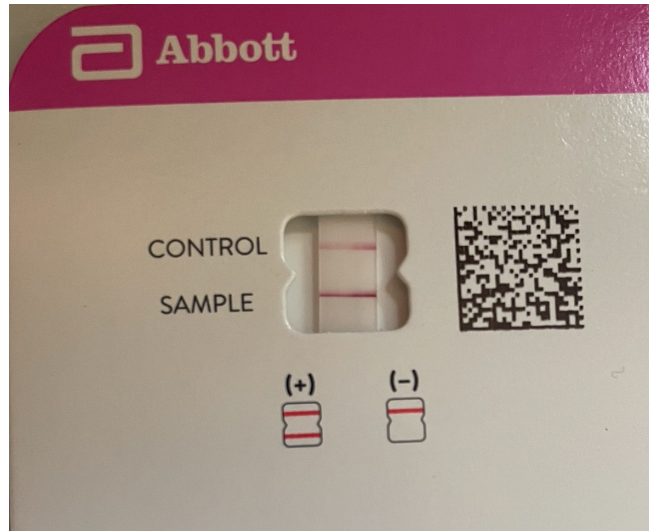
The actual wedding ceremony was in an olive grove by the villa you see above, and all went splendidly – until just after the last words were said. Then it began to rain and hail! Nikki had arranged a huge circus-like tent, so everyone scurried inside and we dropped the plastic sides down to keep the rain from blowing in and drenching everyone.

See anything wrong with this picture – a crowd of people from all over the world packed together in a tent, all breathing the same air? We certainly didn't then, and were VERY thankful for the tent! But later, we were to remember those moments...



Here Matt and friends are stopping an umbrella from flying into the tent! After about an hour, the fierce rainstorm abated and I was able to give my “father of the bride” toast. In it I reminded everyone that Johnson weddings are always stormy: there were 36 inches of snow when Barb and I got married; it rained steadily on the day of Sue’s outdoor wedding, until she started down the aisle and the sun burst forth; here at Nikki’s wedding the opposite has happened, with a sunny wedding followed by storm! The sun came out as I spoke, and festivities went on into the evening. I was able to meet many of Matt’s friends who until then I had only heard about.

All in all, a great European holiday! I boarded the plane in Rome feeling wonderful –but quickly began to feel lousy. Soon I was coughing, a dry rasping cough from deep in my chest. By the time we got home your mother was coughing too. We took COVID tests as soon as we got in the door and, you guessed it, we both tested positive:

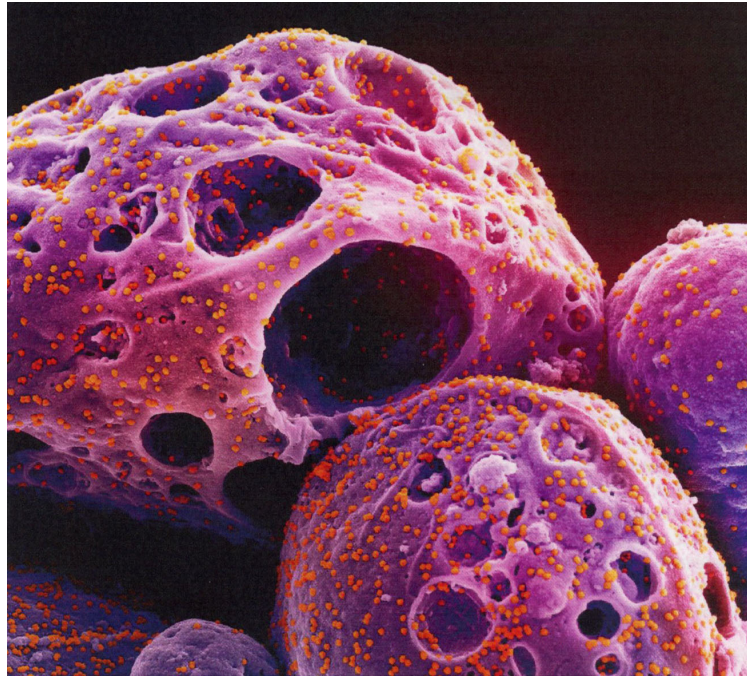


It turns out Italy wasn't kind to our wedding party. Over 15 guests got COVID! It seems that the closed tent flaps created a make-shift indoor space, confined and unventilated – a perfect environment for Covid-19 to spread. Luckily, no one became seriously ill.

COVID knocked me down harder than your mother, but it never was more than harsh coughing and feeling very very tired. Ten days after infection was the first day I did not test positive for COVID-19. Your mother, younger and healthier, cleared two days earlier. For three years I have dreaded becoming infected with the COVID virus, as I am 81 years old and most of those who die are old folk. But this dread drove your mother and I to get re-boosted with the binary booster again just three weeks before we came to the wedding, a precaution that may have saved my life.

As I have been telling you in my last few letters, the boosters we have been taking don't really do much to prevent infection by the new variants we face these days because of "immune Imprinting." Your immune system is keyed to respond to the strain it first encounters, so our vaccines protect us from the original Wuhan strain of three years ago, but not so much from today's variants. So the binary booster vaccine your mother and I received before we travelled actually did little to prevent infection by the variant we encountered in Italy. But the recent booster DID prevent serious illness! And that is the key lesson I take away from my COVID-19 experience.

The binary booster your mother and I received before we travelled was directed at both the original Wuhan strain and the Omicron variant common two years ago, BA. The variant we face today in this country is not variant BA, but rather a mashup of two BA subvariants which is being called variant XBB. This photo is of variant XBB.1.5 bursting from human cells:

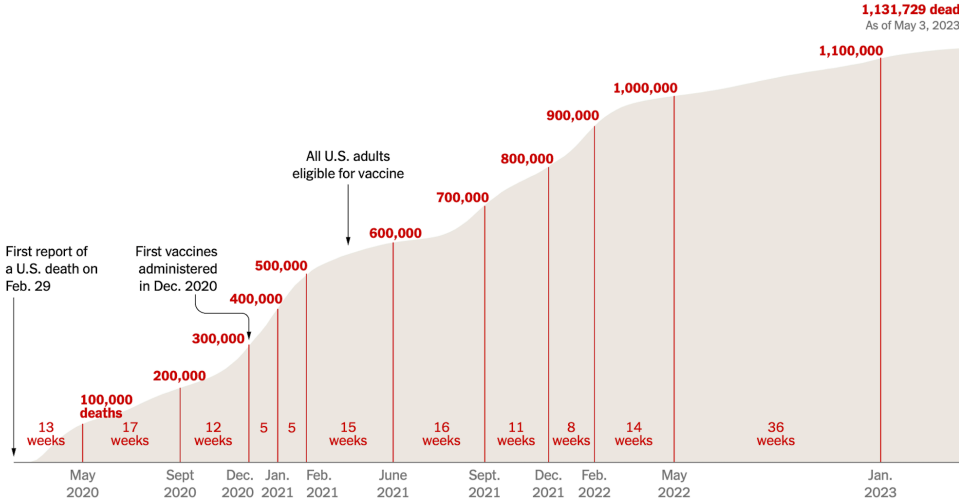


Most Americans Are Moving On

It's hard to believe we are entering our 4th COVID-19 summer. Way back in 2020, when the pandemic first burst among us, I had imagined an endgame would arrive soon. It didn't. But when effective vaccines arrived, it seemed the danger was finally over – at least for those who got the shots. I and many others speculated then about herd immunity and tried to work out how many Americans would have to be infected or vaccinated before we were safe: 60%, I estimated. But the numbers infected and vaccinated passed 60% with no herd immunity in sight. Then passed 70%. Today the CDC estimates fully 94% of Americans have been vaccinated or infected at least once -- and still no herd immunity. Herd immunity proved to be wishful thinking. Why? New variants arose, more transmissible and more able to evade vaccination immunity. And what immunity the vaccines did give us waned after a few months. A single vaccination was not going to be the final answer.

In the end, it turns out the scariest of the predictions made by modelers at the beginning of the pandemic have proved true. Dr Anthony Fauci’s worst-case scenario of a million American deaths was derided at the time, and yet today we are past 1.15 million dead. Over 22 million have died worldwide.

The pace of infection, however, began to slow in America this last winter, and I thought we might be approaching an endpoint:



Government health officials certainly think so. On May 5, 2023 the World Health Organization declared the global health emergency to be finished, and a few days later on May 11 the Center for Disease Control agreed. While COVID-19 was still infecting folks worldwide, the official position is that after three years the pandemic is finally over. Most Americans agree. When polled last week, 66% of those asked said the pandemic was over. Your mother and I see few people wearing masks at the grocery store any more, and restaurant business is booming. In airports going to Italy last month, I counted only 2 people per hundred wearing masks. The decrease in mask wearing is not what worries me. The danger as I see it is that few people feel any further need for vaccination against COVID-19. Only 17% of Americans have had a shot of the binary booster vaccine that your mother and I got a second shot of last month.

This week the FDA advisory panel recommended a fall vaccine booster for everyone, and especially the elderly or immune compromised. They recommended that this new booster not be binary at all, but rather be directed entirely at the variant infecting people now, variant XBB. This is also what the World Health Organization is recommending. It is very important that all of our family get this XBB vaccine booster when it becomes available in the fall. It is not perfect protection, but it is our best shot at a healthy future.

Happy Days Are Here Again

Despite three years of being quite careful to wear face masks in public and get every vaccination and booster available, your mother and I failed to escape infection by COVID-19. Caitlin and Nikki, you both have already been infected, Nikki many times and with a lingering Long Covid. Susie, your careful sequestering of your family leaves you the sole uninfected member of the family. Well done! So now I hope our family can look forward to a healthy future. The smile on honeymooning Nikki's face says it for all of us:



Love you all,
Dad