

Dear Rhode Island,

It's spring at last: the lawns are green again; the daffodils have come and are almost gone; the tulips are blooming – red and yellow; the branches that make up the brown underbrush are red and green now; the air feels clean again as winds drive the weather from the west and south out to sea. Sometimes a good sea breeze slips in between those winds to tempt us with the salt air. The first leaves have appeared, pale yellow and white without even a hint of the green they will become, tentatively emerging at the tips of the highest branches one more time. Spring again. Another miracle.

We have survived the pandemic as a people, more or less, but too many of us were lost along the way. That is, most of us lived, but too many sickened and died, most of those unnecessarily. We still mask our faces and try to stay far apart. We don't hug or even shake hands, and we avoid crowds and parties, uncertain about what is safe. There is now a distance – arm's length at least—between most of us and the world we used to know and love. A caution. A question. Even fear.

Still, life is stirring again. There is traffic on the 6/10 connector and lines at KFC. People are shopping and scurrying. The politicians and pundits are back to strutting and crowing like barnyard roosters.

I'm of two, or maybe even three minds about the pandemic.

On the one hand, we will have lost 600,000 Americans and almost 3000 Rhode Islanders by the time this is done, just because we couldn't agree on how to act and what to do and despite evidence that our choices hurt and even killed some of us: we are still a fractious and stiff-necked people, but also boisterous and happy in our unique, lusty materialistic way, which we didn't change, even in the face of this threat.

The pandemic exposed us to ourselves in a unique way. We finally had to look our racism in the face, but it took a man to be murdered on prime-time TV for us to do that. The virus spread quickly among people who live close together and work two and three jobs, who are mostly people of color – and then it spread to everyone else. So it became impossible not to understand that we are one people anyway, regardless of our biases, our distance, our choices and our differences.

The pandemic showed us that schools feed their students breakfast and lunch because it turns out that half of Rhode Island's families can't afford to feed their own children. So much for a robust economy with thousands of high-paying jobs. Let us thank famous men and women, our leaders, one more time. The pandemic revealed once again that we value those jobs and the profit that they create for some more than we sometimes value human life, common sense, families and our communities. I'm a little ashamed about that.

Still we muddled through. Half of us rushed to be vaccinated, some out of a desperate and somewhat over-blown fear, a selfish need to protect themselves. Others, thoughtful

and cautious, made more careful and deliberate choices, focused on our common life, and acted to protect their communities and one another. Still others were pulled or pushed into vaccination, swept along by obligation, anxiety and guilt, while many remain resistant, afraid of a tiny needle or imbued with Swamp Yankee self-righteousness: no mere virus is a match for us because we are invincible. Don't you stomp on me, live free or die, and the hell with it and all the rest of you.

One side of my brain worries that the pandemic was a message that we didn't get, a letter that we didn't open, and just the first of ten plagues, each building on the way we ignore the one before. Slow down, the message said. Think. Breathe. Just be present. Don't shop. Listen. Take care of everyone – care for the widow and the stranger, the orphan and the poor. Do all those football games, new cars and bars open until 1 AM really matter?

This is a cold virus, that side of my brain says, a tiny threat compared to a universe of more substantial threats. Did all of you good people devote yourselves to doing what was necessary to contain it? Listen up, people. And change.

But another part of my brain wonders if the virus isn't a gift, in a perverse way, a chance to step backward, a pause, an opportunity for a deeply needed moment of reflection.

Dear Rhode Island. It's springtime. We survived the winter, the pandemic, the chaos of our politics and culture, and the consequences of our sloth, lust, arrogance and greed. We live in the most beautiful place on earth, with the most interesting people on earth. We are diverse, multi-colored, multi-cultural, loving, connected, discordant, over-sexed and under-slept, thoughtless, passionate, distracted and engaged. Soon maybe we can come out of the cocoon and live together gloriously again, perhaps a little more quietly, much more lovingly and maybe just a little smarter and wiser than we were.

Maybe.

If we try, try and try, we'll succeed at last.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Fine". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and a stylized "F".

Michael Fine, M.D.