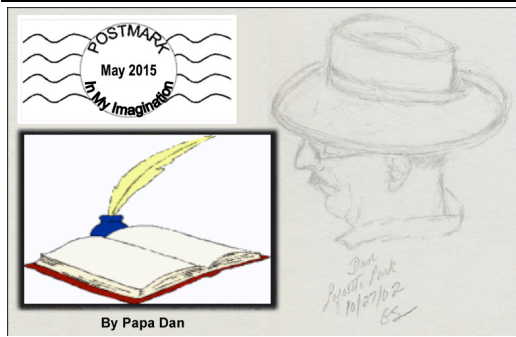


# Shelter

By Dan Sapone



**“So be the change, so be the shelter.”**

— Danny Burke and Marieme Diop

**“Screw This Virus”**

— David Brooks

**“It is not enough to help the feeble up,  
But to support them after.”**

— William Shakespeare

(Today: April 23, is honored as his birthday)

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The word “Shelter” is at the forefront of America’s thinking these days. California was among the first states to implement a “Shelter In Place” strategy for everyone who is not performing “essential” duties. As the virus has become more pervasive and deadlier, state governors have filled the leadership void left by ... well ... you-know-who. So, today, with advice from the World Health Organization (WHO), “Shelter In Place” is what passes for the “American Way of Life” — at least for now, and for most of us. Of course, “Commander Chaos” (“He Who Must Not Be Named”) has defunded and demeaned the WHO for those who are listening to him and encouraged people to resist the shelter-in-place regulations that most governors have imposed. While the President wants to “open up the economy,” most individual states and counties are strengthening “shelter” policies and have begun requiring the wearing of masks outside the home. It is clear that opening up the economy prematurely will directly cause a predictable number of deaths. This morning, 75% of the American people support “Shelter In Place” regulations and only 11% do not. As we lift our eyes to the horizon, we can see that much of the rest of the world has been “Sheltering” for some time now with strong regulations.

Of course, buried in that approach to “Sheltering” is the need to define what is “essential.” Which workers should be considered sufficiently “essential” to continue working outside the home? The consensus on that definition has settled broadly on health-care professionals, first responders, and workers providing services and products (like food, medicine, fuel, etc.) that keep civilization operating. Those professions are considered sufficiently ‘essential’ to go to work. They don’t *GET* Shelter → they make Shelter possible for others.

So, for the vast majority of us, this new way of life means simply: “Stay Home.” for an unknown number of days ... weeks ... months ... Sounds simple, eh? And yet it ISN’T simple at all.

## **Staying home**

Staying Home, of course, means not going to work, not going to school, and staying away from (or at least distant from) people who don’t live in your home. It means at least three things:

1. Not going to work: Here in the 21st century, America employs the largest number of people in history — our ‘work force’ is about 165 million. While that sounds powerfully prosperous, it also means that this record number of people have been relying on those paychecks to buy food, pay bills, and keep a roof over their heads. So, NOT going to work is NOT simple.

By contrast, here in April of 2020, more people are **UN**employed than at any time in our history. Nearly 20 million Americans have filed for unemployment benefits in the past three weeks alone. Some economists warn that, next month, the unemployment rate could reach as high as 15% — a number that could add up to about **25 million people**. That’s a lot of rent payments, utility bills, mortgage payments, and groceries. We tend to compare hard times to the depression of the 1930s when unemployment reached 24.9% of the workforce. In 1935, that added up to “**ONLY**” about **15 million people**. Today’s unemployment, though a smaller percentage, has a much greater effect.

2. Staying home from school: This year, more than 56 million students attend school (elementary, middle, and high school) in America. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 62% of American households have two working parents (not including working single parents). While some number of parents will have the opportunity to ‘work from home,’ the whole picture of parents and students not going where they usually go, every day, is a gigantic disruption for millions of families. So, “Shelter in place” is a two-edged strategy: many parents will not be earning a living during the “Shelter” strategy and their children will not be attending school. If they are all home, well, at least there is not a day-care expense, right? AND they will be avoiding contacts that can expose them to the virus. But nobody would agree that is a solved problem.

3. Providing food for yourself and your family: Again, this cuts two ways: many families will come close to running out of cash to buy food if they are not working AND they must solve the problem of going out into the world to the grocery store if they do have the money.

### → → How Do We FEEL About it All?

The stress of this widespread disruption is new for most of us who were not alive during the Great Depression of the 1930s. While America has had economic downturns and recessions every couple of decades, this is a new level of disruption. History tells us that **how we feel about it** often influences how well we survive. People react to the stress of disruption in many different ways. Over time, our writers and thinkers have provided words that have been thought-provoking and — sometimes — help us to find comfort, and sometimes even solutions. If we are collectively, as a civilization, forced to save ourselves by taking shelter, let’s look at a random collection of words that have been offered for the specific purpose of managing how we **feel** about adversity. Historically, we might ask: what effect have our writers had on widespread hard times — AND have our writers been helpful? Let’s see.

• [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin](#) offered his thoughts about how to respond to adversity:

— “In the final analysis, the questions of why bad things happen to good people transmutes itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it happened.”

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• [David Brooks](#) often takes a philosophical approach to consider what it takes to be human during difficult times. Here, his New York Times column titled “[Screw This Virus](#)” acknowledges the need for more than shelter, but the greater need for solidarity. He wrote:

“Solidarity is not a feeling; it’s an active virtue. It is out of solidarity, and not normal utilitarian logic, that George Marshall in “Saving Private Ryan” endangered a dozen lives to save just one. It’s solidarity that causes a Marine to risk his life dragging the body of his dead comrade from battle to be returned home. It’s out of solidarity that health care workers stay on their feet amid terror and fatigue. Some things you do not for yourself or another but for the common whole. ...

It will require a tenacious solidarity from all of us to endure the months ahead. We’ll be stir-crazy, bored,

desperate for normal human contact. But we'll have to stay home for the common good. It's an odd kind of heroism this crisis calls for. Those also serve who endure and wait. ...

I wonder if there will be an enduring shift in consciousness after all this. All those tribal us-them stories don't seem quite as germane right now. The most relevant unit of society at the moment is the entire human family.

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• Robert Christau wrote, in "Going Into the City": "Nuts to the educational value of suffering."

• Alexandra Kostoulas, a writing teacher in San Francisco (Cary Sapone sent me her words) tells us of the responsibility of writers (like David Brooks) and other artists, to respond to difficult times: "There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal." ...

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Cormac McCarthy wrote of the paralysis of deciding what to do in difficult times:

"Nobody wants to be here and nobody wants to leave."

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Ernest Hemingway described how he tried to recover from unhappiness and fear (albeit, in his case, with mixed personal results). From his novel [A Moveable Feast](#):

— "As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away, leaving only the sea taste and the succulent texture, and as I drank their cold liquid from each shell and washed it down with the crisp taste of the wine, I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans."

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→ → **And, On the Subject of Leadership in Difficult Times:**

• Abraham Lincoln spoke on this subject in a way that is relevant in today's America— judging the character of people who are tasked to make decisions that affect other people:

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

• Frida Ghitis, a world-affairs columnist, writes in response to leaders who waste their power by trying to solve the wrong problem: "The virus can be stopped by keeping it from spreading. That's how we suffocate it. That's how we reignite the economy. Trump's wish to see the economy return to growth is shared by the American people. But the cause of the economic crisis is the virus. This is a cause-and-effect situation. To save the economy we need to stop the virus. Trump already tried to stop it by denying it was a problem. The new plan he is considering could prove just as ineffective and just as deadly. The decision on how to move forward should be left in the hands of the experts."

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Bryan Tracey — Another leadership question for our time: "Is a leader really successful?" Answer:

"Successful people are always looking for opportunities to help others. Unsuccessful people are always asking, What's in it for me?"

• Howard Beale reacted to the inadequacy of leadership in a famous scene from the movie "Network": "We're mad as hell and we're not going to take it anymore." Will America react in this way?

• Terry Goodkind writes about choosing between easy and difficult solutions to the challenges we face: "If the road is easy, you're likely going the wrong way."

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→ → **Across Centuries: An obvious Solution: Help Others. Be the "Shelter" for Someone Else** Here's what a few of our writers have said about this highest priority of our time:

• Charles Dickens (19th century) — "No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of another."

• John Bunyan (17th century) — "You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."

• Shannon Alder (April 2020) — While Sheltering in place, can we still maintain our connection to others? "One of the most important things you can do on this earth is to let people know they are not alone."

• Mother Teresa (20th century) — "Never worry about the numbers. Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you."

## → → OK, So What about the Writers? Can the poets survive? Can They Help?

- As reported recently in [The Atlantic](#), William Shakespeare wrote some of his best works during the plague. In that article, Daniel Pelzner makes some insightful connections between our “plague” (coronavirus) and that one. He wrote, “As with everything that the coronavirus leaves in its wake, the suspension of operations by most major theaters around the country feels surreal.” The closing of theaters — happening today around the world — is not, a new phenomenon. He continued: “Whether theater provides an entertaining diversion from “the evening news” or might be the cause of further suffering, however, is a debate that goes back at least to Shakespeare’s day. Elizabethan theaters were frequently shuttered in London during outbreaks of the bubonic plague, which claimed [nearly a third](#) of the city’s population. The official rule was that once the death rate exceeded thirty per week, performances would be canceled. (As an infant, Shakespeare himself barely survived an outbreak that killed his older siblings.) Like New York’s governor Andrew Cuomo, who has banned gatherings of more than 500 people, [London officials in the 16th century](#) worried that people flocking to town to “see certayne stage plays” would be “close pestered together in small roomes,” creating the means “whereby great infeccion with the plague may rise and growe, to the great hynderaunce of the common wealth of this citty.” Shakespeare’s troupe, The King’s Men, had to rely on royal gifts and provincial tours to replace their lost box office. No such luck — so far — for our 21st-century theaters.

How was The Bard’s writing affected by the plague? It’s historians tell us that Shakespeare turned to writing poetry when — and because — the plague closed the theaters in 1593. That year he published his narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, in which the goddess begs a kiss from a beautiful boy, “to [drive infection](#) from the dangerous year.” Ironically (to our ears), the goddess claimed, “the plague is banish’d by thy breath.” Love poetry, it seems, could be spurred by the plague, and—in the fantasy of the time—even cure it. Maybe so — history suggests that another closure of theaters, in 1606, allowed Shakespeare, an actor and shareholder in The King’s Men, to do a lot of dramatic writing. While sitting out London’s early-17th -century version of “Shelter In Place,” Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* that year. Can we, today, make such lemonade out of this terrible lemon?

- One modern poet, David Malouf (© 1992), wrote a few prophetic lines in a longer poem anticipating a modern plague:

“The sickness in this month is grown so general  
no man can judge. It comes to this: we kill  
our neighbours with the very prayers we sigh  
to Heaven. O my Lord, spare me, spare me.”

## → → Finally — Heroes of this time of Shelter: The Uniters

- Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York:  
*“And we’re going to get through it ... because we are united, and when you are united, there is nothing you can’t do. And because ... we are tough. You have to be tough. This place makes you tough. But it makes you tough in a good way. We’re going to make it because I love New York, and I love New York because ... New York loves all of you. Black and white and brown and Asian and short and tall and gay and straight. New York loves everyone. That’s why I love New York. It always has, it always will. And at the end of the day, my friends, even if it is a long day, and this is a long day, love wins. Always. And it will win again through this virus. Thank you.”*

- California's Governor Gavin Newsom is exerting significant leadership. He wants us to be steadfast, compassionate, and optimistic:  
 "Check in on loved ones; check in on your neighbors. Stay home. This is not a permanent state. This is a moment in time, and we will meet this moment together."

**Epilogue: Some of "poets" shine a timeless light, from their own time, on times like these**

*One reason cats are happier than people  
 is that they have no newspapers.*

— Gwendolyn Brooks, "In the Mecca" 1968

*Some days felt longer than other days. Some days felt like two whole days.*

— Joshua Ferris, "Then We Came to the End" 2007

*Lord! How sad a sight it is to see the streets empty of people.*

— Samuel Pepys, "Diary," 1667

*The burden of keeping three people in toilet paper seemed to me rather a heavy one.*

— Barbara Pym, "Excellent Women" 1952

*One day someone will use the last surviving Latin word in English to say something like, This sucks.*

— Michael Hofmann, interview in *The Paris Review* December 2014

*I've heard the saying "That sucks" for years without really being sure of what it meant.  
 Now I think I know.*

— Stephen King, "The Stand" 1978

*Nothing ill come near thee!*

— William Shakespeare, "Cymbeline" 1611

*All is infection, mother ...*

*We shall sit quietly in this room,  
 and I think we'll be spared.*

— Rita Dove, "Fiammetta Breaks Her Peace" April 12, 2020

*Do your friends shun you? Do people cross the street when they see you approaching?*

— Flann O'Brien, "The Best of Myles" 1999

*How we survived: we locked the doors and let nobody in.*

— Ellen Bryan Voigt, "Kyrie" 1995

*If you don't know the exact moment when the lights will go out, you might as well read until they do.*

— Clive James, "Latest Readings" 2015

*No restaurants? The means of consoling oneself: reading cookbooks.*

— Attributed to Charles Baudelaire 1860s

*Make up your mind to drink wine in quantity.*

— Kingsley Amis, "On Drink" 1972

*If you are solitary be not idle.*

— Samuel Johnson, in James Boswell's "The Life of Samuel Johnson" 1791

And, finally, two of my favorites:

*The greatest pleasure I know, is to do a good action by stealth, and to have it found out by accident.*

— Attributed to Charles Lamb 1800-ish

*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*

— attributed to Edmund Burke (but really: John Stuart Mill 1867, and John F. Kennedy 1961)