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Opinion

Opinion: A fraying of humanity amid the coronavirus pandemic

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Shoppers are entering stores without masks and without regard for how close they are to you, the author writes. Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com

By **Guest Columnist**

Ofer Raban

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Perhaps the biggest discovery I have made during the coronavirus crisis is how effortlessly and painlessly life can diminish. I was a person who was never home: I used my abode to sleep and shower, and was mostly out and about. Suddenly I find myself locked up inside for 22 hours a day—but there is no trauma, and little distress. And time flies, disappearing into the ether—days, weeks, months. The ease with which we can find ourselves living a diminished existence is, frankly, horrifying. And I realize that this is precisely

what happens to many of us as we grow old: we sink, effortlessly, into a smaller existence—fewer social interactions, fewer new experiences, an eternal monotony.

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To be sure, there are some advantages to the crisis: I am spared from seeing my colleagues, my productivity levels have actually risen, I may look better with longer hair, and I discovered the joys of long leisurely walks.

But overall, the crisis is disillusioning. For one, I am appalled by the behavior of not an insignificant number of my fellow citizens. They walk in the middle of the sidewalk, sometimes two and three across, and don't budge. They enter grocery stores without masks, and nearly brush against me while reaching for their favorite items. They zoom by on their bikes just inches away, leaving me raging in a gust of wind and God knows what else. What is this? Unawareness? Carelessness? Defiance? Malice? People have no obligation to care for themselves; but in a plague, we sink together. This pandemic brings to light some important distinctions between nations—and in some regards, we don't look too good. Beyond the governmental dysfunction and inefficiency, there seems to be some widespread absence of social responsibility. And what is civilization but the wisdom to live together?

And speaking of living together, here is another disturbing sign: the kneejerk delegitimization of political opponents. This dangerous phenomenon is long in the making in the U.S., but it is reaching new heights under President Trump and the coronavirus crisis. Being a liberal, I mostly consume the liberal media. There, regrettably, there is a common demonization of those who call

for a swift opening of the economy. In a frenzy of self-righteousness, many liberals describe such advocates as greedy capitalists with little regard for human life; some evil combination of Bernie Madoff and the emperor Nero. Can't these critics see that there is life and death on both sides? Or that the heaviest toll is and will be paid by the poor and dispossessed? Swift opening of the economy may be a bad idea, but no one should doubt its legitimacy, or the honest consideration it deserves.

The situation is no better on the other side. Conservatives are quick to hurl ridiculous and at times astounding accusations of tyranny by officials looking to contain a deadly pandemic.

Alongside displays of heroism and benevolence, the pandemic accentuates some of our ugliest ills. I comfort myself with the discomfoting thought that at least with the coronavirus, one dies alone.

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