

GUEST ESSAY

Are We Following the Science or Our Tribes?

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By Carrie McKean

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MIDLAND, Texas — I learned to drive on the back roads of the Texas panhandle, where the long, empty stretches of dusty caliche neatly divide thousands of acres of farm and ranch land. Everyone knew you drove in the middle of the road, particularly during bad weather, so that you didn't risk sliding into a ditch. If you got stuck in one after a typical summer thunderstorm, you'd probably have to wait until some good-natured farmer meandered by and pulled you out, thankful that you'd given him a story to share with friends at the grain elevator the next morning.

I've been thinking, more metaphorically, about the trouble with ditches lately. How ever since social distancing began, red and blue areas of our country have become even more culturally isolated from one another, dug into the norms of our respective partisan trenches.

A few weeks ago, my 10-year-old daughter, Cora, and I walked into an indoor trampoline park. Resuming full-scale kid birthday parties became socially acceptable here in West Texas months ago, but this was our first time back indoors like that. Though many of us were vaccinated, none of the guests wore masks, the place appeared to be at full capacity, and kids were laughing and playing together like it was 2019 again.

Depending on your ZIP code, this tale may make you shrug or shriek. As a mom accustomed to weighing risks facing my children all the time, this felt like a moderate one, taken in exchange for a significant boost to my daughter's mental and emotional well-being.

As vaccinations pick up, coronavirus cases drop and immunity broadens, our communities nationwide are reopening — but at wildly different paces. And a time that should mostly be dominated by relief and celebration has been overtaken by vitriol and smug regional comparisons. Much of the bickering plays out on the battleground of social media, where competing data sets and cherry-picked anecdotes become fodder for justifying what we already believe.

“Red state” or “blue city,” we all have a tendency to view the pandemic decisions we've made as well-considered calculated risks, while deeming other communities' choices as ill-informed — rooted in either irrational fear or, on the flip side, complete disregard for the well-being of others.

Here in Midland, it's fair to say we're in a ditch on the right. Local distrust of Big Government has always been high. Yet the indecipherable and constantly wavering advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention certainly hasn't inspired confidence in conservative areas like mine. I find myself — someone who had a large and relatively loose pandemic “pod,” but always wears masks indoors when businesses ask for it — torn.

In March 2020, I cried in the shower, wondering how a local culture that seems to value individual liberty above all else could navigate a situation that requires collective cooperation and putting others first.

Initially, I was angry that local leaders didn't immediately mandate the kind of curve-flattening behaviors I saw enforced in left-leaning communities. But in the fall, when our school district quickly pivoted to a full-time, in-person option after starting virtually, I traded my frustration for gratitude. My second- and fourth-grade girls were getting some normalcy without our paying for private school, the only option available in many progressive places where public schools remained shuttered.

Now with the arrival of spring, the general feeling in town is decidedly prepandemic. Some locals joke that while the pandemic might not be over, we're over the pandemic. Texas lifted mask mandates and other restrictions on March 10. A few weeks later Gov. Greg Abbott trumpeted results some liberals thought were impossible: "Today the 7-day Covid positivity rate dropped to a new recorded low: 4.95 percent," he said in a tweet. "Hospitalizations dropped to a 6 month low."

OPINION CONVERSATION

Questions surrounding the Covid-19 vaccine and its rollout.

- **What can I do once I'm vaccinated?**

Tara Haelle, a science journalist, argues that even after you're vaccinated, "you will need to do your own risk assessment."

- **How can I protect myself from new variants of the virus?**

Abraar Karan, an internal medicine physician, says we should stick with fundamental precautions that prevent infection.

- **What can I do while my children are still unvaccinated?**

David Leonhardt writes about the difficult safety calculations families will face.

- **When can we declare the pandemic over?**

Aaron E. Carroll, a professor of pediatrics, writes that some danger will still exist when things return to "normal."

In that same P.S.A., he also gently toed the line between public health prudence and Texans' independent streak: "Everyone now qualifies for a shot. They are highly recommended to prevent getting Covid, but always voluntary."

The mass vaccination site here in Midland, an efficient, well-executed endeavor, closed on April 30. Our public health officials believe they can better reach vulnerable populations who still need vaccines through targeted campaigns. But the closure also reflects the waning local vaccine demand.

Though I'm vaccinated, many people I know are not, and it's not because they've all fallen for fringe conspiracy theories. Many remain unconvinced that vaccine safety can be assured, given the compressed development timeline — choosing to bet on Covid's high survivability rate rather than voluntarily injecting themselves with something they see as pushed by Big Government.

Add to this dilemma questions like those raised by Leana S. Wen, a public health and health policy writer for The Washington Post. In a recent column, she channeled the doubts many people still have and critiqued President Biden's intensely spaced-out and masked-up address to Congress, despite all members in attendance being vaccinated: "If the vaccines are so effective, then why so many precautions for the fully vaccinated? What's the point of getting inoculated if not much changes?"

I hear the same things being asked around here every day. Casting these understandable questions as silly or selfish doesn't help ease conservative vaccine resistance.

Despite the tragedy of lives still being lost, it's not demonstrably clear to many Texans that the governor's rollback of rules was foolish or that the high cost of draconian measures in other areas provided markedly better outcomes than our approach. As Alec MacGillis recently noted in ProPublica when comparing the results of the intense lockdowns in neighboring blue New Mexico with red Texas, "The states had taken very different approaches with regard to their young people, but ended up in almost identical places as far as their coronavirus tolls."

Some people seem to feel sorry for us here. But we tend to feel sorry for people who live in places still largely locked down and wonder if you'll ever get to take your masks off. Though nobody has taken back the insults delivered to places that got rid of outdoor mask mandates, there are public health experts who now say that at least some outdoor rules weren't very helpful in curbing the virus's spread.

As The Times's Ginia Bellafante has noted, perhaps our behaviors are more aligned with tribal loyalty than with the data. "It is easy to see the mask evolving as an expression of cosmopolitanism long past its necessity," she wrote, after seeing New Yorkers keep their masks on outside in spite of new C.D.C. guidance. "If defiance was the style of one kind of culture warrior, mask commitment, regardless of the science, would be the ritual of another."

You'd think more liberals would listen when people like a public health professor at Harvard writes things like: "The truth is, for kids, Covid-19 is like the flu, and we don't make kids wear masks in school for that."

In our community, many of us have been back to in-person school and work for several months. Some people wary of variants are still choosing to stay mostly at home, but many aren't. Both options are socially acceptable.

I do not want to imply these decisions have been easy to make or without potential cost. And I do not take lightly one single life lost to this cruel and capricious virus. As of May 9, almost 50,000 people who tested positive for it have died in Texas. Covid-19 took the life of my good friend's father and left my husband and me merely sniffily, scared and tired when we contracted mild cases.

Yet in the midst of all this confusion and deep loss, we also experienced odd pockets of joy this past year, perhaps thanks to the more flexible social consensus found here than in deep-blue areas.

"You're going to love living here," Cora told the new girl on our street. "It's like coronavirus never even happened." I was taken aback by her comment. We were, after all, doing a form of quarantining as part of a block-wide pod. That's something that failed to garner support (at least publicly) in much of the country. But to our children, it meant a magical, simple summer of long days spent playing together.

Alea, my 8-year-old, played Anna in an outdoor, almost-longer-than-the-original adaptation of "Frozen 2." (The boy across the street who played Kristoff kept interrupting the final wedding scene to loudly announce to the audience that they weren't marrying for real.)

Parents took turns supervising the running-amok children — using Popsicles as bribes — so that other parents could have a break or attend a Zoom meeting for work. Some late afternoons, we mothers would gather for cocktails at the curb, bearing the heavy weight of hard things the kids knew little or nothing about: layoffs, friends stuck in crowded hospitals, troubled marriages stuck in close quarters.

We did our best to keep making lemonade, even creating shirts for all the kids in our pod. "Camp Ridgemont: Summer 2020," the shirts say, rebranding our quarantining street as if it were a beloved summer project. Each time I wash and fold those shirts, I'm grateful for the reprieve they offered from a terrifying world.

It's a uniquely difficult part of the human experience to keep yourself in the middle, to resist the pull of either-or ditches and live in a "both-and" middle space. Simultaneously feeling grief and joy, fear and hope, little pleasures and deep loss makes us both human and uncomfortable.

I understand some of the anger, maybe laced with envy, emanating from some people in big, dense liberal cities. There is a longing for a behavioral formula that neatly gives us what we think we deserve in light of the effort and prudent restraint we have put in. But such an equation doesn't exist. Restrictions lowered risk, but they didn't erase

it.

And now news headlines indicate that fully eradicating Covid-19 as an underlying threat may be a pipe dream, especially since it'll take so long for the rest of the world to get vaccines. At some point, we'll all have to open up again. As we do, I hope we'll be wary of the partisan ditches on either side of an argument and find our way to that middle space where we can mercifully bear one another's different appetites for risk.

A couple of weeks ago, Alea and I visited my 100-year-old great-aunt Lola, who had endured an isolating yearlong quarantine in her assisted-living facility, and went for a walk with her outside. It was an idyllic spring day: cool breeze, warm sunshine, blooming irises, sweet tea. Alea pushed Lola's wheelchair to a sunny spot and Lola closed her eyes and savored being alive. She joyfully announced to passers-by that we were her first house visitors in a year.

I'll never forget when she reached up and hugged me around my neck and told me, eyes filled with grateful tears, "We made it."

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