



This illustration, created at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reveals ultrastructural morphology exhibited by coronaviruses. Note the spikes that adorn the outer surface of the virus, which impart the look of a corona surrounding the virion, when viewed electron microscopically. A novel coronavirus, named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was identified as the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness first detected in Wuhan, China in 2019. The illness caused by this virus has been named coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). *Photo credit: Alissa Eckert, MSMI; Dan Higgins, MAMS. 2020.*

# Living in a Pandemic

A 2020 Perspective  
from Ames, Iowa  
Helen D. Gunderson

In the fall 1999, I believed I had completed writing this book. Circumstances would arise, however, by late April 2020, that prompted me to write again. In January the coronavirus that had barely been on the world radar screen, let alone in U.S. news, had spread into a pandemic that has radically changed the culture of nations around the world. Initially I intended write a short epilogue from the perspective of living in the age of the pandemic, not realizing the pandemic would continue to balloon and be an ever present threat with no end in sight. I also did not anticipate the confluence of the pandemic with intensified news of systemic racism and of the president's desire to have unbridled authority. My few pages of new writing morphed into 40 pages.

If for no other reason, writing a new final chapter has been a valuable way for me to deal with these challenging times and record thoughts that could be appropriate for a personal time capsule. I would love to know more about what life was like for my ancestors, for instance, during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They most likely were well-enough endowed that they did not suffer much compared to other families. Still, I would like to know, and perhaps someday, someone might want to know what life was like for me or other residents of Ames, Iowa, during the pandemic.

During these difficulties, or for that matter, during any challenging phase of life, I would encourage people to write and not be fussy about choosing a genre, whether it be emotionally charged entries to toss in the wastebasket at the end of a writing session, succinct details in a diary, a gratitude journal, other feelings and thoughts in a personal journal, or perspectives about local circumstances. One could also write letters or cards to family members, friends or other people, for instance, thanking a city council member, nurse, postal worker, hardware store clerk, or neighbor. One could make connections with someone incarcerated in prison or a person quarantined in a nursing home, or one could write a letter to an editor or elected officials.

I completed the new last chapter for this book on the morning of July 31, 2020. That same day, a Friday, due to having been in close contact with friend who had tested positive for COVID-19, I drove to the Test Iowa site in Des Moines to be tested for COVID-19. Because I had not driven on the Interstate, with its new complicated ramp system, between Ames and Des Moines in recent years, I chose to take back roads. I planned to travel directly south from Ames along the west side of Ankeny and into north central Des Moines. Unfortunately, I took a wrong turn and found myself northeast of Des Moines in Bondurant, nine miles off my intended route. The mistake was beneficial, considering how I was extra anxious about what the friend had told me about her experience of taking the test – that it was exceptionally painful. The need to focus on navigating complex roads and getting to the right place on time became a distraction from my worries. The mistake was also beneficial because the detour gave me the opportunity to see many huge examples of urban sprawl and related development in an area that had consisted of small towns and farm fields north and east

of Des Moines in the 1960s when I attended Iowa State University. Large tracts of land had been excavated, leaving sculpted mountains of soil in preparation, I presume, for new roads, subdivisions, public facilities such as schools, and corporate centers. The most conspicuous new construction that attracted my interest was long, low, and large with more loading docks than I could count. I guessed it to be Amazon's first ever fulfillment warehouse in Iowa. Once home, I did some Internet research. The facility was announced to the public in February, but on the drawing board and with non-transparent arrangements with the City of Bondurant long before Amazon officially released its plans to the public. It is intended to cover 645,000 square feet with an estimated cost of \$295 million and will hire 1,000 employees. Facebook is building a fifth data center just six miles south of Bondurant in Altoona. The construction of these large-scale Amazon and Facebook projects reminds me that agriculture, which is a major focus of this book, is not the only arena in which corporate America is impacting the Iowa landscape, its communities, and culture.

Finally, I arrived at the Test Iowa site. The security officer at the entrance to the drive-through area in a parking lot showed no concern about my tardiness. There was hardly a wait as I sat in my car with the windows rolled up and only five cars ahead of me as we inched forward to the central testing area under a large awning. The staff was friendly. A woman asked that I show her the barcode that I had received online and printed at home. I held the paper flat against the inside of the car window, while she scanned it. Then she asked to scan my driver's license. As she looked closer at me to begin the test, she said that it looked like I had experienced a recent fall. She was correct. Only 10 days earlier, when walking out of the Carpet One store with an envelope and pre-ordered piece of metal the size of a yard stick, I was focused on the envelope and missed the curb, falling to all fours and knocking the left side of my forehead hard on the concrete. Little did I realize that accident might be a factor in the agony I would experience when the woman actually performed the COVID-19 test. She inserted a cotton swab, I imagine an specially-designed, long Q-tip, up my right nostril. The experience was uncomfortable but manageable. Then she inserted a second cotton swab up my left nostril. I screamed. It was as though she had pushed the probe into an inflamed, infected boil. Had she kept it there much longer, I may have fainted, but within seconds, the test was completed. I drove to a Casey's store to buy gas and use the restroom.

The excruciating pain did not last long, but my nose continued to hurt for a day. In hindsight, I realized the location where the woman inserted the probe into my left nostril was within two inches of the spot where my left brow had hit the concrete. Considering that I had a huge indigo-colored shiner around my left eye in the days after my fall, I imagined there might be a correlation. Did I already have some internal damage in the sinus cavities, and the probe simply aggravated an already sensitive spot? Or perhaps that's the nature of that test – causing great pain to many people. One could only hope for a more friendly kind of test to become available soon.

I drove back to Ames. A friend, Amy Miller, who is my health coach, delivered several bottles of kombucha (a fermented tea), a sandwich, and chips I had pre-ordered from Wheatsfield. She also brought zinc and another supplement to boost my immune system. All I wanted to do was drink kombucha, eat, have space for myself with my cats, and take a long nap.

The Test Iowa woman told me I would get results within two days. An official follow-up email, however, said I would get results within three business days. Fortunately, by Saturday night, a text message arrived instructing me to check online to get my results. They were negative. Whew. A relief to be sure. But a wake-up call, as well, to be more careful about wearing masks, restricting people from entering my home, and keeping my distance from people in general. A reminder, too, to be more intentional about simply staying at home.

It is as though taking the test was a bookend for the chapter that I began as a mere epilogue in April. After making my appointment for the COVID-19 test and anticipating taking it, I knew that the last chapter was complete regardless of whether the results would be positive or negative. I can relax. If I write more about life during the pandemic, the pages will be for a new project, but I truly want to let go of the need to be doing so much, if any, documenting. I can focus on my urban farming, being at home with my cats, cooking well, watching Netflix movies, simply hanging out, and returning to other projects this fall and winter such as editing video footage to post on YouTube



Helen with her older brother Charles and older sister Clara at their farm home. Circa 1947. *Photo from the Marion and Deane Gunderson collection.*

I am grateful, though, to have had the opportunity to write this new last chapter. In 1945, the year I was born, my parents, older sister and brother moved to the road I where I grew up. The United States and other countries in the Allied Forces had fought in World War II against Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler, who in the minds of many, have been the greatest icons of tyranny in Western Civilization. The Allies defeated Germany in May 1945. I can only imagine that Americans living in that era, especially those who sacrificed so much, either in the military or domestically, never expected a similar kind of tyranny to become so full blown in their home country. Because I decided to add a last chapter, I was able to write about the current president and the havoc he has wreaked upon the nation.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude for the role my sister Clara Hoover (nearly three years my elder) has played in my being able to complete this book, especially this last chapter.



She and my only brother Charles (nearly two years older than me but only a year ahead of me in school) are the only people who have known me for all of my 75 years. The three of us were students at Iowa State during the 1963-64 academic year. Clara then studied library science at Case Western Reserve, and in 1966, Charles went to law school at the University of Iowa before returning to Rolfe to practice law and manage the family farmland.

Charles has helped with my road project on occasion, too. While growing up on the farm, we were almost like twins, often spending time together, playing games or doing farm work. He is about as staunchly conservative as I am liberal, and we differ much in our lifestyles and beliefs. Even so, he has been greatly supportive of me learning to manage my own farm land, and I appreciate his help with my questions regarding family history, area personalities, land transactions, and related matters.



Charles Gunderson and Clara Hoover. 2010. *Photo from Clara's collection.*

There was much to like about Clara when I was a child, but I resented the way Mother and Dad would assign her to be in charge of the rest of us siblings as though she was a second lieutenant who could tell us what to do. For many years, some of us family members had a nickname for both Clara and Mother. Occasionally, Mother would even use the nickname in reference to herself to bring the family to attention at a meal or other gathering. (I will not embarrass Clara by actually saying what it was. Family members will know what “BBF” means, and so might other people.) Over the decades though I came to realize that although Clara could chuckle at the memory of being called “BBF,” she was sensitive about that image. She has worked hard to be supportive of all five of her siblings and their offspring. She will not say catty things about family members or allow me to be catty. Also, she will not repeat confidential news from one sibling to another. Although Clara and her husband Hal are reducing their travels as they age and are remaining close to home during the pandemic, they have loyally traveled to family events (graduations, marriages, funerals and birthday parties) even if in faraway states. They have visited me at least once each fall when in Ames for an Iowa State football game and came to Des Moines when the Iowa Natural Heritage

Foundation honored me for a gift of land I made to the foundation in 2016. They send birthday and holiday greeting cards and, in my case, write a check to my favorite non-profit group in my name for my birthday, knowing that's the best gift they could give me.

The connection Clara and I have forged while writing the last chapter would not have been as possible in previous years when she was still working as a high school librarian, then in a management role with Hal's small programming business, and later as a high school curriculum coordinator until age 70. The stay in place element of the pandemic has also been a factor in making communications between the two of us so convenient.

My writing mentor and editor, Adam Wright, who was a godsend of help from February through August 2019, was available to help only for a short time in July 2020 and reviewed my draft of the new last chapter. Fortunately, in 2019, before he took a full-time job at a Waldorf school in Colorado Springs, he helped me build the confidence I needed to proceed pretty much on my own with the new writing.

Clara is the consummate research librarian and loves using her traditional reference skills along with today's internet tools to find useful information. It is as though she cannot resist opportunity when I ask her for help researching some aspect of Pocahontas County or other history. She is also an excellent copy editor. In some respects, Clara is a liberal and in other respects, a conservative, and our lives, writing styles, and willingness to be candid about family are vastly different. She has, however, been extraordinarily helpful, reviewing several short segments that I have emailed to her. Her turnaround time is often less than three hours, and she is able to recommend simple changes to improve spelling, grammar, word choices, and flow while keeping the material true to my voice and the ideas intact.

The more I have grown in understanding family dynamics, the more I realize that Clara, as the oldest sibling, not only had what I considered a "privilege" to give orders to the rest of us, but her designated role was also one of responsibility. Once as an adult, she said that Mother and Dad told her as a young child that she needed to set an example for the rest of us. My parents' expectations are understandable to a certain extent, however, in other respects are more than parents should expect of a child. Children need to be allowed to be children and not burdened with grown up duties.

Although I have spent too many days (if not years) fretting about the challenges of being a middle child, I now understand that childhood is a challenge, period. That developmental stage has its effect on any person regardless of birth order and adopted role. Thankfully we siblings have matured and shifted in how we relate to each other regardless of our varied roles within the family hierarchy when we were children on the farm.

Clara and I often visit on the phone about everyday living and larger matters. I have a sense of what I can risk telling her and what to reserve for sharing with friends. She is one of the first people I have called to confide that I had an accident or did not feel well. I also turn to her to discuss estate planning or report on my projects. Although there is much she does not understand about me, she listens well and does not criticize except on occasions when she hears me rail about the small-mindedness of other people and how I cannot fathom their rationale or why they would vote the way they did. It is in those moments that Clara reminds me that my perspective is only one of many and that people have different needs, temperaments, and valid viewpoints.

We talk about events in history such as the year when Dad as a three-year-old child suffered from scarlet fever and he and parents were quarantined at their farm home; Great-Grandpa's years as a state representative when he voted "aye" in 1919 with nearly all the other legislators to approve the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution giving women the right to vote; the number and nature of the country schools in Pocahontas County; and the cost of tuition at Iowa State when we were students there. The list is long. I appreciate how

talking about the mundane historical details and sharing perspectives from our own lives take our conversations to a deeper, more personal level than in past decades, and we learn new information about each other.

Clara and Hal are both devoted readers. Sometimes she recommends books for me. Sometimes, but more rarely, I hear of a book, for instance on public radio, and tell her. Soon she has arranged for a copy. She receives and actually reads the Practical Farmer of Iowa newsletter and has learned about some of the issues I care about in agriculture. She also claims that she learns new ideas from reading my drafts of writing, when I send them to her for review.

In the last decade, Clara has graciously shouldered much responsibility – mainly as executor for my father’s estate. Mother died in 2004 and he in 2010. Clara inherited their farmstead, where Dad had lived out his life, and was responsible for the maintenance of their house for the years it was unoccupied. By 2018 she had hired a contractor to raze the house and arranged for her tenants to sow prairie flowers in the large yard where we used to play.

It is not that Clara has stepped into the role of “mother” for the rest of us siblings. No, and I might resent it if she did. She embodies, however, perhaps the best kind of big sister one could expect to have. I am grateful that Clara and Charles have my back.