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The Way I See It

Exiting stay-home notice right in time for Christmas

After a trip to the US, it's good to be back in Singapore, where 'we' surpasses 'me' and people respect the rule of law



Paige Parker



Ms Paige Parker with her daughters Happy (in pink) and Bee on the 24th floor of Fairmont Singapore hotel during their SHN. PHOTOS: PAIGE PARKER

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'Twas two days post-Christmas, and all through our home, every creature is stirring, quarantine no longer confining our zone. Predictable sunny skies beam over our heads, yet we dream of a Singapore day with a white whisper of snowfall instead.

A stroll down Orchard Road has masks covering every face, as we live in fear of the pandemic's rapid pace. Teens dressed for the tropics in tank tops and flip flops watch while anxious parents vent, non-stop, as the frightful virus leaves us in a genuine kerfuffle, muddling up our holiday shuffle.

I shall spare thee more rhyming, though beyond doubt, my daughters Happy, 17, and Bee, 12, and I are ecstatic to have finished our stay-home-notice (SHN) just in time for Christmas.

While ensconced at the Fairmont Singapore hotel, smack in the middle of our garden city, with a picturesque view of the Padang, the Esplanade and the Singapore Flyer, I fell asleep on the first night of our enforced SHN without drawing the curtains, for the magical sight of the moon on Marina Bay reminded me of the uniqueness of this island nation that my family has called home for 13-plus years.

Back in the USA

American author F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote of how we return to a place to find nothing has changed except for our mindsets.

I returned to Singapore on Dec 9, after spending just over two weeks with my ageing parents in the United States, with a renewed appreciation for the little red dot that is my family's chosen home.

For my America is not what she was: The growing tolerance of intolerance leaves me woeful, and the dogmatic refusal of countless people to live by safe guidelines that are proven to protect themselves and others from the pandemic reminds me that with citizenship comes a charge.

Although my homeland of birth seems to have lost her way, Singapore understands and her people appreciate that "we" surpasses "me".

Yes, I adored the autumnal weather offering a canopy of golden leaves as Bee and I cycled daily, clad in scarves and gloves knitted by my grandmother Anderson decades ago.

Reminiscing of childhood to my daughters, I pointed out my elementary and secondary schools. Bee, about to enter Nanyang Girls' High in January, daydreamed of what it might be like to attend school in my hometown, population 50,000, where mathematics as taught in Singapore schools is definitely not on the less rigorous curriculum.

Together, we baked and decorated gingerbread cookies with my mother, and all of us attended Sunday sermons at my parents' church.

Mother, recovering from a hip replacement, watched while we decorated the Christmas tree with ornaments, many homemade, dating back to my youth. Our evenings concluded with a predictable though uplifting Hallmark movie, since we rarely ventured from home, save for church and bicycle rides, for fear of Covid infection.

When we did visit a shop and the grocery store, I found solace in signs mandating masks for entry, though plenty of my fellow Americans decided to pay these no heed - "their rights affected" if they were to join the wise masses covering their faces to protect themselves and others. We experienced no contact tracing, nor temperature checks at any point during our visit to the US.

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Life in America felt like a desperate run-on sentence yearning for a full stop, in order to fight the deadly virus which has infected over 18 million people, while killing new highs daily.

Yes, the mask does offer an air of mystery and it can be uncomfortable, but without the covering, there is an unravelling of safety allowing the virus to prevail.

This pandemic has reminded us, no matter how independent and successful we might be, that we all are at the mercy of science.

Instead of the sense of freedom most of us associate with travel, I felt the heavy weight of the nasty plague's reach upon my every action and breath.

Hence, I had no qualms coming home and serving SHN in a government-approved hotel. In fact, the requirement, though perhaps a bit excessive, felt reassuring. The 14 days with my daughters saw friends sending us too many delicious treats and sensible gifts, like jumping ropes, and we exercised daily, played board games, attended online classes and webinars, reviewed university applications for Happy, and created some TikToks.

A saving grace of SHN had to be the hotel's endless supply of coffee pods for the Nespresso machine, daily laundry service, and the outstanding view, allowing me to watch life unfold below.

Lest our SHN sound too ideal, the Covid-19 swab test, on day 11, was most unpleasant. Taking less than 30 seconds, with the insertion of a long, thin stick into each nostril for a slow 10-second hold, both Happy and I found it worse than we had expected.

In the moment, it was terrible, but perhaps the psychological discomfort weighed heavier than the physical pain.

We thought Bee would not have to take the swab test because of her age, but I was called a day before the end of SHN and alerted that someone near us on our flight had tested positive for Covid-19. This meant we were no longer under SHN, but now officially under Quarantine Order, even though Happy and I had tested negative.

On day 13, the day before we were to end our quarantine, Certis officers drove us to KK Women's and Children's Hospital for Bee's swab test, and then escorted us to Siloso Beach Resort. We spent the final night of quarantine in a room with three

beds, missing that Marina Bay view. Thank goodness, Bee's test result came back negative.

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Gratitude and hope

Despite the prolonged SHN, I am grateful to live in a country where people respect the rule of law and where the Government's intentions to keep people secure overrides naysayers.

To know we have a system in place and leadership to keep us safe - and more vibrant than perhaps any other country in the world at this moment - allows citizens and residents of Singapore to have faith in our future.

Certainly, the end of 2020 sees no one looking for splendour or glitz to mark the occasion, especially not when the world is genuinely sick.

Instead, this holiday season is all about that aforementioned faith, which allows hope to prevail: hope for tomorrow's start of phase 3, for businesses to find a way forward to thrive, and of course, hope in a safe and accessible vaccine in the new year.

The former visions of sugar plum fairies dancing in our heads are today replaced by images of days when masks will be tossed aside instead.

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Life lessons from the Bard during the pandemic

Perhaps this pandemic year has not been the much-touted wasteland. We have been reminded of what is genuinely worthy - family, relationships, true friends, community, and even the balance between work and leisure. This lesson, gained through our confinement and isolation, offers us a fresh understanding of life's breadth, our relevance, and significance.

Our post-pandemic world, though far away, could well be better than before, if we maintain and keep only that which is most important, all the while continuing to embrace "we" over "me".

• **Paige Parker is a certified gemologist and author of Don't Call Me Mrs Rogers: Love, Loathing And Our Epic Drive Around The World.**

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