

Upfront

"Follow the science." You hear that a lot. Nevermind that the "the" is at minimum superfluous and, more likely, grammatically incorrect. Which seems a little ironic, giving the haughty tone most of the people who employ the phrase tend to use.

If we're admonished to follow it – this thing, "the science," or excoriated for, rube-like, not doing so, we'd better know what it is. So, I checked. According to The Science Council (not The The Science Council...sorry, I couldn't help myself), science is "the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence." "Systematic methodology" are the essential words. If you remember from your school days, science is driven by the Scientific Method, the key to discerning natural facts.

Remember the Encyclopedia Britannica? Nowadays, you don't have to build new bookshelves to accommodate its many volumes; it exists online. Britannica.com explains the Scientific Method thusly: "A researcher develops a hypothesis (basically, an educated guess), tests it through various means, and then modifies the hypothesis on the basis of the outcome of the tests and experiments. The modified hypothesis is then retested, further modified, and tested again, until it becomes consistent with observed phenomena and testing outcomes. In this way, hypotheses serve as tools by which scientists gather data. From that data and the many different scientific investigations undertaken to explore hypotheses, scientists are able to develop broad general explanations, or scientific theories."

Despite all of the boastful "We follow the (sic) science" claims and implicit, "While you idiots don't" taunts that have been flying around for the better part of a year, I can't recall reading the results of a similarly abundant collection of experiments. (And I, pardon the hubris, consider myself to be reasonably curious, smart, and well-informed.)

This follow-the-science submission device has troubled me for a while. Then, I went to New York and on to New England last week, and my agitation grew. You might recall that I traveled to the Big Apple in September, and subsequently declared it (to you): Closed. Now, it's not only closed, it's pathetic and sad and completely defanged. Everyone you encounter save for the people who are serving your commercial needs (which is, like, almost nobody) seems to look at you as though you are the embodiment of the grim reaper himself. Two masks? Try three, four in some cases. With rubber gloves. And – this was new to my pandemic-eyes – goggles, tight-fighting to the head, like high school chemistry class, with glasses underneath.

So what if there wasn't a single fanny in the hundreds of outdoor-dining seats I walked past?! I'm not lying: Not one! If the (sic) science is keeping New Yorkers extra-safe, then maybe the disemboweling of their urban center is a palpable sacrifice.

I thought about death. Both the bodily and the societal kinds. As a country, we're a collection of states, each with some latitude to govern itself according to the will of its people. Each state government has a chief executive, its governor. In the private sector, we employ metrics (quantifiable measurements) to evaluate (chief) executive performance. It seems reasonable to examine the efficacy of our public sector (chief) executives (governors) the same way, then, no? Within this death frame that I've been contemplating two metrics seem particularly important: mortality rate (attributable to COVID-19, as a percentage of total population) and decline in (state) GDP (total economic activity). Why mortality and not

infection rate? Because getting sick is one thing...a thing one can live with...dying is for keeps.

Too often, we believe something to be true, and we then try to develop arguments to support our belief while ignoring contradictory facts. We are a culture of predisposition. Our biases are crippling. But the (sic) science...er, data...doesn't lie.

Per Becker's Hospital Review (as of its February 2nd daily update), the three deadliest states (vis-à-vis COVID-19) in the nation are: New Jersey (with a 0.242% mortality rate), New York (0.223%), and Massachusetts (0.212%). Undeniably, these are populous states (8.9 million, 19.4 million, and 6.9 million, respectively) with New York particularly dense around its namesake city. What three states have been relatively safest? Vermont, Hawaii and Alaska (0.028%, 0.029%, and 0.035%, with populations of 624 thousand, 1.4 million and 735 thousand). (The density measures for these three varies much more widely than your first impulse might suggest.) What about the controversial early-openers, Georgia and Florida? How have they fared? Smack-dab in the middle of the pack, actually, at numbers 26 and 23 (from the best) with death rates of 0.130% and 0.124% and large and, in some regions, dense populations of 10.6 million and 21.5 million. (Roughly 1 in every 10 Americans calls one of these two states home.)

As for the aforementioned societal suffering, or "economic death," there's an app for that, too. Or a URL. The University of New Hampshire's school of public policy publishes lots of data that track COVID-19's impact states' financial health. From the end of 2019 to the third quarter of 2020, every state except Utah has a smaller economy. Who has faltered the most? Hawaii's GDP has shrunk by 8.8%, Wyoming by 7.8%, and New York by 6.1%. Georgia – a decline of a relatively modest 2.0%, and Florida, somewhat worse off, down 5.0%. Jobs? Net job losses in Hawaii, Michigan, and New York, are each more than 10%, while Idaho and Utah have, somehow, added jobs. How about New Jersey and Massachusetts, the other two of the deadliest three? Losses of 8.9% and 9.4% of total jobs. Twenty-seven states have lost more than 5% of their jobs. As for Georgia and Florida: net losses of 2.0% and 2.8%, respectively, in the top (lowest job-loss rates) quartile, each.

To understand a state's mortality rate, you'd have to consider items like volume of interstate travel and its physical isolation. But have you noticed the pervasiveness of out-of-state license plates around here over the last year? Lots of Empire State tags. Or the residential real estate boom? People buying homes here – expensive ones – sight unseen. My guess: Georgia and Florida have been among the most visited states in the nation since this whole mess began.

What, then, does the (sic) science say? The data confirms that New York is nearly both the most deadly and decimated (pandemic-wise) state, yet its citizens are among the most cautiously isolated, its containment approach among the most draconian (my anecdotal observations, not empirically confirmed), and its chief executive the most celebrated. Meanwhile, Georgia and Florida, carelessly "unscientific" in the eyes of some, are doing pretty well, key performance indicators considered together.

As much as our instincts compel us to attempt to wrangle entropy into benign submission, definitionally, we can't. That's the meaning of entropy (an actual scientific principle related to the second law of thermodynamics...okay, now maybe I'm showing). Some forces are random and tend toward chaotic. Which leads me back to The Serenity Prayer, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Who says God and science can't be friends?

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