

Dear friends, family and colleagues

For most of us these have been trying times — I won't bother to list the reasons. Even I, retired and comfortable, have found some features of daily life quite hard.

There have been good times too.

One of the best for me took place few weeks ago. At her request, I spent a couple of hours on two evenings helping a Japanese professional colleague improve the translation into English of a government document that spells out in some detail, and grade by grade, the moral education curriculum mandated by Japan's national education ministry: MEXT.

I loved every minute. I loved the intricacies of the language questions. I loved getting to know from the inside how Japan's national government views the virtues they intend to instill in children at different ages. It was fun to recognize that Japanese moral education professionals may well be more aware of Plato than we are in the USA. I came away thoroughly enlivened by a detailed conversation across, around and with the cultural differences between our two countries, differences that were on display where we two could each see them so clearly.

It will come as no surprise to those of you who have been reading my "letters from Asia" emails for decades, that I revel in encounters with difference, as well delighting in the beautiful, the profound and the funny features of different places. These Virus Times have offered less for my sense of humor but there has been plenty of difference, much of it quite profound.

The differences have been mysterious as well.

This letter is full of complex material rearranged and organized by me. It may be so detailed and intricate that it makes much more sense to me than to others. The notes in pink throughout indicate the trains of thought I am following. If you enjoy following them too, do let me hear your reactions.

Helena

### **(1) INTRODUCTION**

In this letter, then, a few sketches of "national" identities as revealed in the data and stories that have emerged around the world. I have done some phrase-making, collected some comparative data, and put onto my professional website [PEACEMAKERPRESS.COM](http://PEACEMAKERPRESS.COM) several of the articles and images that I have found particularly revealing. I know much more about some places, the UK and USA, Japan and South Korea, and much less about others, China, the nations of Africa, contrasts between Uruguay and Argentina.

Regardless of how much or how little I know, I find the differences set out here genuinely mysterious. The biology and medicine of the virus itself has befuddled and fascinated doctors and academics who work with disease. Yet another article today addressed one of its key mysteries: why do some people get so very much sicker than others?

The place of the virus in different cultures is at least as befuddling. For me, many politico/cultural differences still remain beyond the reach of satisfactory explanation.

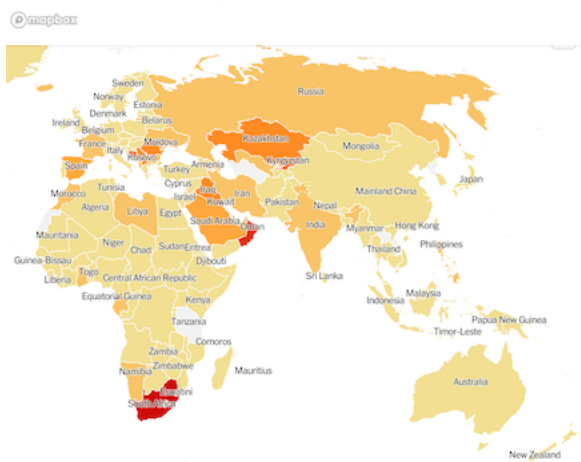
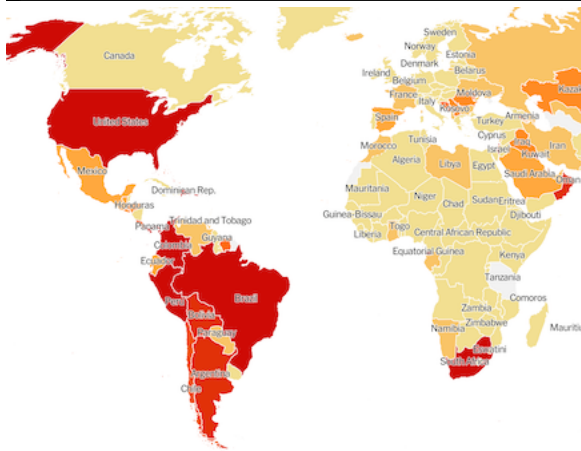
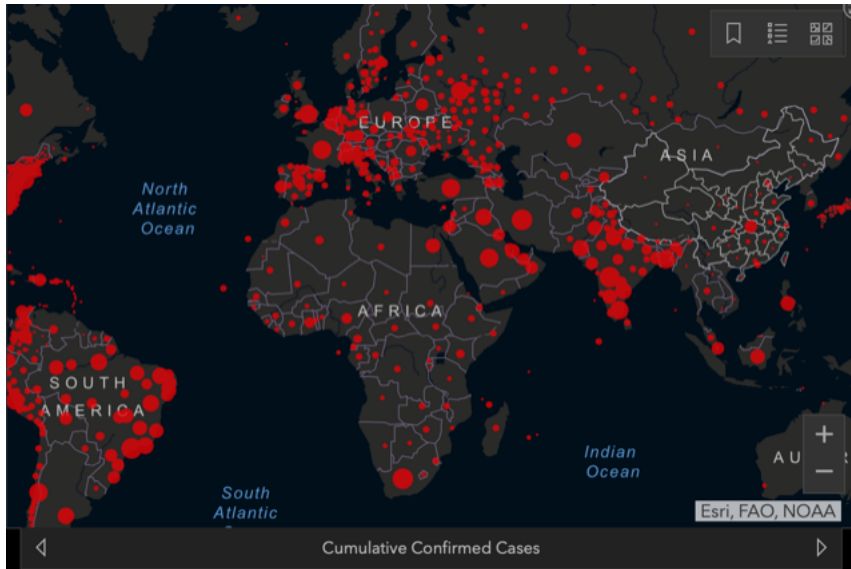
The segments begin with some images: comparative maps, comparative charts with sidebar comments and a set of related “mystery” questions after each series. Next comes an attempt at metaphorical language to accurately characterize differences among a few countries.

Next, a segment with a few "Japan and the USA compared" remarks. Unlike my previous letters in these Virus Times, this one goes both to my US/UK world and to my friends and colleagues in Japan and Korea.

Last the CODA. The most mysterious question of all.

## **(2) BROAD and MYSTERIOUS COMPARISONS – MAPS AND CHARTS**

(A) Three maps — The first shows the total number of cases (Johns Hopkins), the second and third are current growth rates (New York Times), all gathered in the last week.

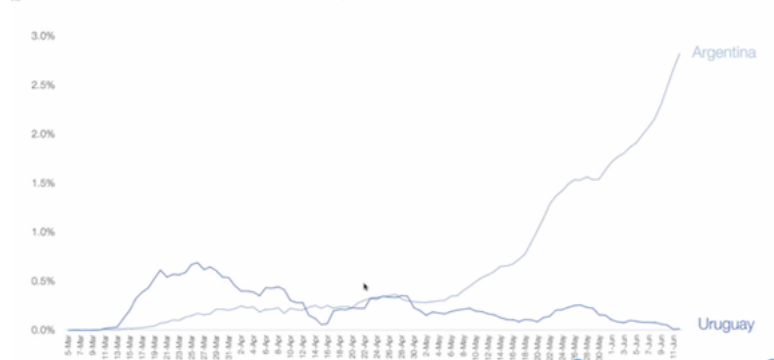


**Mystery No. 1** Almost no cases in Africa except in South Africa  
 the Americas Almost no surge in the western Pacific

Virus cases surging in

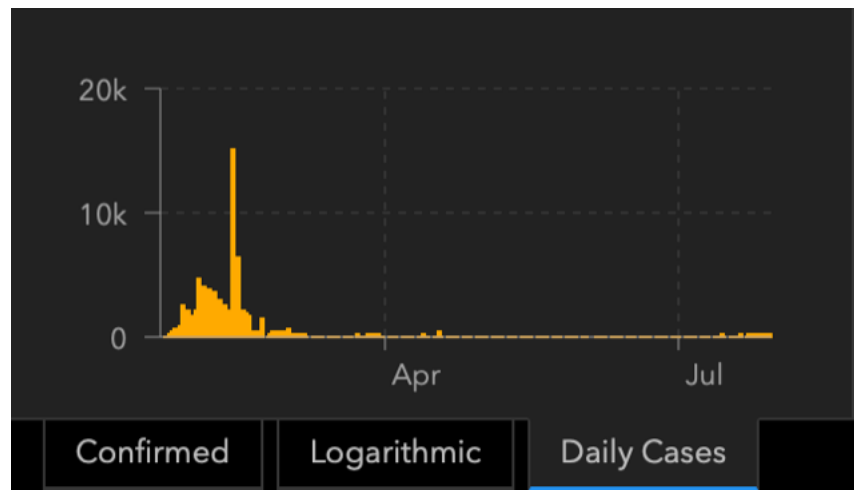
(B) One chart comparing Argentina Uruguay — from a recent talk by Thomas Puyeo

Gráfica 1.c: Casos Diarios per Cápita de Coronavirus en Argentina vs. Uruguay  
A 14 de junio de 2020

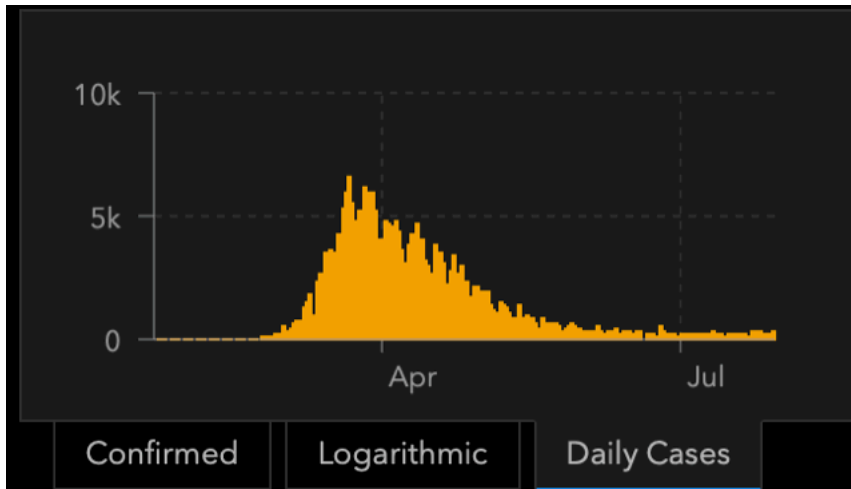


**Mystery No. 2** — why are these two countries so different? They even share a border. Something perhaps about population size?? A friend living in Uruguay some of the time says: "what makes Uruguay exceptional in so many ways? Lots has been written about that, none totally convincing, but in general it's truly exceptional."

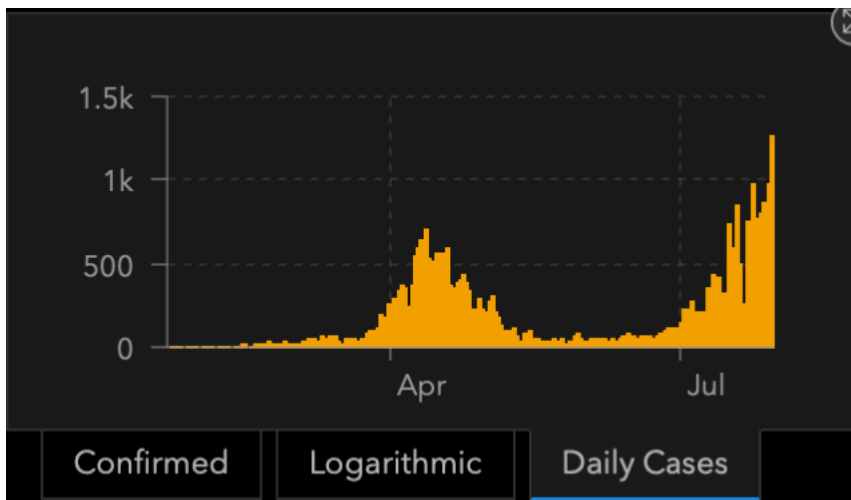
(C) Five Charts showing daily cases all made on the same day July 30, 2020. In alphabetical order The sidebar comments highlight scale differences and seasonal variety



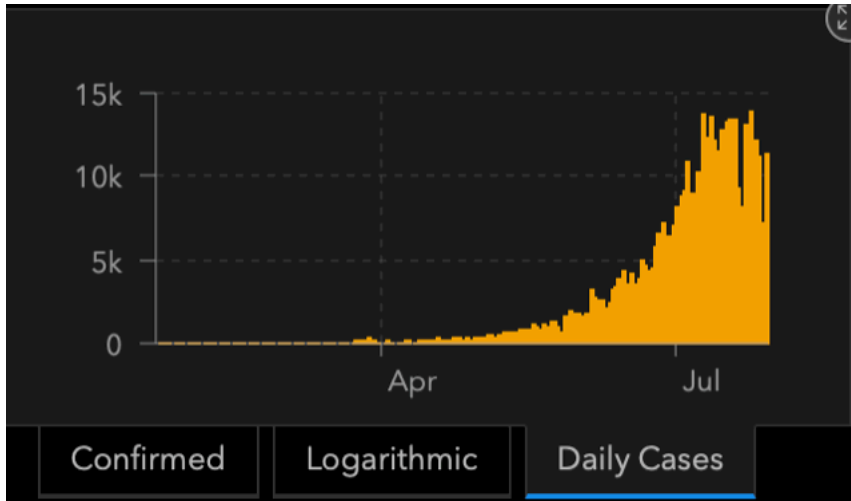
China Everything allegedly virtually over by mid-April. But notice there are still cases. Numbers unclear because of large scale from a single huge reporting day in March when they announced over 15,000 new cases in a single day that clearly representation an aggregation from earlier days. I don't personally trust ANY Chinese numbers.



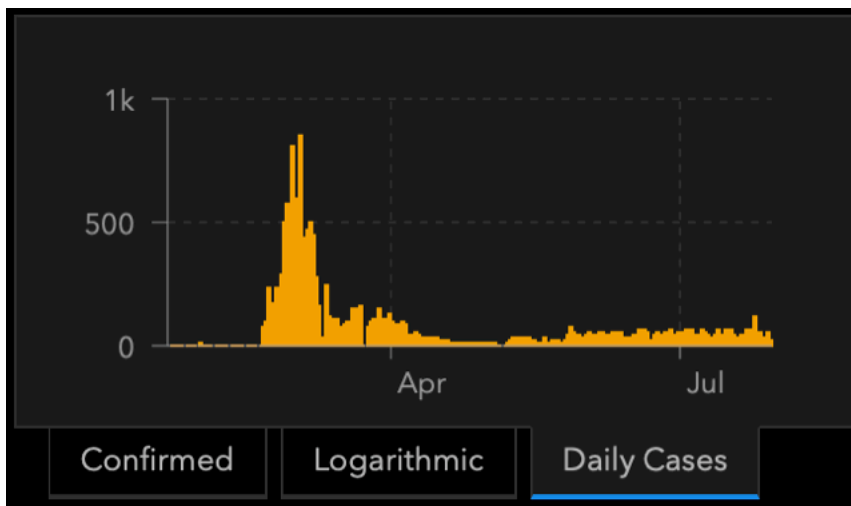
Italy Another long tale of cases that never completely disappear, and their highest day is about the same as in China except for the one Chinese aberration.



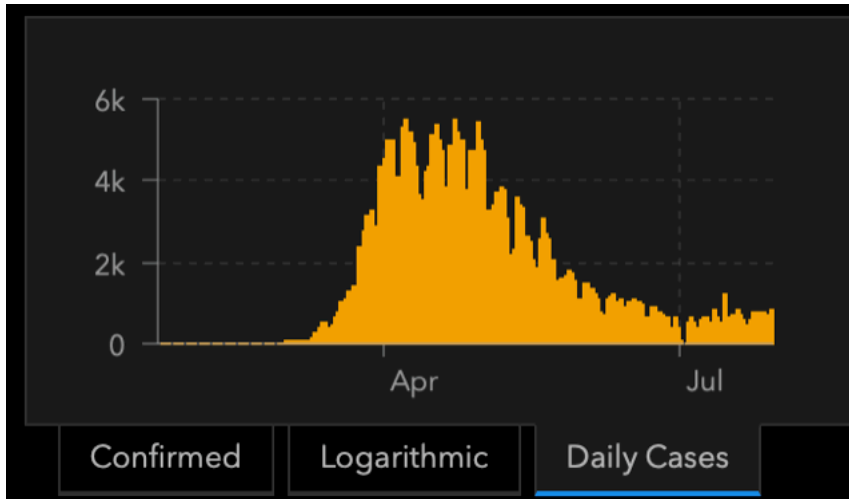
Japan Having seemed to have it genuinely under control (note the TINY numbers) there is a new peak happening right now. Their tale goes in the other direction, a very slow start. Australia is also having a second peak. Is the virus beginning a second journey around the world. from the Western Pacific on westwards?



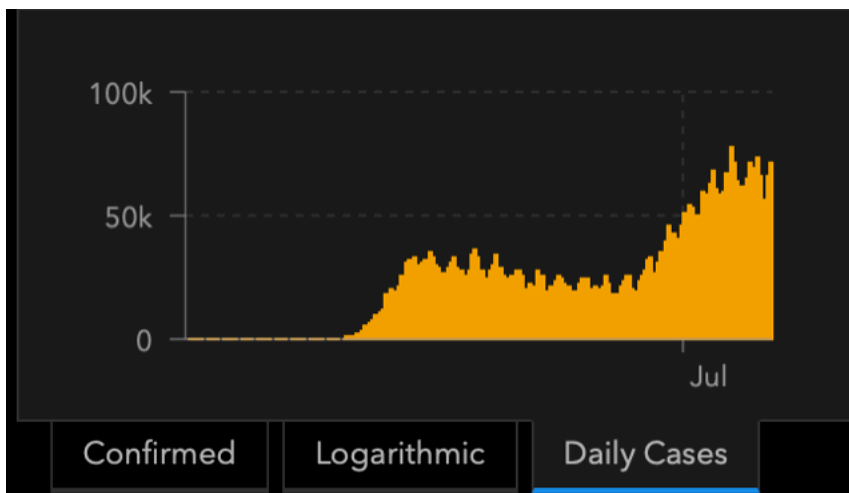
South Africa Unlike the rest of Africa, their daily case rate is huge, US in scale — over 10,000 all in the second phase of cases.



South Korea By far the fewest cases and a very steady long tail, like China. Is a small new peak beginning?



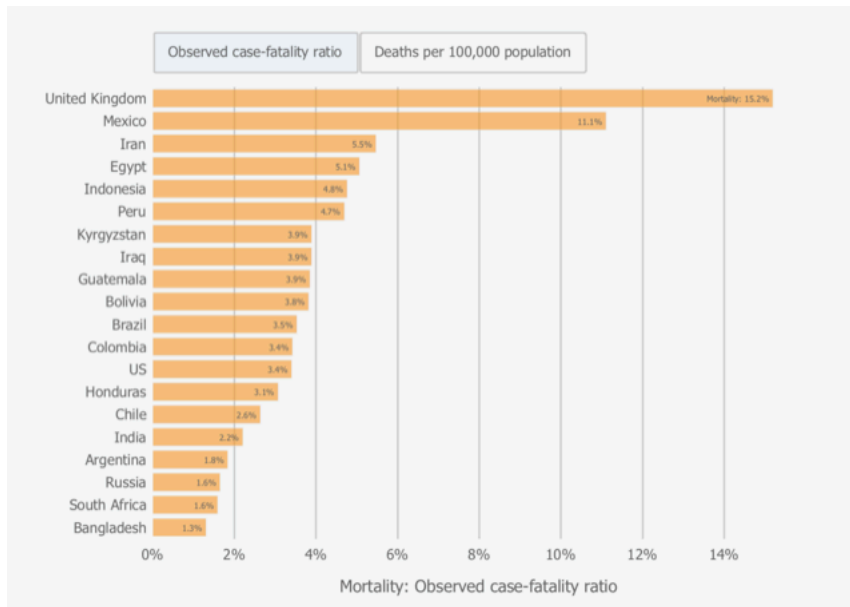
UK A pattern very similar to Italy. The UK scale makes it all look bigger because their worst day was not as bad. Unlike the US they really have managed to cut the daily case load. But see below about mortality rates.



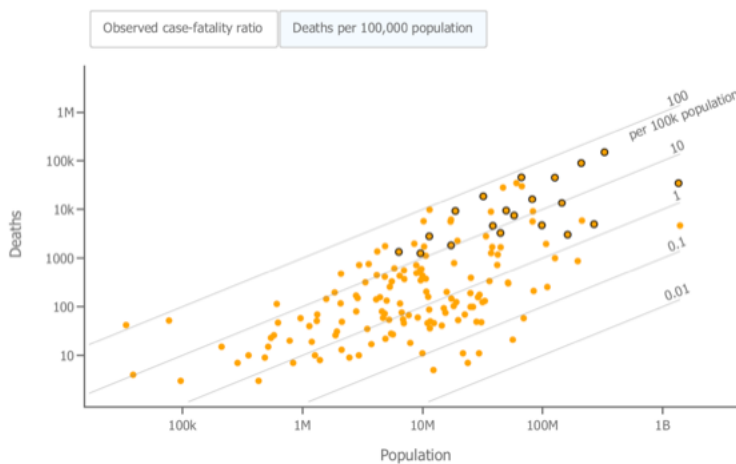
USA The double bump, the Northeast in April and the South and south west in July. Note the scale. By far the steepest of all, much steeper than China.

Mystery No. 3a The seasons of peak infection vary very widely. No. 3b Japan is having second peak No. 3c the US second peak is twice as serious as the New York peak.

(D) Two WHO "death rate" charts



The UK has by FAR the worst fatality rate among people who actually got the disease.



The death rate per 100,000 population makes a chaotic scatter plot. Population size is not a good risk indicator.

**Mystery No. 4a** Some wealthy European countries have **death rates per 100,000 population well above 50**: Belgium, UK, Spain, Italy, Sweden

**Mystery No. 4b** Several, mostly wealthy Western Pacific countries have **death rates per 100,000 population below 1**: Taiwan, New Zealand, China, Australia, Japan and South Korea.

**(3) COMPLEX REALITIES REDUCED TO A SINGLE METAPHOR.**



ITALY: It came, catastrophically and it went. It hit the richest part of the country first, spread south as far as Rome and then retreated. It never did go further south. *Tsunami. A wave that runs out of power somewhere*

SOUTH AFRICA: The caseload resembles Europe/North America more than other African nations. *Apartheid lives on*

SOUTH KOREA: A track and trace program that really worked. Except that the software turned out to have serious privacy flaws. And nothing seems able to stop South Korea's political crises — the Mayor of Seoul and potential next President has just committed suicide during a sexual harassment scandal. *Techno/social miracle but not quite*

UK: A demand for rules and strict compliance. P.M. Johnson's aid Cummings created a genuine crisis by traveling when it was forbidden. There was a huge surge in volunteer mutual aid, a reawakening of the World War II spirit. *Stiff upper lip on the home front*

CHINA: Ferocious lockdown in Wuhan followed by mandatory apps installed on phones to control behavior, local Party monitors at building level to ensure adherence, forcible hospitalization of the sick. followed by mandatory testing and now by the creation of a national DNA database of all Chinese men. *The Communist Party using the management methods of Industrial Agriculture on an entire population*

#### (4) SIMILAR AGENDAS — DIFFERENT MANIFESTATIONS Japan and the USA

**MASKS** That the people in Japan put on masks with ease was no surprise. We've always had them on hand in Japan just in case either of us developed a cold or allergies or anything that required us to show we were trying to avoid harming others. That masks would become a political issue in the USA was not a surprise. With hindsight it even seems reasonable that the people in states who lived through the first few months of the virus in the USA unscathed could have come to believe by July that their previous relative safety was a sign that they were safe without masks. Historians say a similar anti-mask attitude prevailed in the US during the 1918 pandemic as well. Of course masks in the USA also bring out America's entrepreneurs and we ourselves are the proud owners of four lovely washable cloth masks made by a good friend who is doing this for all of her friends.

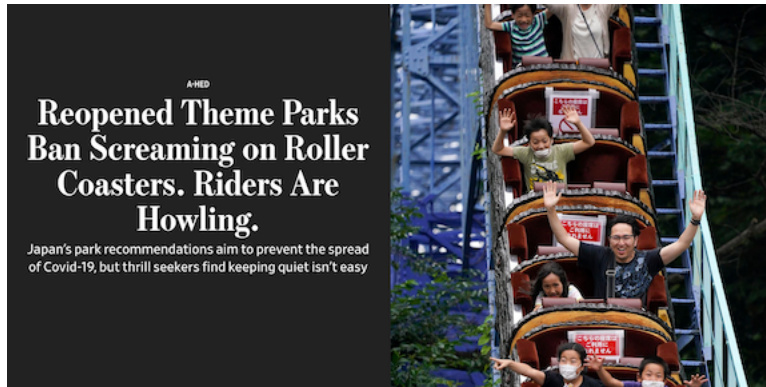
**CLEANLINESS** People in both the USA and in Japan are bombarded with advertising for cleansing and anti-bacterial products. In Japan this falls on the ears and into the minds of a people with a centuries old tradition of cleanliness, bathing, shoes, off, hand washing etc. In the USA this advertising preached to the already germophobic, but not so much to the rest of us. The earliest tests of COVID viability were all about its survival on surfaces, so suddenly we Americans began trying to follow virtually hospital-grade infection control strategies. America, including the New York Subway, has never been cleaner. Our grandchildren may even be developing Japanese-grade hand washing

standards. Ask me in five years whether they still wash every time they come into our house.

## TOUCHING STORIES

Two from Japan:

the operators of rollercoaster who asked users not to scream



and the surprise decision to do a nationwide series of Fireworks displays on the same day, June 2. Sky “hanabi,” sky flowers. The displays were so short crowds didn’t have time to gather. Cynical view? they had the fireworks on hand for the Olympics, why not use them. Friendly view. They did use them and did so collectively.



Fireworks exploding over the Okunitama Shinto shrine in Fuchu, in the western suburbs of Tokyo, on June 1.

Two from the USA:

The protestors who went masked and socially distanced to protest this summer’s police shootings.

A local gathering in our neighborhood  
the other in Houston



### Protesters ride through Houston on horseback

A group of people on horseback rode through downtown Houston today in a peaceful protest of George Floyd's death.



Adrees Latif/Reuters

Governor Andrew Cuomo offering to help Massachusetts, which filled the vast support gap left by the Trump administration.

Governor Andrew Cuomo is speaking at a press conference. The graphic overlay on the right side of the image contains the following text: "Our neighbors in Massachusetts are seeing an increase in cases. They may need 400 ventilators. If they do, we have identified the ventilators and will transport them in 24 hours." Below this text is a yellow map of Massachusetts. At the bottom of the graphic, there are three buttons: "STAY HOME.", "STOP THE SPREAD.", and "SAVE LIVES." At the very bottom of the image, there is a blue banner with the text "FOR MORE INFORMATION GO TO CORONAVIRUS.USATODAY.COM".

## ECONOMIC NATIONALISM

Japan — trying to break out of the Chinese supply train trap, so the government has begun giving direct subsidies to 87 Japanese companies to help them move production back to Japan or to Southeast Asia:

"The subsidies aim to cover suppliers of the sorts of goods needed in an emergency — such as masks — as well as industries where supplies can be disrupted by an economic shock.

Companies that are benefiting include producers of auto and aviation parts, hygiene products such as alcohol-based sanitizers, fertilizer, medicines and paper products." Washington Post

The USA — trying to guarantee a supply of vaccines, so the government has been committing to buy millions of doses of several different kinds of vaccine. President Trump is banking on vaccines to win him the election, even though many of his supporters are also anti vaccination:

### **New York Times stories**

July 22: Pfizer Gets \$1.95 Billion to Produce Coronavirus Vaccine by Year's End

July 7: U.S. Will Pay \$1.6 Billion to Novavax for Coronavirus Vaccine

June 8: Could Trump Turn a Vaccine Into a Campaign Stunt?

## (5) CODA AND YET .....

None of this helps to explain one of the biggest mysteries of all. **THE TOTAL NUMBER OF DEATHS IN JAPAN AND THE USA**

Japan has a **population** of 126.2 million concentrated on narrow coastal plains. The majority live in cities. Japan's population is **aging** faster than that of any other nation. The population of those 65 years or older roughly doubled in 24 years, from 7.1% of the population in 1970 to 14.1% in 1994. In 2014, 26% of Japan's population was estimated to be 65 years or older

The **United States** is the **third-most populous country** in the world, with an estimated population of 330,052,960 as of August 2, 2020. About 13% of the population is estimated to be 65 years or older

In other words Japan has about 2/5 the population of the USA and double the USA percentage of elders, hence the number of people who are particularly "vulnerable" if they catch COVID in Japan is 28 million and in the USA is about 40 million.

**Total Deaths to date      Japan 1023      USA 156,702**

Is an explanation hiding in the data in Mystery No. 4 above? I have no idea.

All I know is that I care about both places and it's sad to think about the suffering no matter whether there are 1000 families grieving or 150,000 families grieving.

That's all for now. Do copy and forward this to anyone who might be interested.