


Those Who Chose Shaming Over Science

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March 14, 2022



By  [Gabielle Bauer](#) March 14, 2022 March 16, 2022 [Philosophy](#), [Society](#) 6 minute read

For the first 62 years of my life, I don't recall anyone calling me a selfish idiot, much less a sociopath or a mouth-breathing Trumptard. All that changed when Covid rolled in and I expressed, ever so gingerly, a few concerns about the lockdown policies. Here's a sampling of what the keyboard warriors threw back at me:

- Enjoy your sociopathy.
- Go lick a pole and catch the virus.
- Have fun choking on your own fluids in the ICU.
- Name three loved ones that you're ready to sacrifice to Covid. Do it now, coward.
- You went to Harvard? Yeah, right, and I'm God. Last I checked, Harvard doesn't accept troglodytes.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, something deep inside me—in my soul, if you will—recoiled from the political and public response to the virus. Nothing about it felt right or strong or true. This was not just an epidemiological crisis, but a societal one, so why were we

listening exclusively to some select epidemiologists? Where were the mental health experts? The child development specialists? The historians? The economists? And why were our political leaders encouraging fear rather than calm?

The questions that troubled me the most had less to do with epidemiology than with ethics: Was it fair to require the greatest sacrifice from the youngest members of society, who stood to suffer the most from the restrictions? Should civil liberties simply disappear during a pandemic, or did we need to balance public safety with human rights? Unschooled in the ways of online warriors, I assumed the Internet would allow me to engage in “productive discussions” about these issues. So I hopped online, and the rest was hysteria.

Village idiot, flat earther, inbred trash, negative IQ... Let’s just say that my thin skin got the test of a lifetime.

And it wasn’t just me: anyone who questioned the orthodoxy, whether expert or ordinary citizen, got a similar skinburn. In the words of one community physician, who for obvious reasons shall remain anonymous: “Many doctors including myself, along with virologists, epidemiologists and other scientists, advocated a targeted approach and a focus on the most vulnerable cohorts of patients, only to be dismissed as anti-science, tin foil hat kooks, conspiracy theorists, antivax and other equally colorful disparaging labels.”

Early in the game I decided I wouldn’t respond to such insults with more insults—not because I’m especially high-minded, but because mudslinging contests just leave me angry and it’s not fun to walk around angry all day. Instead, I took the shaming on the chin (and still walked around angry).

The Shame Game

The shaming impulse asserted itself right from the start of the pandemic. On Twitter, #covidiot began trending on the evening of March 22, 2020, and by the time the night was over, 3,000 tweets had coopted the hashtag to denounce poor public health practices. When CBS News posted a video of spring breakers partying in Miami, outraged citizens shared the students’ names in their social media networks, accompanied by such missives as “do not give these selfish dumbfucks beds and/or respirators.”

In the early days of the pandemic, when panic and confusion reigned, such indignation could perhaps be forgiven. But the shaming gained momentum and wove itself into the zeitgeist. Also: it didn’t work.

As noted by Harvard Medical School epidemiologist Julia Marcus, “shaming and blaming people is not the best way to get them to change their behavior and actually can be counterproductive because it makes people want to hide their behavior.” Along similar lines,

Jan Balkus, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Washington, maintains that shaming can make it harder for people to “acknowledge situations where they may have encountered risk.”

If shaming “covidiot” for their behavior doesn’t accomplish much, you can be sure that shaming people for Wrongthink won’t change any minds. Instead, we heretics simply stop telling the shamers what we’re thinking. We nod and smile. We give them the match point and continue the debate in our own heads.

Gloves Off

For two years I’ve been that person. I’ve smiled politely while dodging insults. To put my interlocutors at ease, I’ve prefaced my heterodox opinions with disclaimers like “I dislike Trump as much as you do” or “For the record, I’m triple-vaxxed myself.”

Just today, I’ll allow myself to drop the pandering and call it as I see it.

To everyone who dumped on me for questioning the shutdown of civilization and calling out the damage it inflicted on the young and the poor: you can take your shaming, your scientific posturing, your insufferable moralizing, and stuff it. Every day, new research knocks more air out of your smug pronouncements.

You told me that without lockdowns, Covid would have wiped out a third of the world, much as the Black Death decimated Europe in the 14th century. Instead, a Johns Hopkins meta-analysis concluded that lockdowns in Europe and the US reduced Covid-19 mortality by an average of 0.2%.

What’s more, long before this study we had good evidence that anything less than a China-style door-welding lockdown wouldn’t do much good. In a 2006 paper, the WHO Writing Group affirmed that “mandatory case reporting and isolating patients during the influenza pandemic of 1918 did not stop virus transmission and were impractical.”

You told me that social interaction is a want, not a need. Well, yes. So is good food. In truth, social isolation kills. As reported in a September 2020 review article published in *Cell*, loneliness “may be the most potent threat to survival and longevity.” The article explains how social isolation lowers cognitive development, weakens the immune system, and puts people at risk of substance use disorders. And it’s not like we didn’t know this before Covid: in 2017, research by Brigham Young University professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad determined that social isolation accelerates mortality as much as smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Her findings splashed the pages of news outlets around the world.

You told me we need not worry about the effects of Covid restrictions on children because kids are resilient—and besides, they had it much worse in the great wars. Meanwhile, the UK saw a 77% increase in pediatric referrals for such issues as self-harm and suicidal thoughts

during a 6-month period in 2021, in relation to a similar stretch in 2019. And if that doesn't shake you up, a [World Bank analysis](#) estimated that, in low-income countries, the economic contraction ensuing from lockdown policies led 1.76 children to lose their lives for every Covid fatality averted.

You told me that vaccinated people don't carry the virus, taking your cue from CDC director Rachel Walensky's [proclamation](#) in early 2021, and we all know how well that aged.

You told me I had no business questioning what infectious disease experts were telling us to do. (I'm paraphrasing here. What you actually said was: "How about staying in your lane and shutting the eff up?") I got my vindication from Dr. Stefanos Kales, another from Harvard Medical School, who warned of the "dangers of turning over public policy and public health recommendations to people who have had their careers exclusively focused on infectious disease" in a recent [CNBC interview](#). "Public health is a balance," he said. Indeed it is. In a [2001 book](#) called *Public Health Law: Power, Duty and Restraint*, Lawrence Gostin argued for more systematic assessments of the risks and benefits of public health interventions and more robust protection of civil liberties.

So yeah. I'm upset and your finger-wagging posse left me alienated enough that I had to go looking for new tribes, and in this quest I've been rather successful. I have found more kindred spirits than I could ever have imagined, in my city of Toronto and all over the world: doctors, nurses, scientists, farmers, musicians, and homemakers who share my distaste for your grandstanding. Epidemiologists, too. These fine folks have kept me from losing my mind.

So thank you. And get off my lawn.

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Gabrielle divides her time between writing books, articles, and clinical materials for health professionals. She has received six national awards for her health journalism. She has written two books—*Tokyo, My Everest*, co-winner of the Canada-Japan Book Prize, and *Waltzing The Tango*, finalist in the Edna Staebler creative nonfiction award—and is working on two more.