

## Opinion: We are one another's lifeboats

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In a family photo from 1952, a six-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl are shown in their home at 6202 Dibble Avenue in Cleveland, Ohio during a scarlet fever quarantine. Photo courtesy of Tom Palaima. *Austin American-Statesman*.

As the COVID-19 lockdown was starting, I received an old black-and-white photograph taken in Christmas 1952, when I was a year old.

Looking at the photo, I could see that my extended family was locked down. My cousins Jim, age 6, and Lynn, age 3, peer out through the glass of the door of the small front rooms where they lived with my Aunt Myra and Uncle Adam. An official notice tacked on the door declares in bold letters “scarlet fever.” Jim brandishes a toy six-shooter in his left hand. Lynn is hugging her Christmas present, a pair of colorful boots. A Christmas wreath hangs above them.

Not pictured are the rooms upstairs where my parents, my older brother and I squeezed in. Living in the sparsely furnished downstairs living room and rear kitchen, my immigrant paternal grandparents shared the home they bought in 1925 and held onto through the Depression. The house was heated by a basement coal furnace well into the 1960s.

We were Cleveland's Roman Catholic version of Woody Allen's "Radio Days." How everyone in our three households endured the quarantine is hard to guess. But the isolation was real. We were not among the 30 million American homes that had telephones back then. Round-screen black-and-white televisions lay just ahead. Radio programs diverted our parents from the here and now. What my illiterate grandparents thought and felt was always hidden behind the barrier of the little broken English they could speak. We somehow made it through and gratefully went on to our lives ahead.

Our strange times now, therefore, are not entirely unparalleled. We are all out at sea hoping to return to safe harbors. My grandparents knew the feeling. Speaking only Lithuanian and Polish, they had come individually by sea a decade apart in large ships transporting eastern European immigrants from Bremen and Liverpool.

Being forced to keep to ourselves gives us a rare opportunity to look at ourselves and our responsibilities to others. We can reach outward by looking inward and by looking back.

British war photographer Sir Don McCullin puts it this way: "Good people live in a sad world." We see it in his award-winning photos of ordinary people in hopelessly impoverished areas of London and northern British industrial towns in the late 1970s.

In "This Brilliant Darkness: A Book of Strangers," Jeff Sharlet activates viewer's empathy through mobile phone images of the invisible castoff people who inhabit hidden spaces in our communities, often in plain sight. We see these images in real-time, driving past homeless encampments like the one in the grassy median of Riverside Drive east of Pleasant Valley Road. Sharlet's photographs help us to see each individual as a human being in need, not a human discard. They haunt him. He invites them to haunt us, too.

"They give you futures as well as pasts," Sharlet writes. "You realize just how fragile everything is. Instead of standing on land you realize you're on a boat, and it's a small boat, and the ocean is all around you, and the best hope is just to stay on the boat, because there is no land."

Who knows what becomes of human lives and what sets them irreversibly off track? We all have points where things go wrong. We all can go down paths never to return.

Let us all stay secure in our boats and look closely and sympathetically at who we are, past and present. We need to be one another's lifeboats now and when we reach *terra firma*.

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