



# **PANDEMA'S BOX**

**A BIG STORY TOLD IN LITTLE BOXES**

BY MOLLIE D WALLACE

March 2 – June 19, 2022  
Forsberg Riverside Gallery  
**Waterloo Center for the Arts**

# PANDEMA'S BOX

Opening Pandora's Box is a metaphor for creating endless trouble. Inspired by Pandora, the Pandema's Box exhibit is the story of how we dealt with the great trouble beginning in 2020, the coronavirus.

In the Greek myth, the gods create the first woman, Pandora, and give her a box with special "gifts" that she must not open. She opens it anyway and out comes endless trouble.

Pandema comes from the mind of Des Moines artist Mollie D Wallace. Wallace assumed there would be just a handful of boxes and that the pandemic would be over by summer 2020. Now two years later, there are more than two dozen. Each deals with a specific story of the pandemic, from hoarding toilet paper to the great mask debate.

Each story is told in miniature, each in a vintage jewelry box, and each created in real time as the pandemic played out.



## MOLLIE D WALLACE

@molliewallaceart | molliewallace05@gmail.com

WALLACE is a Des Moines native and earned a degree in design and illustration from Pratt Institute. Her work can be seen throughout Des Moines and New Orleans in the form of murals, signs and merchandise branding. Wallace has designed everything from bike helmets and food trucks to guitars and Mardi Gras costumes.



## 01 Dancing Alone

She shouldn't have done it, but the lock was so close and so inviting, and she was so curious, so Pandema opened the box. Out emerged the coronavirus, COVID-19.

Now she twirls alone. On each revolution in the ornate but empty opera house she can see the skeleton keyhole, a reminder of what happens when an epidemic is unleashed.

To prevent a catastrophic surge of the disease, draconian lockdowns were ordered. Schools closed in mid-March and converted to online classes. Movie houses, shopping malls, Broadway, sit-down restaurants—all dark. All major sports, even the Olympics, were canceled or delayed. Libraries, national parks, museums, all closed. All of it unprecedented.

So Pandema continues to twirl for an empty house — she's the only moving character in all the boxes — and wonders, is there an end to this?

## 02 Life in Quarantine

Love your home? Sure. Love it 24/7? Well ...

The only way to get ahead of the disease was to prevent its spread. That is, stay home. Isolate. Got it, people said.

They re-read epic novels like *Lonesome Dove*. They played games (note the Monopoly board and deck of cards). Some homes got organized. Others, not so much (see the overflowing laundry basket).

Streaming services flourished, and everyone learned to Zoom. Artists spoofed famous paintings and shared them online. One put face masks on the characters of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, another had Jesus dining alone in da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Others taught the cat to ride the Roomba.

But being creative at sheltering in place was scant comfort compared to the simple pleasures of visiting with friends and family, seeing a movie, or going out to dinner.



## 03

### Spring Outbreak

You can cancel sports and schools and theaters but you can't cancel spring of 2020. So said the spring break organizers and revelers. Besides, went the early wisdom, only old people with underlying health problems were vulnerable to the virus.

College students swarmed Florida. Ohio student Brady Sluder famously declared, "If I get corona, I get corona. I'm not going to let it stop me from partying." So they partied. Note the warnings from an Italian newspaper amidst the "beach" detritus. See also the discarded Corona beer cans. Beer, of course, had nothing to do with the pandemic.

Thousands of people found themselves adrift at sea. Dozens of cruise ships were denied entry at port after port because some passengers had the virus. Note the ships at sea on the box's front inside panel.



## 04

### Wash Yo Hands

Staying home was the main strategy to prevent contagion but a whole new set of rules dominated behavior for the times when people had to go out.

Rule 1, stay away from others. Masking tape lines on the floor showed how to keep the proper distance at the grocery store. The proper distance was six feet, the distance that particles from a sneeze or cough can travel. Notice the ruler keeping the roosters a safe distance apart.

Rule 2, wash your hands. Then wash them again. And before you do, don't touch your face. The CDC recommended washing for 20 seconds, about the length of time to sing *Happy Birthday* twice.

Rule 3, wear a mask. The early advice was that only health professionals or caregivers of COVID-19 patients needed to wear them. That changed in early April with growing evidence that asymptomatic people could transmit the disease.

Rule 4, take your temp. People with the coronavirus generally have fevers.





## 06

### The Roll Rush

The shelter-in-place order was like the weather forecast for a winter storm – everybody rushes to buy the essentials. But instead of bread and ice-melt, people hoarded toilet paper and other paper goods. Stores ran out in mid-March.

Toilet paper? “People like to eliminate some of the uncertainty” in emergencies, said Boston University Professor Jay Zagorsky. “Buying toilet paper ensures that at least one act in life is completely taken care of.”

Americans saw the funny side. In Alabama a man treated passing motorists with a cardboard sign “Will work for toilet paper.” A fake dating post declared, “Man with 100 TP rolls seeks woman with generous amounts of hand sanitizer for good clean fun.”

In this box, rolls of toilet paper, made from felt, are equated with fine jewelry and rare coins.



## 05

### Empty Chairs & Empty Tables

Bars and restaurants – from the neighborhood tavern to fine dining and everything in between – were closed. Many businesses limped through the crisis by offering takeout or outdoor seating, and others were kept afloat by federal loans that were forgiven if owners could show support for workers.

Others pulled the plug. By late July, nearly 16,000 restaurants closed permanently. By the end of the year, 110,000 eating and drinking establishments in the U.S. closed for business, temporarily or permanently, with 2.5 million jobs erased from pre-pandemic levels, according to the National Restaurant Association.

Those that survived struggled to find employees. Many workers found other jobs, some feared virus exposure at their old jobs, and others said employees could earn more by staying home with unemployment benefits.

## 07

### The “Chinese” Virus

Presented with a drumbeat of ever alarming advice to act as the virus spread from China to Europe, President Trump downplayed the threat, calling it a hoax and blaming the media and Democrats for exaggeration.

He also blamed China for the outbreak, calling it the “Chinese Virus” despite complaints that the label resulted in racist anti-Asian threats.

The president advocated the use of unproven drugs for treating the disease. Health experts and bleach suppliers were alarmed in mid-April when he appeared to suggest injections of cleaning solutions. Trump said he was just spoofing reporters.

In this box, Trump’s tweets are portrayed as fortunes spewing from fortune cookies, often thought to originate in China. Actually the cookie is an American creation famously served in Chinese-American restaurants (note the restaurant scene on the lower level).



## 08

### School’s Out

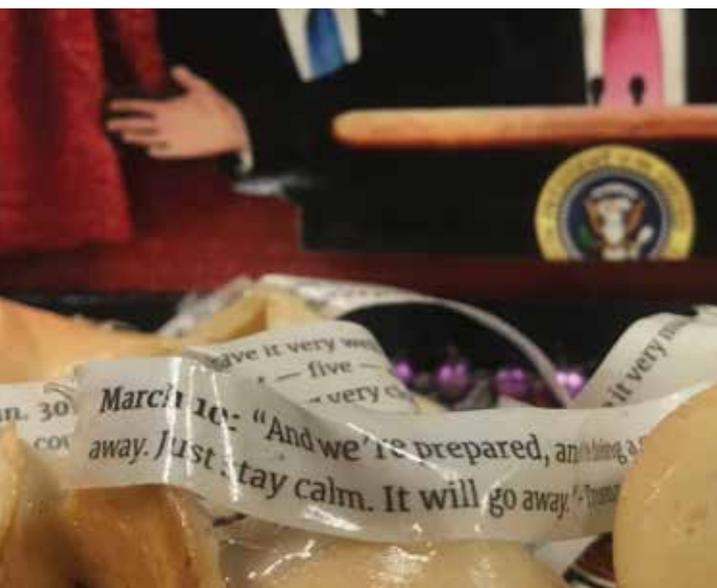
The pandemic forced a near-total shutdown of schools in the spring of 2020 – an unprecedented upheaval of K-12 education in the United States.

Remote learning took over and some kids liked the change. Less intimidating to participate in class. Others felt isolated or had trouble focusing.

There were other impacts. Parents who had essential on-site jobs had to find somebody who could watch young homebound students. Meals for disadvantaged kids were disrupted, so some schools offered drive-up food giveaways.

And still more disruption. Proms, teacher-parent conferences, school sports, and graduations were canceled or performed online. Even outdoor playgrounds were roped off due to early fears that the virus could attach itself to the swing set.

It was a little like Alice Cooper’s *School’s Out* song of 1972. But instead of being an anthem for the beginning of summer, the pandemic impact seemed unending.





09

## Essential Workers

The stay-at-home orders didn't apply to emergency room nurses. Or meatpackers, transit and package delivery drivers, Postal Service workers, and grocery store clerks. About a third of U.S. adults were identified as essential workers during the pandemic, meaning they were required to work onsite. As a group, their wages were far less than for people who could work from home.

The nation gave its thanks. Grocery store clerks were given "hero" shirts to wear. Yard signs thanking mail carriers were everywhere. Customers gave bursts of applause. Corporate messages of praise were ubiquitous.

The workers appreciated the sentiment and many were thankful to have jobs at all compared to millions of laid-off restaurant and lodging workers.

On the other hand, the burnout rate among these "essential" workers was high, especially among health providers. Many said a higher minimum wage would be better than a round of applause.

10

## Do the Quarantango

People stuck at home do what comes naturally, so it's said. As this box suggests, they did the Quarantango. The lower tray shows what they produced nine months later, the Covid Patch Kids. Others called them the Coronials and the Baby Zoomers.

Sociologists enjoyed the speculation but said it was unlikely. In times of stress and uncertainty, they said, people tend to delay big life decisions.

Nine months after the great New York City blackout of November 1965, there were news stories – later shown to be unsupported – about a birth boom. Every disaster since has produced the same always-mistaken prediction.

Sure enough, there was no baby boom late in 2020 or early 2021. It was the other way around. Overall U.S. births for 2020 were down 4 percent, the CDC reported.



# 11

## Black Lives Matter

On Memorial Day 2020 in Minneapolis, forty-six-year-old George Floyd was killed during an arrest when white police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes. Floyd gasped that he couldn't breathe.

He was far from the only Black person or person of color to die needlessly at the hands of police. But when the video of the astonishingly brutal "arrest" went viral, the Black Lives Matter protests (while it had already gained traction – not to mention, controversy) exploded into a mainstream movement.



# 12

## Tug of War

Pressure to relax quarantines and "open the country" started to grow in May. Advocates said damage to the economy would be severe and long lasting if the clampdown lasted too long. The cure cannot be worse than the disease, they said.

Scientists warned that premature relaxation could cause the disease to roar back. If you think it's hard now, they said, think how hard it will be if a second wave forces you to re-impose quarantines.

In this box an old-fashioned tug of war is playing out between two summer camps: Camp Healthicaca and Camp Economanoma.

Policy makers did their best to take both sides, keeping health mandates in place while softening the impact of those rules by extending unemployment benefits, creating eviction moratoriums, inciting businesses not to lay off workers, and providing stimulus cash to most Americans.





## 13 To Mask or Not to Mask?

The Hamlet character in this box is asking that question as he stands before an empty opera house, the unfilled seats made of red pipe cleaners.

At first, scientists didn't know the disease was uber infectious, nor was it clear how long infectious particles could last in air. In March, both the WHO and the CDC said face masks shouldn't be worn by healthy people and should be reserved for those who were sick or caring for the sick.

That advice was reversed weeks later when it became clear that asymptomatic people could transmit the disease, and that a cloth face covering could provide some protection. Wearing your mask will help protect others, said the new advice, and you get protected when others wear theirs.

But from the beginning there was resistance. Wearing a mask became a political question, with many Republicans claiming mask-wearing was a personal choice while Democrats largely supported mandatory mask mandates.

## 14 The Home Cut

With salons and barber shops closed for the pandemic, home haircuts became common.

There was lots of advice. Start cautiously, the professionals said. Use sharp scissors. The ones in the utility drawer will make it look like somebody bit off your hair. If you can't find somebody else to do it, at least use mirrors so you can see more than just a front view.

Of course there were errors, many of which were shared with a laugh on social media. There were lopsided cuts, harsh layering, uneven lengths.

One man said he wasn't concerned. "The difference between a good haircut and a bad haircut is three weeks," he said.

Note the parlor scene in this box with miniature electrical outlets, beauty supplies, even a bathroom scale.



## 15

### Pandemic Sourdough

Grocery stores don't devote much space to flour, yeast and such. There's not much profit to be made selling ingredients for breadmaking. Besides, who has time for that?

By April it was clear – lots of people had time for that. And it wasn't just bread, but specifically, sourdough. With yeast being hard to find, people rushed to sourdough, which relies instead on a living starter made of flour and water fermented by wild yeast and bacteria.

Soon everyone was posting pictures of their sourdough creations. There were tips on how to keep your starter yeast alive, recipes to use your new hobby, and offers to share starter.

In this box notice the half-empty bag of flour and lots of breadmaking paraphernalia at L'Pandisserie, a play on L'Patisserie, a French bakery. And of course, all the perfect sourdough creations.



## 16

### Zoom Attire

When they couldn't meet in person, they met with online chat programs like Zoom.

It was quickly apparent that virtual meetings didn't require suits and ties. The general wisdom was "business on top, party on the bottom." Note the character in this box wearing boxers that nobody will see on his meeting.

But there was a learning curve. One woman experimented with the filters to change her head into a talking potato, then couldn't turn it off for her meeting. Others forgot to mute their mikes when not speaking.

Even so, virtual meetings proved to be productive and popular. Business owners wondered if they really needed downtown office space.

One person said his Zoom call ended abruptly after 40 minutes because the organizer was on a free tier. "This is the single greatest advance for meeting productivity that I have ever seen," he said.



## 17 Pandemic Pastimes

With no movies, sports or school events to attend, no sit-down restaurants to enjoy, no vacations, how did they fill their time?

Not a problem. While the pandemic took a ghastly toll it also provided an opportunity to renew an old hobby or find a new one.

A day-by-day Google study showed an enormous increase in requests for pastime information. On October 16, 2020, for example, the topic of home canning got a sixfold increase in hits compared to a year earlier.

As shown left to right in this box, people also brought out old board games and dove into card-playing, learned or relearned sewing or crocheting or playing a musical instrument, re-read the classics, tried their hands at gardening, learned to shop online, and adopted a pet.

And they went outside. Note the running trail, swimming beach, and kayak in the lower box.

## 18 Weather Extremes

Late morning on August 10, Iowans were amazed as skies turned black. It wasn't the swirling bully of a tornado – Iowans know about those. It was ferocious winds and pounding rain of a rare derecho. Hurricane force winds of up to 140 mph blasted a wide swath of the state. Cedar Rapids, the state's second largest city, lost an estimated 50 percent of its tree canopy. Ten million acres of the state's nation-leading corn crop – more than a third – was ruined or damaged, and power was out for weeks for many. It was the third most costly weather event of the year in the U.S. (\$11 billion), exceeded only by Hurricane Hanna in Louisiana (\$19 billion) and the Western wildfires (\$16.5 billion).

The pandemic dominated news all year but ghastly weather events knocked COVID-19 off the front pages for days at a time.

This box shows a common breakfast scene in the foreground and a giant map of 2020 weather disasters on a television weather station.



## 19 The Vacci-Cabana

The long-awaited vaccines rolled out in December, with health professionals and elderly people being first in line. Those lucky enough to get the jab were ecstatic. Doctors could treat their patients without fear of getting the virus themselves. After months of isolation, people in nursing homes could finally receive visitors.

The rollout was hectic. Health departments sometimes received fewer doses than promised. Computer sign-up systems were confusing.

Millennials frantically signed up their boomer parents for shots. One wag wrote, "I bet you 100 shares of Pfizer Inc., that behind every vaccinated 70-year-old is a 30-year-old on an iPhone."

With vaccination came a sense of privilege. Note the 50's era lounge that you could visit if you had the jab.

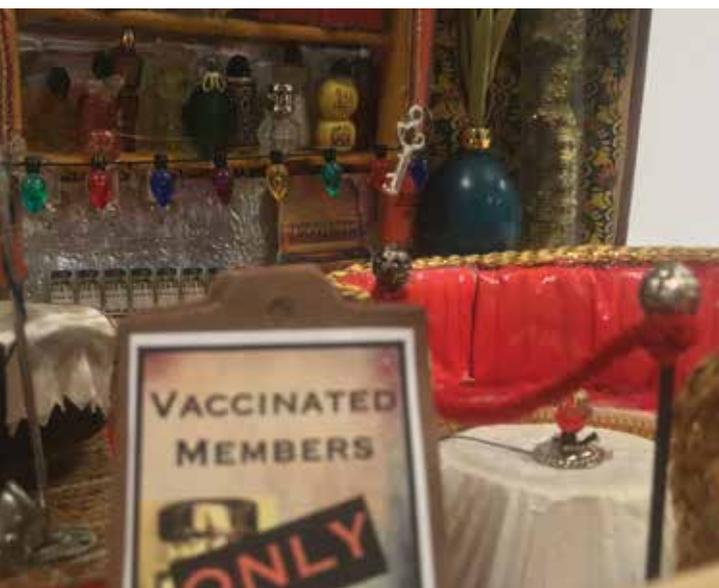


## 20 Snake Oil

The World Health Organization calls the explosion of misinformation about the pandemic the "infodemic." A politician in India said that drinking cow urine and applying cow dung on the body could cure COVID. But only if Indian cows were used. Televangelist Jim Bakker sold a concoction called "Silver Solution" to prevent COVID, charging a "donation" of up to \$125. He agreed to refunds.

More examples: You can prevent COVID, or cure it, by taking hot baths, ingesting bleach, eating enormous amounts of garlic, or using asthma nebulizers to inhale hydrogen peroxide.

Note the collection of concoctions, salves, vitamins, and other "cures" in this box. And a hair dryer. A Florida official announced that to cure COVID, all you need to do is inhale, with your nose, hot air from a hair dryer. Needless to say, it doesn't work. And it could injure your nose.





## 21 The Insurrection

On January 6, 2021, the Capitol in Washington D.C. was stormed during a violent attack.

The attack disrupted a joint session of the House and Senate assembled to count electoral votes and certify the election for president.

The Capitol was locked down and lawmakers, including the vice president, and their staffs were evacuated. Police were overwhelmed as rioters occupied and vandalized the building for several hours.

The attack on the Capitol was unprecedented.

## 22 Herd Immunity

Herd immunity occurs when a large portion of a community (the herd) becomes immune to a disease, making the spread of disease from person to person unlikely. As a result, the whole community becomes protected – not just those who are immune.

Measles, mumps, and polio are examples of infectious diseases that were once very common but are now rare in the U.S. because vaccines helped to establish herd immunity.

The consensus among scientists is that rather than making a long-promised exit, the virus will most likely continue to be a manageable threat – still causing hospitalizations but in much smaller numbers.

Reaching a herd immunity threshold now looks unlikely because of factors such as vaccine hesitancy and the emergence of new variants.



## 23

### Road Trip 2021 (are we there yet?)

As 2021 got underway, it looked like the battle against COVID was making headway. Vaccines were highly effective. Restrictions on social distancing started to relax. Stores, restaurants, sporting events – all started to feature actual people.

But COVID wasn't done. Viruses that aren't stamped out will mutate, and new variants struck hard. Back came the social restrictions, more debate about vaccines and masks, more hospitalizations. COVID fatigue was common.

The billboards in this box show the whiplash-like impact of this on-again, off-again, on-again disease. The folded roadmap on the dash shows states with mask mandates and those without. The steering wheel is a plastic bracelet, the windshield is the cover of a Swiffer pad box, and the "leather" interior surfaces are made from vinyl eyeglass cases.



## 24

### Terminal C

In this box, the airport terminal is deserted, as many were when COVID burst on the scene in 2020.

Like other viruses, COVID mutates to different forms. First identified in Wuhan, China, many people initially referred to it as the Chinese virus, leading to stigma against people of Asian descent. Thus, the World Health Organization decided to use the Greek alphabet to track variants.

The WHO reasoned countries would be more forthcoming to disclose a new strain if it were named Sigma or Rho rather than the country's name. The letters Nu and Xi are being skipped.

Note the "departures/arrivals" sign showing COVID variants coming and going. The fencing is made from mesh from an onion bag.



## 25 Hope

In the original myth Pandora slams the lid shut, shocked at the ills and evils she has unleashed onto the world and on mankind. Once shut, the only thing remaining in the box is hope.

In this box, hope – present but unseen in all the other boxes – becomes visible to the world.

It is hope that urges us day after day to find courage to fight through all the evils. Hope is the expectation that things will be better tomorrow.

© 2022 Mollie D Wallace. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration by Mollie D Wallace  
Text descriptions by Roger Munns & Mollie D Wallace  
Photography and design by Chawne Paige

A special thank you to Diane & Roger Munns

Published by Waterloo Center for the Arts, Waterloo, Iowa  
[waterloocenterforthearts.org](http://waterloocenterforthearts.org)

The Waterloo Center for the Arts is supported in part by Experience Waterloo and the City of Waterloo Hotel-Motel Tax Fund, Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa, Iowa Arts Council (a division of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs) and Friends of the Art Center.



**waterloo center for the arts**

225 Commercial Street | Waterloo, Iowa  
[waterloocenterforthearts.org](http://waterloocenterforthearts.org)