Taking a shot at coronavirus

Stay course despite positive vaccine news

The search for a coronavirus vaccine yielded promising results this week, but that must be seen for exactly what it is — a bit of news with potential but uncertain significance, the first step on what will be a long road to an effective vaccine.

It also must be seen for what it is not — a reason to turn complacent and relax the behavior that has served us well the past two months. Keeping our distance from one another, avoiding crowds, wearing masks and practicing good hygiene have helped turn the tide of the pandemic. The number of new infections in New York and some other places is going down. That trend must continue, vaccine or not. Forgetting to adhere to those practices because a vaccine is on the horizon would be shortsighted and unwise, and most likely would cause infections to spike again. No one wants a return to the recent past.

Similar caution should be exercised regarding President Donald Trump’s revelation that he’s been taking the controversial drug hydroxychloroquine as a preventive against COVID-19. He said he started nearly two weeks ago, after his personal White House valet tested positive. Since then, two more studies have been published casting doubt on the drug’s effectiveness against the coronavirus; one found that patients taking both hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were more likely to suffer cardiac arrest. And the FDA has issued a safety warning about the drug’s potential to cause dangerous arrhythmia, saying it should not be used outside of a clinical trial or hospital that allows for careful heart monitoring.

In making clear he was going with his gut on taking the drug, Trump continued a troubling trend of defying expert medical opinion — like his resistance to wearing a mask, his suggestion of disinfectant injections (the source of the drinking Clorox joke) as a cure, and his rejection of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reopening guidelines. It sets a terrible example for the public. His reckless question, “What do you have to lose?” has a disturbing answer: Plenty.

Certainly, the news from Moderna, a Massachusetts biotechnology company, is encouraging. Moderna’s very preliminary results are cause for optimism. In the meantime, stay the course. Our safety depends on our own actions, at least for now.

— The editorial board
Newfound guardians of our galaxy?

Scientists say other beings inhabit the Milky Way. What would they think of us?

 Amid several weeks filled with more than the usual complement of outrageous revelations and offenses against norms of decency and common sense, news arrived that two scientists at the University of Nottingham in Britain have calculated that more than 30 intelligent civilizations could exist in our Milky Way.

Granted, the Milky Way is huge, and the closest of those alien civilizations likely would be thousands of light-years away. Not traditional neighbors, in other words. But consider this: The scientists used Earth as the model for how life may develop in other parts of the Milky Way. If Earth is the model, the Milky Way could be in trouble.

If these other civilizations developed as Earth did, perhaps their most powerful country also is led by someone who apparently approves of building concentration camps for certain religious groups. Perhaps that same leader many parsecs away is expressing his concern that he might lose an upcoming election if voting is made easier for more people, and is working hard to make it more difficult to vote. Perhaps he and other leaders in that land are ignoring warning signs about a spreading killer virus, in defiance of the advice of medical experts throughout that land and all over that world.

Perhaps the top environmental agency in this other world also is deciding not to put limits on a chemical that is linked to brain damage in infants and found in the drinking water of as many as 16 million of that land’s residents, just the latest of many steps it has taken guaranteed to pollute the air and water those people breathe and drink. Perhaps people in those worlds are being killed by law enforcement officials who kneel on their necks with callous indifference.

The Nottingham scientists used evolution in their calculations, assuming that elsewhere as on Earth it would take 5 billion years for intelligent life to form. If we’re all proceeding in tandem, perhaps people in other worlds also are wrecked, knowing that some of their brethren are being treated unfairly because of the color of their skin, the religion they practice, the people they love, the gender they are, or the place they come from, and knowing that it’s wrong and knowing it must stop and yet knowing that the mistreatment continues.

And then I wonder what these other civilizations would be like if they were a comparative speck of time, say 5,000 years, ahead or behind us. If they’re 5,000 years behind us, will they avoid the worst of what constitutes human behavior here? Will they know to nip bad acts in the bud? As they make their way through the earliest stages of their evolution, will we here on Earth survive long enough to develop communication and detection systems capable of finding these civilizations, which the Nottingham scientists say would be an average of 17,000 light-years away, in order to warn them of what might lie ahead? Would they listen to us?

If they’re 5,000 years ahead of us, do they even still exist? Did they encounter anything like the self-broiling of their world and act before it was too late? Have they learned to refrain from harming one another and are they now treating each other like the equal life-forms that they are? Are they so advanced that they already have found us but backed away, confounded by our inexhaustible capacity to do both good and evil to ourselves and by our utter inability or unwillingness to change?

If they do approach to warn us, will we listen?

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday’s editorial board.
When I get confused about life and my fellow humans, I find it helpful to look to nature for perspective. This week, that meant thinking about the caterpillar.

We almost killed it when we first saw it. It was two years ago when we spotted it on the carrot greens in our garden. Then we discovered two more, and believed an invasion was underway. Scarred by our memories of tomato hornworm and gypsy moth caterpillars and their ilk, we collected these three and put them in jars — but then had second thoughts. Their colorations were captivating, with alternating stripes of yellow, green and black in various contours. And sure enough, a quick online check showed they would evolve into swallowtail butterflies. This particular species is black with blue and yellow markings, just a gorgeous specimen. We previously had seen a couple around the yard. So we hurriedly placed the three caterpillars back in their carrot-top refuge and let one of nature’s great processes continue.

A week or two ago, we discovered another swallowtail caterpillar at a much younger stage, our second such sighting this season. We tried to track it as it inched its way around the carrot patch, munching, growing bigger and more beautiful, blending in as it knows to do to escape the notice of the birds, preparing to find a safe spot to form its chrysalis. But we lost sight of it a few days ago, as we always do. These caterpillars are good at camouflage, and they’re sticking to it, as they should. So we expect to see the evidence of another successful transformation soon with another butterfly patrolling the garden.

Next to the carrots are the tomatoes, green but growing, now fully armored against the squirrels that seem to like them as much as we do. This is a three-year war . . . and counting. Plastic mesh fencing staked into the ground and netting on top draped over poles and clipped to the fence have worked so far, so we’re sticking with it.

On the other side of the garden, our blueberries are cordoned off from the blue jays, mockingbirds and Baltimore orioles by netting stretched across a PVC frame, with sheets of plastic and wooden boards added as an additional barrier along the bottom when we discovered that the netting alone was not enough to keep the birds out. They were going to keep coming until they couldn’t.

And that’s the way it goes in life. You do what you have to. We all do. The birds, the butterflies, the squirrels. And usually, the people. We stick with what works as long as it works, and when it doesn’t work any longer we adapt. I don’t worry about my avian and rodent friends going hungry. They know what to do. There are lots of them around, and they all look like they’re eating well. Our blackberries and raspberries are still fair game. The squirrels frolic as restlessly as always, the blue jays swoop the tree tops as imperiously as they ever did.

Then I look beyond my yard, down the street and across the country, and I see so much of the nation struggling with the coronavirus. I see cases and deaths rising again, and hospitals overflowing again, and lines of cars for testing again, and doctors and nurses being asked to reuse personal protective equipment again, and leadership absent again, and falsehoods pronounced again. And I see people refusing to adapt, and others casting aside adaptations that have worked. And I don’t understand.

In the natural world, constancy and change are the yin and yang of survival. Find the balance and you thrive. Some humans have a lot to learn.
EDITORIAL

Another term for Kaminsky

Long Island needs strong voices in the State Senate to craft a smart way forward for the suburbs and Todd D. Kaminsky’s voice is crucial to that effort. The 42-year-old former federal prosecutor from Long Beach, who has served in the Senate’s 9th District since 2016, has notched accomplishments, including advocating for and helping to shepherd through a new Long Island Rail Road station at Belmont Park, crucial to that project’s development.

As chair of the Environmental Conservation Committee, Kaminsky has been a strong advocate for the environment, an area of concern for his South Shore district, which has been hit hard by extreme weather and likely will be again. He has worked to create stiff penalties against illegal dumping, a particular Long Island bane, and sponsored the landmark Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. Signed by the governor last summer, it is the state’s most important effort to move toward reduced greenhouse gas emissions across sectors of the economy.

Unlike some anti-business members of his caucus, Kaminsky understands that Senate Democrats must not shy away from the big projects and partnerships with the corporate world that can bring jobs, tax revenue, and economic stability. He was too quiet and slow to challenge State Senate leadership on its mistaken opposition to an Amazon headquarters in Long Island City, eventually calling Amazon’s departure from a planned headquarters expansion a “tragedy.”

“We can’t be anti-development at the drop of a hat,” he said in an endorsement interview with Newsday’s editorial board.

It is these types of struggles within a Democratic caucus brimming with more left-leaning activists in which Kaminsky must find a firmer footing. The region’s future economic growth is at risk. In a similar and important fight in the last two years over bail reform, Kaminsky tried to use his law enforcement background to help guide some of his colleagues’ work, with mixed success. Additional revisions of the changes in bail and discovery laws are needed next year, and Kaminsky should be at the center of them.

His opponent, Victoria M. Johnson, 60, a Rockville Centre Republican, has Albany experience including as chief of staff to former Assemb. Brian Curran. But her erroneous notions about what actually occurred in the bail reform process and crime statistics coupled with her lack of definitive support for the science of vaccines suggests that she would not be an effective advocate in the State Legislature for her district or Long Island.

Newsday endorses Kaminsky.
— The editorial board

EDITORIAL

Brooks has earned a 3rd term

State Sen. John E. Brooks will stand alone on the ballot this fall, after the Republican Party’s two possible candidates were disqualified because of successful legal challenges.

But Brooks, now completing his second term in office in the 8th Senate District, commendably stands out for other reasons. Just before the pandemic took hold, Brooks had introduced a bill to cap the amount of a school district’s spending that comes from residential property taxes at 50%, in an innovative attempt to provide tax relief particularly for communities with a small commercial property tax base.

The Seaford Democrat says his plans were gaining traction, and he hopes to resume discussions, and find ways for businesses to contribute more to education funding.

Even with such big ideas, Brooks is willing to admit he doesn’t have all of the answers to the state’s budget difficulties, but he’s open to potential tax increases on “truly high-income earners.” He calls the State Legislature’s process in passing criminal justice reform “horrendous,” and isn’t pleased with where the reform stands now, noting that he worries particularly about individuals with mental health issues.

Brooks, 70, deeply understands his district, and has tried to tackle some of its most knotty challenges, such as securing a fiscal monitor for the Wyandanch school district. He says he has more to do, suggesting, for instance, establishing a veterans’ program at Nassau University Medical Center to be funded by veterans’ agencies.

Both of Brooks’ would-be challengers — Suffolk County elections commissioner Nick LaLota and attorney Norman Sammut — were disqualified.

Long Island needs Brooks’ imagination and thoughtfulness in Albany. In his next term, Brooks should continue to push his bold vision for changing the school funding system that is bleeding taxpayers and take a leadership role in the local delegation on financial issues, veterans’ affairs, and other issues he knows well.

Newsday endorses Brooks.
— The editorial board
EDITORIAL

MTA budget at the mercy of Washington

This is a crucial moment for public transit across the region. The financial picture is grim. Yet, we still need the transportation network that makes the region work 24/7. And we still have to plan for the future.

Come Wednesday, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board will face a variety of budgetary scenarios, each likely more ugly than the next. There will be service cuts and layoffs to consider. The Long Island Rail Road could see full branches shuttered. Avoiding such steps is dependent only on whether federal stimulus funds come through and, if so, how much.

So far, no news from Congress is bad news. The MTA board, and commuters across the region, must be prepared for bumpy roads ahead. But there is a ray of hope.

When he takes office, President-elect Joe Biden can make a few moves to help right away. He can start by reinstating the MTA’s Federal Emergency Management Agency reimbursements for COVID-19-related expenses like personal protective equipment, estimated to cost as much as $500 million in 2020 alone. It’s absurd that the Trump administration stopped these payments, and it’s a small but easy fix Biden can make in his first few days.

Next, Biden can move the region ahead in bigger ways. Take congestion pricing, which could bring in $1 billion a year. The MTA is awaiting a clear answer from federal officials on how the authority should move forward with the plan’s environmental review, which would pave the way for the tolling of Manhattan’s central business district.

Then there’s the promise that Biden might do what President Barack Obama left off. That means returning to the Obama plan to fund also the Gateway project to build a new tunnel under the Hudson River. Biden knows how critical Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor is, and just how awful a failure of those tunnels would be.

Perhaps most significant, Biden can — and must — pick up where his work with President Barack Obama left off. That means returning to the Obama plan to fund half of the Gateway project to build a new tunnel under the Hudson River. Biden knows how critical Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor is, and just how awful a failure of those tunnels would be.

But while such wish list items would be helpful, none will mean much without federal relief. The MTA is seeking $12 billion; the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey needs $3 billion. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell must end the logjam and get the nation’s economy moving.

Spencer should be suspended

Although Suffolk County Legis. William Spencer “has stepped down from his leadership posts in the county legislature,” one “leadership post” from which he has not stepped down is that of legislator [“Spencer out of Suffolk leader post,” News, Oct. 23]. His credentials deserve the highest respect, but because he is a doctor, elected official

Matt Davies

GAO INTOXICANT

G.O.P.

fraud

O PROOF

GRAIN OF SALT

Northwell should eye health, not guns

I am concerned about Northwell Health routinely asking emergency room patients if there is a gun in their house [“ERs to ask about guns,” News, Sept. 24]. The emergency room visit wouldn’t even have to be related to a possible gun injury, and patients will be asked whether they exercise their Second Amendment right? Will patients be asked whether they exercise the First Amendment right? I have a better idea: How about asking the patient that, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the leading causes of death are predominantly heart disease and cancer. In addition, according to a study by the Johns Hopkins Institute for Health and Social Policy, medical mistakes are now the third-leading cause of U.S. deaths. Don’t believe that Michael J. Dowling, president and chief executive at Northwell Health, would better serve emergency room patients through guidance of diet, exercise and clean living, which would result in fewer interactions with doctors, which could possibly lower the statistics on medical mistakes.

— Steven F. Cassidy, Franklin Square

Letters

Caterers need government help

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the catering industry has been forced to cancel most if not all of its parties this year. Our business, Lambrou’s Catering, has done only four small parties of no more than 50 people. Since there is no dancing, our more profitable parties had to be canceled. Many restaurants are doing better since the pandemic started, but the catering business is shut down. We cannot survive like this after eight months and counting with no return to our normal business in sight. Our industry needs assistance from Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Nassau County Executive Laura Curran. Please, at least, forgo our real estate taxes.

Nick Lambrou, Island Park

LETTERS