

**A BRIEF TASTE OF NORMAL LIFE**  
**amid a medical crisis and the**  
**everlasting COVID-19 pandemic.**  
**Stewart Hendrickson**  
**Seattle, July 16, 2020**

I have lived alone with my cat, Igor, in my Ballard condo since January 2020. Last November, my wife, Betty, moved into memory care at Aegis Living-Rodgers Park, in Queen Anne. After three months of non-stop work, emptying our large house, getting it ready to put on the market, buying and moving into a new condo, and selling the house in late February, I could almost feel like a normal person again. Oh yes, after about three months I got a haircut in early March – no time when I was so hard at work – just before the pandemic lockdown began. I even started to look normal – now, I haven't had a haircut since. During that time, I visited Betty at Aegis, first every day, and later, every other day.

In early March, Betty had a fall and was in Northwest Hospital to pin a hairline fracture in her left upper femur. My short-term normal life ended for a while.

Then, in mid-March, the pandemic lockdown began. I could no longer visit Betty – Aegis was closed to all visitors – we only talked on the phone. After that, life was anything but normal. Under the Governor's "stay-at-home" order, I usually leave my condo only for a two-mile walk once a day. Groceries come by Instacart from PCC – I am not anxious to mix with a lot of people, particularly indoors.

Cooking for one is not easy. I usually cook enough for four meals and eat the same dish over four consecutive days. Vegetables and fruits don't keep very long, and I often end up throwing food away if it spoils. Eating alone is no fun – we have evolved to eat together with family and friends. I often eat too fast, which isn't good for my digestion, and I miss the pleasure of conversation at my table-for-one.

If it weren't for Igor I would be talking to myself a lot, which wouldn't be good, and might make me a little weird. Instead, I talk to Igor. He listens but doesn't say much. I often phone old friends (even new ones), reconnect with college classmates, and even a high school friend I managed to track down after too many years. But most of all, I talk to my daughter, Krista, in the Bay Area of California, almost every other night. We have become very close, especially after Betty moved into memory care. I rely on her good advice, and we have a lot of common interests to talk about. I would love to visit her in California, but with COVID-19, I don't feel safe about travel, especially flying. In late June, we talked about her driving up to Seattle with her son, Austin – they would drive straight through, about 12-13 hours.

After Krista and Austin had arranged to drive up on Wednesday, July 8, Betty took another fall at Aegis on Friday, July 3. EMS took her to the ER at UW Medical Montlake Hospital, just south of the University. She was being X-rayed

when I arrived. This was the first time I had seen her since the lockdown in mid-March. She was ecstatic to see me as we reached out to touch hands and faces. She was in some pain, but able to sort of tell me what happened. She had fractured her upper right femur, which required surgery to replace the ball of her hip joint (a half-hip replacement). No operating room (OR) was available on the weekend, so she was transferred to UW Medical Northwest Hospital on Sunday. As I was visiting her that day, an OR opened up, and I followed her on her gurney to the OR where I was able to speak to the surgeon and the anesthesiologist. The operation went well (only about 45 minutes).

It was a slow recovery for Betty. The first few days she was in pain, quite fidgety, and not able to talk much. When Krista came with me to see her on Thursday, she was much better – not so much pain and more relaxed. Austin was also able to visit her – she had not seen him in several years. By Sunday, she was able to return to Aegis. That was the last we will see her until the end of the pandemic, or when person-to-person visiting becomes possible.

And now, the brief taste of normal life. Krista and Austin arrived late on Wednesday after driving straight through from California. I had not seen Krista since she helped me move into my condo in January, and I had not seen Austin in over two years. They both slept in my second bedroom – my music/computer room. The next morning life was normal, like with no pandemic. Getting up in a house with other people was great. Even Igor was excited – two new friends to play with him, not grumpy old me. Since we all had been very careful about the virus, we decided not to wear masks in the condo.

In the mornings, Austin was at work online at his laptop – fortunately, he can work wherever there is Wi-Fi available. Later during their visit, he was able to take his mountain bike for some great rides up Tiger Mountain, east of here. I also got to know him better than before.

I never had to cook the whole time they were here – what a great relief! Austin is a gourmet cook, and, between him and Krista, we ate very well. It was like having two live-in cooks – heaven! – and good dinner-time conversation. They even left some leftovers and extra food.

I enjoyed taking Krista on my daily walks, after her 5-6 mile run earlier in the morning. I not only showed her my neighborhood, but we had some great conversations along the way. One day we walked down to the Sound at Shilshole Ave.

Krista gave my condo, especially the kitchen, a good cleaning, and sparkle. I'm not bad with cleaning, but I don't do sparkle very well. The condo looks even better after they left, and I did do a lot of cleaning and straightening up beforehand. All I have to do now is keep it up.

After they left, early Tuesday morning, I felt sad. Mornings are always worse until I can open my bedroom door and greet Igor. I was also a bit tired after five days of normal living. I continue my daily solo walks. The first day, I met a friend starting to walk her dog. We circled in opposite directions and met again halfway around – nice to see and talk to someone face-to-face.

This little respite was very welcome, and it just might keep me going for a few more months until I can see Krista again. Next time she had better give me a haircut, it will be very overdue!

*Stewart Hendrickson is Professor Emeritus (chemistry), St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN; and Research Professor Emeritus (chemistry), University of Washington, Seattle, WA. He lives with his cat, Igor, in Seattle, WA.*