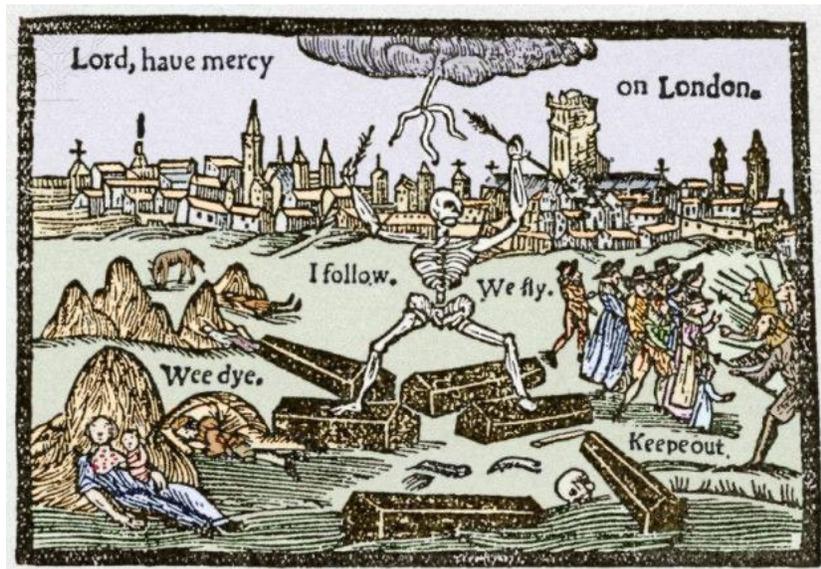


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# NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

*Social Distance in the Plague Years  
of Elizabethan and Jacobean England*



An essay by Charles Sullivan, PhD  
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During her long and eventful reign as Queen of England (1558-1603) Elizabeth Tudor gradually learned how to get most of the little things she wanted, and how to avoid some of the big things she didn't want. The little things included wagon-loads of silver ingots and gold bullion, uncut gems and rare spices, hi-jacked from Spanish convoys and outposts in the Americas, supplemented by lavish gifts of what might now be called "designer" clothing and accessories, which she graciously accepted on her birthdays, holidays, and other festive occasions at home. The big things she mostly managed to avoid or work around; they included invasion by Spain or other foreign enemies; repeated crop failures that threatened her people with starvation; political challenges from an unruly Parliament; the collapse of the slow-growing national economy—and on a more subjective level, such dreadful possibilities as attempted assassination; betrayal by those she trusted; denunciation for religious heresy; unsecure travel outside of southeastern England; marriage with anyone she considered inferior to her, which meant nearly everyone in Europe; failure to produce a suitable heir to the throne; untimely death from a contagious disease like the plague; and worst of all for her, perhaps, the undisguisable onset of old age.

Elizabeth, having been sickened and scarred during an epidemic of smallpox in 1562, had her own strong reasons to avoid the plague, which remained an unsolved medical mystery of worldwide proportions for more than three centuries, from the Black Death of 1348 to the Great Plague of 1665. Between these two much-discussed outbreaks there were more than 30 other epidemics in England, with London usually hit the hardest because of population density. The worst year of the English plague occurred in 1563, when nearly a fourth of London's population died. Elizabeth was 30 then, five years after her coronation, probably revolted by what she was able to see and hear about the ghastly effects of this disease. Her Jacobean successor, James Stuart, destined to be crowned 40 years later as King James I, was a child of 7 living in the relative safety of rural Scotland.

Since that time, there has been confusion and debate about what these deadly “plagues” actually were. Today most experts believe that what struck London repeatedly from the 1300s to the late 1600s was bubonic plague, a disease of rodents, especially black rats. It is now understood that the disease was passed between them by bites from their fleas. When a rat died from the plague, its fleas had to find a new host to live on. If the new host was a human being, disease could easily spread to other humans. When this happened, 80% of those with the disease would die, most within a week. But for many years the process of contagion was poorly understood. It seemed to have something to do with physical contact, but what exactly? Avoidance of plague-ridden houses and their occupants was practiced when possible, yet death rates were not much reduced. In the 1660s, some individuals believed the plague spread through bad air, so they smoked tobacco to prevent it from entering their lungs. This remedy was not found to be effective. Then in 1894 a French doctor discovered the bacterium that causes bubonic plague. In 1908 experts realized that rat fleas spread plague. Reliable methods of treatment and prevention were then developed, more than five centuries after the Black Death (1348-1350) had killed millions of people in Europe and Asia, possibly as much as half the population of the known world at that time.

Considering the different kinds of problems that she faced, and the various actions she took to deal with them, Elizabeth was pleased to settle for surviving in most instances, rather than holding out for clear-cut victory. Survival, as she came to understand it, was not just about herself, but about her standing in the world; survival meant she still had whatever it took to continue performing the various roles, powerful though sometimes conflicting, which she had inherited from her controversial father, King Henry VIII. Building on this legacy, Elizabeth served as (1) monarch of England plus Wales, Scotland, and later Ireland, with credible claims to additional territories here and there, such as “Nova Albion,” somewhere north of San Francisco; but she was also (2) the supreme head of the Church of England, a Protestant religious sect established by her father, for reasons of his own; and apart from

that, she posed proudly though sometimes precariously as (3) the star attraction in a swirling galaxy of old-family aristocrats, up-and-coming knights, confidential advisors with their own axes to grind, assorted other courtiers of lesser degrees, distinguished visitors from abroad, would-be suitors, indiscreet ladies-in-waiting, and handsome male “favorites,” all mixed together in her heavily guarded Court, at the top of an unstable human pyramid that comprised the top-down social order of England in those days. Queen Elizabeth would eventually be able to function effectively as leader of the state or church or privileged society, as she saw fit. But first she had some growing up to do.

The most recent biography of this remarkable monarch (*Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years*, 2017, by Cambridge historian John Guy) argues that her life reached a turning-point during the 1580s. In general, having studied this period, I would agree. Elizabeth, repeatedly torn between impulse and hesitation as a young woman, evolved into a brilliant, possibly neurotic, famously erratic, reluctantly middle-aged ruler who might still take advice at crucial moments from the wrong sources, including a number of fortune-seekers and fortune-tellers who beguiled her with dreams of empire as a source of income. Not often enough did she trust her own instinctive judgment about certain ambiguous people and situations.

In those middle years of her reign, Queen Elizabeth sometimes benefited from haphazard combinations of natural ability, painful experience, loyal support, unexpected developments, and her own determination to endure, plus a few lucky breaks such as the sudden disintegration of the first Spanish Armada, a supposedly invincible invasion fleet, in 1588. Both sides prayed for success in this encounter, no doubt, but Elizabeth had the shifting winds of the English channel on her side, plus a host of aggressive and quick-witted mariners led by Francis Drake, John Hawkins, Martin Frobisher, and other one-time “privateers” who rose to heights of patriotic fervor on this occasion. The ordinary seamen may have been kept waiting a long while afterwards for their meager pay, but the boldest leaders were promptly rewarded with

significant tokens of social acceptability, which the Queen herself approved. Hawkins and Frobisher enjoyed the rare distinction of being knighted at sea, after breaking through and scattering the dense formation of some 130 Spanish vessels, loaded with troops. Drake, already knighted in 1581 as the Queen looked on, for his amazing feat of circumnavigation, would soon be given an elaborate one-of-a-kind pendant locket, containing a hidden image of Elizabeth's thickly powdered face. (Now known as the "Drake Jewel," this ornate object is currently displayed at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.) Having grown up in poverty and obscurity near the bottom of the English social hierarchy, Sir Francis didn't quite know what to make of the Queen's extravagant, seemingly intimate gift, but he wore it hanging conspicuously from his belt while having his portrait painted in 1591, with a symbolic globe behind him.

We note in passing that around this time, the occasional practice of "privateering" and even some incidents of outright piracy didn't really amount to much of a problem for Elizabethan law-enforcement, as far as the Queen's attitude was concerned. It usually depended on who was involved in the transaction and what happened to the proceeds. Elizabeth could ignore certain things and permit certain other things to happen—literally issuing permits and occasionally providing the ships and other resources to enable them—because the annual expenses of "the Crown" or royal government, added to her own expensive tastes and habits, were such that she always needed money. She must have been surprised and heartily pleased when the value of the treasure that Drake brought home and turned over to her, from his famous voyage through Spain's empire in the "New World," proved to be more than enough to pay all of England's national debt.

Elated after the improbable "Armada" triumph in 1588, Elizabeth was encouraged to believe that England, having previously lost its old strategic bases in the Netherlands and western France, might once again become an important player on the continent of Europe; perhaps she could join forces with Henry of Navarre, the future ruler of Protestant

France, to offset the might of Catholic Spain and Portugal combined. This sounds like a theological conflict, no doubt, but it was primarily a political and economic rivalry, with control of transatlantic commerce ultimately at stake. For several years, England's soldiers and their allies fought Spanish troops and mercenaries on the European mainland, achieving mixed results. Elizabeth received glowing reports of minor advances, and frequent requests for reinforcements and supplies, but she was not given enough facts about battles lost or the true numbers of casualties. Nor was she made aware that some of those casualties were probably caused by mysterious diseases, rather than the conventional weapons of human enemies.

The English commander at this stage, the flamboyant Earl of Essex, age 26, had brilliant visions of military glory which he shared with eager subordinates. Essex seems to have regarded warfare in France as a series of "Prince Hal" opportunities, with himself playing the part of that fifteenth-century English hero, King Henry V, leading his handful of devoted followers to incredible success and immortality as "we happy few" (in Shakespeare's words) at the Battle of Agincourt. These heroic fantasies can now be documented for one military engagement at Rouen, not a memorable event in reality, after which Essex personally knighted no fewer than 22 young English nobles for unspecified feats of gallantry on October 8, 1591. By doing so, he set a national record for maximum number of knighthoods awarded at one ceremony (and I could add in a footnote that he later surpassed this record after the Battle of Cadiz in 1596, conferring a batch of 61 knighthoods in conjunction with the Lord Admiral of the English navy). Essex always was a big thinker. But his largess in 1591, far beyond anything she would have authorized if asked, was enough to arouse the suspicions of the Queen, who had previously treated him as one of her most promising "favorites" and possibly a military genius. Now she asked for factual reports from the battlefield, and when these were not forthcoming, she ordered Essex to return to England at once. As before, he failed to answer her messages with anything but vague promises and more pleas for reinforcements and equipment.

Late in 1591, from other informants, the Queen learned that England's army was being decimated—not only by casualties in combat, but also by malaria, dysentery, and outbreaks of bubonic plague. On December 23, she sent Essex a long letter in her own handwriting, reciting all the negative things she had heard about what was happening in France, and ordering him to spare his young English officers—to send home as soon as possible, she said, any surviving “gentlemen of good quality dear to their parents and blood” before they, too, became victims of the plague (Guy, p. 185). This order was obeyed, belatedly, but the ordinary foot soldiers in Essex's army were another matter. Instead of directing them to be repatriated with their officers, at the Crown's expense, Elizabeth simply abandoned them—those physically able to move might get back to England on their own, somehow, while other wounded ones would die wherever they were left, stranded in France; or possibly they could survive among the rural French, until such time as the Queen had use for them again. In any event, there was obviously no plan to pay these men or their families what was owed for their army service (small amounts, at most) and there was no possibility of transportation back to England until the following summer.

In August 1592, predictably, bubonic plague struck the city of London, silently killing its civilian victims by the thousands, at the same time that the last of the sick, wounded, financially destitute English troops were finally returning from France. Some managed to reach the small farms and villages they called home, but many others ended up in the nation's capital, where they wandered the streets, lacking food and shelter, hoping to find work or charitable sustenance in the midst of a depressed economy, meanwhile infecting other Londoners with diseases from overseas. How to cope with this new, unexpected threat? The Queen's leading advisers, the members of her Privy Council, had little interest or experience in public health, and at this late date, they could only make futile gestures after the fact, like forbidding discharged soldiers from entering London. Her Majesty the Queen, with a more urgent grasp of the problem, solved it for the moment by insisting upon the creation of a movable *no man's land* or safety zone around herself

and her Court, wherever she happened to be, in London or elsewhere. The basic idea was to restrict access to the Queen and her chosen associates, within a radius of two miles in all directions—an extreme example of social distancing, highly exclusive and more than a little unwieldy in practice.

The radius of this circle of exclusion may not seem very large to us today, but if it was actually applied to overcrowded London, the area of the circle (a little greater than 12 square miles) would have impacted thousands of Elizabeth's subjects at any given time; they were now presumably forced to get out of her surroundings and go somewhere else, their lives disrupted, regardless of social rank, position, wealth or health. There would be exceptions of course, but not very many. Initially the Queen limited the list of those who could come anywhere near her to the Privy Councilors (eleven trusted men who were then fulfilling lifetime appointments), plus their clerks, and a few dozen of the most devoted female companions and dependable servants. Everyone else would be required to leave the exclusive area or stay away from it—or otherwise be punished for trespass. But having conjured up this exaggerated version of royal privacy, the hard-to-please Queen seems to have had second thoughts about being conspicuously at the center of such an empty, drab existence; she sought other ways to distance herself, restore her social world to larger size—and lest we forget, have some fun!

Fortunately for her, it had become an accepted custom for the Queen to engage in summer “progresses” every other year or so, vacating her spacious quarters in London for several weeks at a time, travelling by coach or barge (and usually wearing a mask) for prolonged visits to selected members of the uppermost social classes. She generally preferred those who happened to occupy large wooded estates in the well-groomed countryside of southeast England—out of town, yet not too far from the capital city and the physical security of its royal strongholds, in case of trouble.

Elizabeth, still notoriously bold in a wide range of activities, from acrobatic dancing and late-night flirtations to make-believe swordplay or chess games with the cleverest opponents, was nevertheless cautious about how far she would travel beyond the security of Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, and vicinity. In 23 summer “progresses,” over a period of 44 years, she never once ventured into the midlands or the north or west of England, never saw Wales (the land of her Tudor ancestors), much less Scotland or Ireland, though her kingdom ultimately included them all. On the European continent, even the friendliest places were much too far away for safe and easy visiting. As for North America and other parts of the New World or the old, especially Asia, she was content to hear fanciful stories, to receive curious presents or inflated returns on her infrequent investments, and occasionally to have her portrait painted with a suggestive map or a spinnable globe of the world.

As it turned out, Elizabeth’s “progress” during the plague months of August/September 1592 was more elaborate than most others, and a particular pleasure for the Queen, as well as for those she visited. The foremost destination, an elegant manor house called Bisham Abbey, overlooking the Thames about thirty miles upstream from Westminster, had been familiar to Elizabeth since childhood, through informal family connections at Court. The exquisite centerpiece of the private entertainment she enjoyed there—a pastoral fable about shepherdesses and sheep, with music, dedicated to her—had been written and produced by women she knew, some of them the wives and mothers of men who held important positions in the kingdom. With bucolic diversions like these, the Queen could distance herself from most of the disagreeable or dangerous aspects of everyday English life, even a plague epidemic; yet she could still maintain—and hopefully improve—the intricate kinds of social/political relationships that helped her to rule a united kingdom with increasing self-assurance in later years.

There was of course no hiatus for all those people stuck in plague-ridden London and environs during the summer and fall of 1592. Some

evidently practiced their own individual versions of social distancing and voluntary isolation, as best they could in that dense old metropolis, with the result that deaths were reduced to about thirty a week. Elizabeth, returning to the city in September with a full agenda of other problems to think about, must have relaxed the two-mile rule of social distance from the Queen at some point; but health conditions got worse again in the spring of 1593, so that other measures had to be tried. London buildings inhabited by diseased persons were quarantined, with bright red crosses painted on their front doors (a requirement that might raise issues of privacy today). Popular center-city theatres were closed. Plays could be offered only at newer venues in the outskirts, at least seven miles from the centrally located Old St. Paul's Cathedral—except for royal command performances, of which there were not very many. Vintage playbills suggest that a few of Shakespeare's first theatrical productions were staged then, especially for Her Majesty's enjoyment.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth may have tried to forget about the English soldiers sent to France and later abandoned. But something evidently prompted her. Records show that she authorized small weekly payments (two shillings) to the most badly maimed of the wounded men who had returned; and to prevent those of rural origins from congregating in London, they were required to go back to their birthplaces to be paid. Other young men, not wounded veterans and thus not eligible for even this small amount of compensation, were roaming the city's untidy streets in belligerent gangs. The economy continued to be sluggish, so unemployment remained high. Deaths from plague now averaged about a thousand a month in London, and many additional people were infected but survived. A fortunate few residents, who had the means to get away from there, and somewhere else to take refuge, did so.

The Queen, with more options than anybody else, rounded up her essential entourage and moved again—this time to the comparative safety of Windsor Castle (about 22 miles from Buckingham Palace). It is reported that Queen Elizabeth II has done the same in 2020, because of the current pandemic. Social distancing in both cases, evidently; but

for Elizabeth I there may have been deeper motives. John Guy, the biographer mentioned previously, says that Elizabeth was “invisible to her subjects and seemingly impervious to their suffering. . . numbed by her inability to respond to extreme socioeconomic forces so obviously beyond her control” (p.196). And in her case, events beyond the walls of Windsor were even more distressing as the year 1593 unfolded. In July, with the lethal plague still at its worst in England, the international balance of religious power shifted away from her as a trusted ally, Henry of Navarre (the future King Henry IV of France), unexpectedly announced his conversion from the Protestant faith to Catholicism, thus increasing the likelihood of further conflict and competition with Spain, Portugal, and other Catholic countries.

With France now abruptly added to England’s enemies list, it’s not surprising that Elizabeth would react by withdrawing even further into herself. She apparently suffered from episodes of intense depression, and strong feelings of guilt or shame, because, as the anointed daughter of a king, she held herself responsible for the overall condition of the kingdom entrusted to her care—the kingdom as an abstract entity, it seems—for she had no direct contact with most of her subjects. She didn’t want to see them, and she didn’t want to be seen by them, much less touched by them, whether they were infected with the plague or not. Indeed, she issued a new proclamation before leaving the seclusion of Windsor, to make it more difficult for any unauthorized person to catch sight of her.

For Elizabeth, the next several years would be no better. A series of poor harvests, starting in 1594. Virtual desertion by Sir Walter Raleigh, perhaps the greatest of her favorites in later life, who would now spend two years eagerly searching for a lost “city of gold” in the jungles of Guiana, Central America. After that the deaths of her irreplaceable sea captains, Drake and Frobisher, in the Caribbean. And more aggression from Spain in 1595, including a failed landing in Cornwall, the southwest corner of England, and then the ominous gathering of Spanish and Portuguese ships for another vast Armada fleet in 1597. Rough

weather ended that threat, as in 1588, and soon the Queen could weep with relief after hearing about the death of Spain's belligerent ruler, Philip II, in 1598. His last years had been focused obsessively on defeating her, unseating her (possibly executing her as an anti-Catholic heretic) and adding her kingdom to his.

Among many other things that happened during this hectic period, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was performed for the first time, with young Mercutio, mortally wounded after a sword fight, shouting his terrible curse, "**a plague on both your houses,**" before he dies (Act 3, Scene 1). This moment epitomizes the senseless tragedy of life derailed, youthful promise cut short, love denied, as a consequence of deadly antagonism between two bitterly opposing factions that could not be reconciled. A plague on both houses! Conceivably, this might have been Shakespeare's way of dramatizing Elizabeth's tragic situation, since he dared not write about her directly. If she was in the audience that evening (probably disguised or hidden from sight) we might wonder which two houses came to her mind: Capulet vs. Montague? Tudor vs. Stuart? England vs. Spain? Protestant vs. Catholic? Or all of the above. The Queen must have been emotionally exhausted by memories of the bloody conflicts she had witnessed up to this point. Witnessed, or tolerated, or provoked.

But there was always something more for her to cope with, it seemed. Having presided over the English "colonization" of Ireland during the 1590s, Queen Elizabeth now put the ambitious young Earl of Essex in charge of controlling that country, but he was unable to suppress the defeated Irish (predominantly Catholics) when they rose up again. Given the largest military force ever assembled during Elizabeth's reign, he lost the advantage of numerical superiority by wasting fractions of his army in a series of small, inconclusive engagements in 1599. Meanwhile he continued to award knighthoods by the dozen, causing some people to wonder if Essex was perhaps creating a fan club or an elite army of his own. Then he made a frantic dash back to England to argue with Elizabeth in person; but she refused to see him. Frustrated, furious,

Essex came up with his next (actually his last) brilliant idea of leading a popular rebellion against the Queen. But he soon realized that he was not the people's hero after all. Long story short, the dozens of new knights did not rally around him; the great majority of Elizabeth's subjects remained loyal to the monarch they knew. Essex was arrested, tried for treason, and executed in 1601, as the country suffered from new outbreaks of contagious diseases, notably smallpox and the plague. Elizabeth, the last of the Tudor monarchs, died in 1603 in the midst of these epidemics. Unmarried and childless, she was swiftly succeeded by James VI of Scotland, her cousin, who took the throne as James I of England, the so-called Jacobean king and the first of the controversial Stuart dynasty.

At this point I had intended to contrast the queen's-eye view of English plagues and related matters with a different account, a largely unrecognized specimen of what is now called "history from below," based on some forgotten archives of the City of London in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. These extraordinary sources of data exist because someone (possibly Elizabeth herself) thought that the official historian (the appointed Recorder of London) should be supplemented by a second official to be known as the Remembrancer of London. This person's job presumably was to write a history of public events that were pleasant (or at least, not unpleasant) to talk about. Three different Remembrancers served from 1570 to 1609; after that, the position seems to have remained unfilled; but as an early example of bureaucratic momentum, the clerical record-keeping in this office continued for another 55 years.

And so, thanks to the World Wide Web and good fortune in the rare books market, I now possess a sturdy volume entitled, *Analytical Index to the Series of Records Known as the REMEMBRANCIA. Preserved among the Archives of the City of London. A.D. 1579-1664*. It provides nuggets of information about many aspects of life in London, from the Admiralty and Aldermen to Watermen and Windmills, and it includes 20 pages on the subject of Plague. But I'm sorry to report that the Plague

coverage is discontinuous, almost as though some of the original files had been destroyed or redacted, as we now say. There are several pages of Plague entries for the years 1580 to 1583, but then a gap of 20 years until April 18, 1603, a month after Queen Elizabeth's death. Here we begin to read about the reign of her successor, James I, who evidently practiced social distancing as diligently as Elizabeth had, or more so. In the plague year 1625, for instance, the Remembrancer (pp. 338-9) recorded:

Letter from the Lords of the [King's Privy] Council to the Lord Mayor and Court of Aldermen [of London]. On account of the great infection and other extraordinary occasions for his service, not only was His Majesty absent from the City, but the Council was forced to disperse themselves more than at any other time was usual. They [the Mayor and Aldermen] should be very careful not to abandon the government of the City committed to their charge, and to continue and increase all usual means for repressing the contagion, and further be very vigilant on all other emergent accidents concerning the Government, and give speedy redress, informing one of His Majesty's Principal Secretaries, or such of the Privy Council as were nearest at hand, of their proceedings.

Social distancing was practiced not only by Tudor or Stuart royalty but also by high-ranking royal officials; the Privy Councils in those times were typically a mix of hereditary nobles, newly elevated nobles, upwardly mobile knights, a few well-connected clergy, an occasional commoner of exceptional ability. The irrepressible Robert Devereux, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Essex, was one of Elizabeth's last appointed Councilors for a year or so, before he was convicted of treason, removed, executed. The ever-striving Walter Raleigh may have had his eye on a Council seat, among so many other prestigious possibilities, but didn't get one. Even the most financially successful members of the middle and lower classes, such as Drake and other newly rich privateers, probably never aspired to reach such heights. When a disaster like the plague occurred, they and all the people below them in the social hierarchy were generally left to fend for themselves—some to survive the plague and

other existential threats, some to be transported nameless into unmarked graves. The worth of anyone was largely determined by their place (their approximate level) in the social hierarchy, and for countless people the answer to such questions was effectively zero.

Was this distorted perspective shared by all or almost all members of Elizabethan or Jacobean society? At the higher levels, yes, probably; but further down in the pyramid of classes, some individuals were cultivating a different set of values which anticipated the humanistic, egalitarian ideals of later generations. Let me conclude by telling you briefly about one outstanding example. John Donne (1572-1631) was born in modest circumstances, had the benefit of several years at Oxford and Cambridge, enjoyed some adventures as a private soldier in overseas campaigns led by Raleigh, Essex and possibly Drake. Later as a prolific metaphysical poet he came to the attention of King James (sponsor of the celebrated Bible published in 1611) who urged him to enter the Protestant priesthood and subsequently promoted him to the position of Dean of Old St. Paul's Cathedral, London.

By that time, Donne knew more than he cared to know about virtue, vice, sin, redemption, illness, health, and the conundrums of human mortality—all of which he explored in a busy decade of writing poetry, sermons, and eloquent meditations that could be shared with various gatherings of men and women in the Cathedral. I particularly recommend the following lines, first published in 1624, as a powerful antidote to the doctrine of social distance that we have been talking about.

No man is an island entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent,  
a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea  
Europe is the less,  
as well as if a promontory were,  
as well as if a manor of thy friends

or of thine own were.

Any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know  
for whom the bell tolls;  
it tolls for thee.

Reading Donne's words as a student years ago, I used to assume that the sounds came from one of the great bronze bells that were rung on special occasions, such as a high mass or a royal birth; but lately I have learned that during the plague years, London churches like St. Paul's had dozens of little handbells, which were intended to call attention to the many funerals—so they were rung by surviving relatives or friends or strangers walking down those twisting streets and narrow lanes near the homes of recently deceased plague victims.

