

# Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

## Vaccine FAQ: What is it like to get the COVID-19 Vaccine?

GRETCHEN M. MICHELFELD

Yes, there have been bumps in the road to rollout the coronavirus vaccine, with people who are fully eligible having trouble getting vaccination appointments while refrigerators full of doses languish unused. Those of us who worry about equitable medical treatment for marginalized populations are staying politically hypervigilant, and many are trying to help older family members and neighbors navigate New York City's convoluted online appointment system.

But hope is in the air as we see more and more of the public vaccinated. We can almost picture ourselves in a post-COVID world replete with ball games, theatre, in-person school, and hugging.

I informally polled a number of vaccine recipients (*i.e.*, everyone I know who has been vaccinated) to hear their stories.

David Jay Smith, a Patient Representative at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, works at the Rockefeller Outpatient Pavilion on East 53rd Street. He was vaccine-eligible because his job entails daily, direct contact with Sloan Kettering cancer patients. David received both doses of the Pfizer vaccine in January. Everything went smoothly. He got his appointments through his employer, was vaccinated at the hospital, and has experienced no side effects at all.

"I feel physically fine and getting the vaccine has been a positive thing for me emotionally. I was informed that I can still contract COVID, and can still be a carrier, so I'm taking all of the precautions I've been taking all year, but I believe that if I do contract COVID I will have a much milder case."

In contrast, Ray and Bru Lopez were told that ten to fifteen days after their second shot, it would be safe to socialize indoors and mask-free. Eleven days after receiving their second Pfizer shot, Ray and Bru were thrilled to be able to attend their great-granddaughter's birthday party.

"We were so happy to see everyone

and get hugs," Bru wrote to me, "It felt really good! That is what I have missed the most. Human touch. Fortunately, Ray and I have each other. There are so many people here who are widowed. They tell me all the time that we are so lucky to have each other." Still, she was nervous. She wrote, "I was very reticent. I was not sure that we were totally safe.

It was all family members, but still..."

The Lopezes live in The Buckingham, a retirement community in Houston, Texas. Their age made them a high priority to be in the first wave of vaccine recipients.

Bru explained, "They told us that



*Dr. tenOever Shows Off His Vaccinated Arm*

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Walgreens would be here on January 5 and again on January 26, and The Buckingham nurse called every resident and scheduled an appointment time. They administered 400 Pfizer vaccines to residents and staff. The shot was very quick, and we hardly felt it. My arm was a little sore the next day, but Ray did not have any problem. I guess you could compare it to a flu shot.”

The Lopezes and others in retirement communities and assisted living facilities are fortunate to have institutions working the system for them. I myself got a call from my mother’s nursing home, Braemar Living in Middletown, NY, saying that all residents would receive the vaccine. My mom didn’t even need an appointment. I gave my permission, and she received her first shot the same day.

New York City senior citizens who live on their own are having a tougher time getting vaccinated. Monica Liriano, a Market Research Executive in Jackson Heights, Queens, had to navigate several different websites before she could get her mother, Lady, an appointment.

“I feel like the appointment we finally got was a fluke. I was convinced we were going to show up and either it wasn’t a real thing, or she’d get turned away,” Monica told me. But once they arrived at the vaccine site at Newtown High School in Elmhurst, everything went smoothly. “All in all, the process took thirty minutes, there were no lines, no waiting outside and everything was really well organized. Also, no weird questions or directives—only that her arm might hurt and she should ice the area.” Monica was also pleased that the intake nurse made Lady’s second appointment right on the spot.

Lady was a bit nervous to get the vaccine at first, but now that she has had her first Moderna shot, she’s telling all her friends to get it too. Unfortunately, appointments are still very hard to make.

Unlike Lady, who experienced no pain or side effects, Aisha Mabarab, a staff member at a Child Advocacy Center in Brooklyn, had a bad reaction to her first Moderna shot and she has decided to follow [the CDC guidelines](#) and not get her second.

“At minute ten of the fifteen-minute observational period after the shot I noticed my right hand was quite swollen,” Aisha told me. “A staff member called an EMT who came to my seat and, when he saw my hand, he moved me to a separate area where he checked my vitals. My heart rate was nor-

mal, but my blood pressure was a little elevated.” The on-site physician suggested she go to the ER as a precautionary measure. But Aisha hesitated (“You know, COVID and all.”) and soon the swelling subsided.

Aisha also had trouble making that first vaccine appointment. As a front-facing counselor who works alongside law enforcement and Child Protective Services, she was eligible right away, but her place of employment did not arrange for her to be vaccinated. Staff had to handle the system on their own. People whose employers arrange for vaccinations have a much easier time of it.

NYPD Sergeant Gerard Walker and Dr. Benjamin tenOever of Mt. Sinai were lucky to have their employers provide the vaccine.

Ben, the Fishberg Professor of Medicine and Director of the Virus Engineering Center for Therapeutics and Research at Mt. Sinai, was enrolled in the Phase III clinical trial for Pfizer. “We received either placebo (saline) or the vaccine,” Ben told me. “It was a blinded study, but it was very apparent what each person received based on whether their arm was sore the next day.”

Ben had to maintain a “COVID diary” thereafter to report on any symptoms he might be experiencing. He also had to promise not to get any other vaccines in the interim and, interestingly, not to have unprotected sex with anyone during the three-week period between shots. He felt totally fine after both shots, but, he says, others in the study developed fever and body aches after the booster.

Gerard feels fine as well.

“I’m glad the process is over,” he told me after he received his second Moderna shot at an NYPD shooting range in the Bronx that had been transformed into a testing/vaccination site. Like so many other vaccine recipients, Gerard reported soreness in his arm, but no other side effects.

Jim Keller, a grant writer/editor at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and former *Natural Selections* Editor-in-Chief, was, like fellow employee David Jay Smith, happy to have Sloan Kettering provide vaccination appointments and administer the shots on site. Jim was not asked to keep a diary, but after the first injection, Sloan Kettering sent him a follow up questionnaire every day so that he could report any side effects. The shots did not hurt, but both times he noticed his heart rate increased. He believes this was anxiety.

And how does he feel now?

“I feel fine, both physically and emo-

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tionally. Mostly grateful to have been able to receive the vaccine so soon. Although, if I could, I would have given mine to my husband.”

Everyone I interviewed reported being glad to have received the vaccine. Even Aisha hopes “as more research develops there may be future guidance on reactions, and if it is ever deemed safe for me to receive the second dose, I will.”

Monica asked me to tell people, “Don’t be nervous to get the vaccine and ask for feedback about different locations since there seems to be varying experiences depending on where you go.”

Monica’s mom is doing very well, as are David, Bru, Ray, Ben, Gerard, and Jim. My mom has dementia, so she cannot tell me how the shot has impacted her health, but her caregivers report that she is feeling great and everyone is relieved the seniors and staff at Braemar are protected.

Let us hope we are all able to avail ourselves of this protection as soon as possible. ■



## Culture Corner

### Stories of Individual Change and Redemption in Movies

BERNIE LANGS

A scorpion and a frog meet on the bank of a stream and the scorpion asks the frog to carry him across on its back. The frog asks, "How do I know you won't sting me?" The scorpion says, "Because if I do, I will die too." The frog is satisfied, and they set out, but midstream, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog feels the onset of paralysis and starts to sink, knowing they both will drown, but has just enough time to gasp "Why?" The scorpion replies: "It's my nature..." – *The Fable of The Scorpion and The Frog*

*Spoilers ahead!*

There are countless films and television shows that document the trajectory of characters initially introduced with overbearing and seemingly insurmountable negative qualities in their personalities who, over the course of the story, gradually morph into more ethical and better versions of themselves. These tales of self-discovery deliver positive, hopeful affirmations that we are all capable of making changes amid newfound understandings of our inner natures.

*The King of Staten Island* (2020), directed by Judd Apatow, follows a 24-year-old man (played by Pete Davidson) struggling with Attention Deficit Disorder and frequent flare-ups of mental illness. Amid life's pressures, he is unable to control his inner demons and transition from an adolescent mindset to that of a responsible adult. Davidson's character, loosely based on his own experiences after the loss of his firefighter father in the 9/11 attack, never accepts and comes to terms with the death of his dad (also a firefighter in the film) at age seven, arresting his growth and development. While continuously making a mess of his own life, he drags down the life of his well-adjusted, academic sister and sabotages his mother's first relationship since the death of her husband. He also takes advantage of the young woman who loves him as she tries again and again to make him realize his potential and do something productive with his talents. As I watched the movie, I kept wondering if he'd ever change for the better and fix the



Bill Murray with Andie MacDowell in *Groundhog Day* (1993).

terrible mess he'd created. I also speculated on how a shift in personality would be presented believably by Apatow, given the massive scope of the protagonist's destructive behavior. When Davidson's character finally begins to mature and comprehend the depth of what he's done to family and friends, it's cathartic to watch him succeed in making believable amends.

The late German philosopher, Theodor W. Adorno, mocked American movie culture for providing plot lines where the audience knows either from the start or quite

quickly how it's going to turn out in the end, which he believed showcases the simplicity and mindlessness of the genre. I don't mind realizing where a movie is heading, the beauty for me is in the details and originality of how each director presents stories of love, drama, laughter, and action, and at times, salvation. Films using admittedly well-worn concepts can be viewed as uniquely conceived if they present new twists and turns to tales of our timeless struggles, providing fresh emotional expression of our common hu-

manity.

Some of my favorite movies depicting unique characters who change over the course of the story include: *Blood Diamond*, *10 Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*, *Lord of the Rings*, *American Hustle*, *Star Wars*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and the 1951 version of *A Christmas Carol*. I find the greatest and most stunning moment of terrific self-knowledge initiating a reversal of ideals occurs in the ending sequence of the 1957 epic war film directed by David Lean, *Bridge on the River Kwai*. In this moment, Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness) mutters with horror, "What have I done?", comprehending that the bridge he's helped construct with fellow prisoners of war during World War II has value only in terms of "aiding and abetting the enemy." The boastful pride of what they've created turns to horror when he finally understands what was obvious all along: the bridge will be used for troop and weapons transport by the Japanese and will cost Allied lives—and that it has to be destroyed

Photo Courtesy of THE KOBAL COLLECTION

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PHOTO COURTESY OF COLUMBIA PICTURES

Alec Guinness asks himself "What have I done?" in *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957).

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immediately.

My favorite story documenting an admirable progressive inner change is *Groundhog Day*, the 1993 classic fantasy featuring Bill Murray as an acerbic, jaded television weatherman forced to reckon with himself as he's stuck in a time loop of endless repetition of the same day, February 2. In addition to being extraordinarily funny and downright clever, the movie points to larger truths and lessons. The understandings that Murray slowly fathoms are presented in a manner that make them plausible and believable, even within the ridiculous parameters of the outlandish surreal world he inhabits. It's a beautiful thing to behold as he finally emerges, embracing life and new-found love.

Life differs from art, but many of us have long-time friends we've seen grow out of their more destructive traits to embrace better ones, resulting in a less stressful relationship and a renewed bond. As individuals, it can be very difficult to forgive ourselves for things we have said or done in the past that leave us with deeply-held, often bitter, regret. To change one's life and personality for the better can at times be a slow, difficult process taking years of struggle and constant self-awareness, while keeping a diligent eye out for relapses to past destructive patterns of behavior and thinking. Storytelling can provide an almost magical and profound hope that we can change our inner being, our unique natures, arresting the unfounded



Photo Courtesy of UNIVERSAL PICTURES

Pete Davidson on the Staten Island Ferry with Bel Powley in *The King of Staten Island* (2020).

belief that our worst faults and actions are genetically impossible to prevent from expression, and the idea that at times we can't help but act solely with innate and fixed responses, impossible to unlearn. The "nature" aspect of the "Nature or Nurture" debate should not be used as an excuse to acquiesce and surrender to the notion that we carry personality traits beyond the control of free will, choice, and reason.

Rare is the case of a human soul that behaves as the Scorpion, knowingly and

unremittingly taking himself down to a watery grave along with the kindhearted frog. It is worth remembering that as murderous and unchangeable the nature of the scorpion is in the fable, the frog displays the characteristic of trust, and we should not lose heart that this inner purity of spirit finishes him off in the end. Our movies, television shows, and novels are filled with countless tales of "scorpions" who end up reversing course midstream to save the day in creatively wondrous, exciting, and moving ways. ■



## Pets of Tri-I

AUDREY GOLDFARB

This month, I interviewed Remy, a spunky and fashionable one-year-old French bulldog. We met for the first time on the lawn of the Graduate Student Residence on a particularly frigid February afternoon. Remy's curious and energetic nature was undeterred despite the temperature, and also despite the fact that he has probably explored that patch of grass hundreds of times previously. His genuine enthusiasm for his surroundings reminded me to appreciate the mundanities of everyday life. And his chic red jacket and adorable booties inspired me to dress for the job I want, not for the job I have. Remy lives on campus with his doting parents, Rockefeller University Ph.D. candidate Nicole Infarinato and her partner, Ryan Platt.

**Audrey Goldfarb: How did you first meet Nicole and Ryan?**

**Remy:** We met when I was just a little puppy in New Jersey. They wanted to take me home that minute, but I had a hairy mole on my eyeball that needed surgery. I guess no one is perfect! I had to stay in a cone all by myself to heal, but I am tough as nails. Mummy and Daddy came back to pick me up during a snow squall. What is a snow SQUALL!? It took hours to get to NYC, but I loved my new home and all my new toys.

**AG: Have you trained your parents to do any tricks?**

**R:** If I huff and go under the table, that's how they know I need to go outside, immediately. Once they understand, I do downward dog stretch to show them I'm limbering up for our walk. If I bark and gurgle at them, it means Mummy or Daddy need to stop what they're doing immediately and come throw my tennis ball or dragon, Puff. When I drop my toys off the couch, I stomp my feet and curse in dog so they know I need immediate assistance. I do not like waiting.

**AG: Have you seen any good shows lately?**

**R:** I always start my day with the weatherman Erick Adame on New York 1 News. I love Erick Adame! Then I watch Hoda on the Morning Show. I love Hoda! And also, have you seen Paw Patrol? It is riveting and profound.

**AG: What are your favorite foods?**



Photos Courtesy of NICOLE INFARINATO

**R:** POPCORN!

**AG: Where do you like to take Nicole and Ryan on walks?**

**R:** Off campus! Must escape!

**AG: How do you help out around the**

**apartment?**

**R:** Moral support and entertainment. I have been saving the year, really. I also keep watch in our window in case some-

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thing very interesting is happening that we must not miss out on.

**AG: Have you been enjoying the snowy weather?**

**R:** Yes, it's 100% different from rain. Daddy bought me a big red coat and snow boots. This is normal and not weird at all. I am a fashion icon. Stay tuned for my spring season looks!

**AG: Have you witnessed anything interesting lately?**

**R:** Yes! There are some shady snowmen that have been popping up around campus. I do not trust them. Where are their masks!? I pull out their stick arms to defend us.

**AG: What is your astrological sign?**

**R:** Virgo, but I'm really a Taurus. I am a little bull! My birthday is September 14. Please send gifts!

**AG: What is your biggest fear?**

**R:** Missing out. I have serious FOMO.

**AG: What is your love language?**

**R:** Popcorn.

**AG: What is your greatest strength?**

**R:** Keeping everyone happy during the pandemic. Also, walking in doggie boots. I slay!

**AG: What is your biggest weakness?**

**R:** Popcorn.

**AG: Describe your perfect Saturday.**

**R:** After sleeping in, having brunch, and surveying campus, I watch Manchester United with Daddy. Then we all go on a long walk and explore NYC. I find a new tennis ball and am delighted. Maybe I even get to go into CVS. We end the day with cuddles and popcorn on the couch. I get many cookies and take many naps.

**AG: What would Nicole and Ryan do without you?**

**R:** \*Huffs and curses in dog\*

Pet owners who would like their furry, feathered, or scaly companions to be featured should direct their correspondence to [agoldfarb@rockefeller.edu](mailto:agoldfarb@rockefeller.edu). ■



Photos Courtesy of NICOLE INFARINATO







## Natural Expressions

### Digital

Bernie Langs and Mary Jane Folan of The Rockefeller University Development Office announce the re-release of the novella, *The Isle of Souls*. The book, written by Langs with new ed-

its provided by Folan, follows the pursuit of the mysterious "Isle of Souls" in the East China Sea. This 2020 edition of *The Isle of Souls* is available now on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com).

Kristina Hedbacker of the Friedman Laboratory at The Rockefeller University would like to share her artwork,

"Gracie." This piece is a 16 x18 mixed media collage.

Email Megan E. Kelley at [mkelley@rockefeller.edu](mailto:mkelley@rockefeller.edu) to submit your art/music/performance/sporting/other event for next month's "Natural Expressions" and follow [@NatSelections](https://twitter.com/NatSelections) on Twitter for more events. ■