

Alcohol to the Rescue!

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Allen Mendenhall – March 21, 2020

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The world, it seems, is full of bad news.

The disorienting coronavirus pandemic has occasioned an upsetting parade of horrors: Government-imposed shutdowns of business. Bans on public gatherings. A national lockdown. Restricted travel. Shortages of testing kits and hospital beds. Mass layoffs. Social distancing. Martial law. Strained supply chains.

There's even talk of recession and depression.

Should we panic? Should we despair?

Of course not! How would that help?

This unusual moment, however stressful it may be, teaches us about the wonderful workings of spontaneous order in society, and of the innovative ability of ordinary people—not of

presidents, dictators, chancellors, generals, or prime ministers —to improve lives and institutions in disparate communities across the globe.

Take the example of craft distilleries, which, of course, make liquors and spirits. Today they're distilling a different concoction: hand sanitizer!

One estimate is that 75% of craft distilleries in the United States have considered producing hand sanitizer, which, because of panic purchasing, has been difficult to find in grocery stores and pharmacies. Bottles of hand sanitizer can sell for hundreds of dollars. Yet many distilleries are now giving them away!

Right down the road from AIER, where I've spent the last week as a visiting scholar, Berkshire Mountain Distillers is selling hand sanitizer for a mere \$6 per bottle. And, folks, these aren't little bottles.

Back home, where my family anxiously awaits my return, John Emerald Distilling Company is converting its facility into a "disinfectant depot." It's providing hand sanitizer in large spray bottles.

Wait, you might ask, what about those pesky regulations that prohibit distilleries from generating hand sanitizer? Well, the federal government has waived them. Makes you wonder: were these regulations even necessary?

It's fascinating that distillers found a simple solution to a pervasive problem before the bureaucrats did. While governments investigated and arrested alleged price gougers who "stockpiled" hand sanitizer, industrious individuals invented practical substitutes.

Hubris and arrogance deceive government leaders into believing that only the most qualified experts among us can centrally design and maintain a mass, uniform plan to mitigate if not contain coronavirus. Meanwhile, despite government red

tape, entrepreneurial forces quietly operate to supply consumers with the products they need during trying times.

Come to think of it, I don't remember owning or using hand sanitizer when I was a kid. Presently, though, it seems so essential to quotidian experience that stores can't keep it on the shelves. How quickly and innocently we grow accustomed to everyday possessions that would have *amazed* us just decades ago.

The current crisis, if that is the right word, affirms F. A. Hayek's proposition that a spontaneous order constitutes "an adaptation to the multitude of circumstances which are known to all the members of that society taken together but which are not known as a whole to any one person." Each of us, despite government action or inaction, as the case may be, has changed our lives to respond to this rapidly evolving situation. We've made sacrifices and compromises, adjusted our habits and routines, and imaginatively resolved unforeseeable challenges.

That's what the market is: the *free*, aggregated actions and decisions of innumerable buyers and sellers within their unique settings and particular contexts. The market isn't some monolithic evil bent on elevating certain classes of people at the expense of others. It isn't the embodiment of a single, undifferentiated intent or an unvarying scheme to enrich some homogenous group.

Perhaps the invisible hand metaphor, though well meaning, is misleading. We human beings are not wooden chess pieces that a deific Mr. Market moves from square to square on his playing board. We're complex, conflicted, loving, and curious agents exercising our reason and judgment to help our families, friends, and neighbors—and to discover needed goods and services as well as the viable means for delivering them.

People are, sadly, suffering and dying because of coronavirus, the harms from which are planetary in scale. We should remember, all of us, amid hardships and confusion, isolation

and loss, disruption and sorrow, to appreciate the small, entrepreneurial miracles that have widespread and salubrious effects—like turning vodka into pocket-sized, germ-killing gel!

To distillers everywhere, let's raise a glass. *Cheers! Salud! Yamas! Kanpai! Prost! Saúde! Chin chin! Noroc! Skål! Ganbei! Geonbae! Gesundheit! Santé!*

Thank you, and here's to your health.

Allen Mendenhall



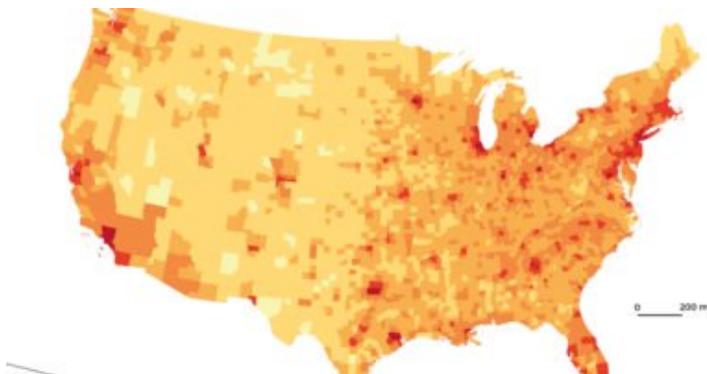
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