

Mask Mamas

Coronavirus: the most feared word in the world today. Death monger. Heart exploder. Lung destroyer. Clot thrower. Grandma slayer. Kid killer. From complete obscurity to #1 news topic in only a matter of weeks.

Daily we are barraged by dystopian views of astronaut-garbed healthcare workers working feverishly in hospitals and intensive care units around the globe. Everyday folks don medical-grade N95 facemasks, if they have them, and social distance from one another when in public, or isolate at home to ward off infection or prevent its lightning spread. Everyone washes hands, singing “Happy Birthday” two times through to ensure at least 20 seconds of scrubbing, enough to ensure effective germicide. Disinfectant cleaning supplies fly off store shelves. Hoarders, prescient enough to act before most others grasp what is happening, fill their basements with the new gold standard: toilet paper.

The world as we knew it has gone topsy-turvy.

Like other older people with rational minds, my husband and I hunker down at home, waving to passersby through the window – no closer. We learn to buy groceries online and pick them up curbside, absent human contact. We discover that things we need actually are only wants; we find we can forgo many items. We read good books; we bring the gardens to life; we plant new vegetable patches; we play music; and, too often, we watch the news. Even as Luddites, we learn to use group chats on Zoom and WhatsApp and Facebook and FaceTime. In these ways, we adapt to the “new normal.”

But we never adapt to the growing death toll: nearly 100,000 in the US alone in only the first quarter of the virus’s spread.

And, too, we are antsy. How can we be mere bystanders to a pandemic that is wreaking havoc all around us? It is ripping through communities with wild abandon – Jesse James on a killing spree with nary a US marshal in sight. Can we just sit idly by, watching the devastation all around us?

No. There must be something we can do, not only to keep busy and ward off creeping depression, but to Make A Difference.

But what?

In short order, we decide that making facemasks is our calling. If we can do nothing else, at least we can produce homemade masks that might provide an ounce of

protection against the deadly coronavirus. My adrenaline is up; I'm rarin' to go. My good husband, Michael, is more restrained in his enthusiasm, but I know him: he will rev up as we go along. I cannot proceed, though, without some evidence-based information. Once a scientist, always a scientist.

I quickly learn that all masks are not created equal; I need to educate myself. Which mask pattern should I use? Which fabric? What sort of fastener?

A short video teaches me that I can make CDC-compliant masks – 6" x 9" rectangles for adults, 5" x 7.5" for children – with triple pleats and fasteners to go around the ears.

I check off the "which pattern?" box.

Fabric? That should be no problem whatsoever. I have stacks and stacks of fabric from years of making wedding gowns, quilts, home décor projects, outfits for my daughters, and "stuffies" for our grandkids. I open the sliding door to my studio closet to see the sturdy shelves Michael built for my fabric warehouse. I am greeted by piles of material of all sorts – cottons, fleeces, flannels, muslins, silks, and satins – all arranged by color scheme: the red stack, the blue heap, the purple pile. Where do I begin? I need more help.

I return to my computer to research which materials are best for this project. As it turns out, several scholars have conducted empirical studies. Scientists at the University of Chicago, for example, tested the filtration effectiveness of different types of fabric: flannel, cotton, polyester, chiffon, synthetic and natural silk. Using a human's average respiration rate as a guide, the researchers used a fan to blow aerosolized particles 10 nanometers to six micrometers in size across the various cloth samples. They measured the size and number of aerosolized particles in the air both before and after passing through each fabric.

The scientists learned that dual layers of fabric performed better than single, especially in hybrid combinations. For example, one layer of cotton combined with two layers of silk was effective at filtering greater than 90% of particles larger than 300 nanometers. Combining one layer of cotton with one layer of flannel produced identical efficacy.

Fabric decision made: One layer of quilter's cotton plus one layer of cotton flannel.

Now, which sort of fastener? Something that ties around the back of the head? Elastic bands that encircle the ears? An internet search reveals that elastic seems to be the hands-down favorite. But elastic can be flat, braided, or corded. And it comes in a dizzying array of sizes and thicknesses, not to mention colors.

In the end, I don't need to make this decision, because, within days, there is a nationwide run on elastic of all types and sizes. I settle for whatever I can get my hands on, although I work hard to obtain ¼" or 1/8" flat elastic or 2mm cords – whichever one Jeff Bezos can deliver to me quickly and in sufficient quantities.

Fastener type selected.

Finally, I'm ready to start making facemasks. I pull out the monochromatic piles of fabric in my closet and resort them by fabric type. I set aside the most luscious ones: the beaded ivory satin of Laura's wedding dress, the champagne satin and lace from Kristen's vintage wedding gown, the Italian brocade of Thea's Grace Kelly-style gown, and the rose patterned organza of Anne's dress, from which I had sufficient remnants to also create little Lila's christening gown a few years later. I think about how beautiful each of my daughters was on her wedding day, and still is, and my heart feels full to bursting.

Next, I sift out dozens of fabrics from various grandchildren's Halloween costumes: pirates and princesses; Harry Potter and Owlette and *Frozen*'s Elsa; lions and tigers and bears, oh my! Even a pink pterodactyl. ("Yes, Nana, it must be a *pink* pterodactyl.") The last fabric I touch is the orange sateen that was just right for Jack's Dusty the Cropduster airplane costume. And what a costume it was! Jack, as the pilot, wore a bomber cap and aviator glasses, a long white scarf flowing in the breeze, as he sat in the cockpit of the cropduster that hung from straps over his shoulders. The costume was difficult enough to create, but the real challenge was packing this airplane inside my small suitcase for a 30-hour ride inside another airplane. That's what I had to do in order to personally deliver Jack's costume to him in the Philippines, where he and his family were living at the time. Not much room for my clothes in that suitcase, but Jack got his airplane, at that treasure hung from a hook in the ceiling of his bedroom for years thereafter.

I am smiling now. I don't love the blood and gore of this holiday, but I do cherish how this annual event has stitched together my relationship with each of my grandchildren. Negotiations for Halloween costumes begin in July, and I look forward to them every year. I communicate back and forth with each child. We decide on a theme and then explore ideas together. Eventually, we trade pictures of possible final versions. Each child circles the image of the winning selection.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yes, Nana, I am sure."

"It's only August. Are you *sure* you will still want to be that in October?"

"Yes, Nana, I am SURE!"

With that assurance, I begin the process of making a pattern and sewing each costume.

Halloween is such a special bonding time for us. True enough, it's about candy, but it's about Nana's costumes, too.

This year, though, troubling questions bedevil me: Will children even celebrate Halloween? Will any parent permit children to knock on strangers' doors and accept possibly contaminated candy from them? Will children even wear costumes this year?

I sigh, and set aside all scraps from my ghoulish endeavors.

My piles have been whittled down to only 100% cotton and flannel. There's still a lot of fabric. I will have enough to make dozens of masks.

I flip through the cottons, not sure where to begin. I touch two identical calico prints, one on cherry red background, the other on cobalt blue. These are the remnants from the *Little House on the Prairie* dresses, complete with bonnet and pinafore, I made for my daughters when they were five and three years old, respectively. Each morning they'd don those outfits, gather up an old pewter tea set and some wooden spoons, and head out to the back yard to a make-believe tent made of old bed sheets. There they'd play to their hearts' content. At the end of the week, I'd practically pry those dresses off them so I could wash the outfits and hang them to dry for the next week's adventures. Precious scraps these, but they aren't doing anyone any good in my closet, and there are just enough there for a couple of facemasks. Besides, I have the photo of Laura's daughter, my granddaughter Izzy, playing *Little House* in that same dress just last year.

With that happy image, I begin.

Even though masks aren't particularly difficult to assemble, it takes several steps to do it right. After a few halting attempts, I learn some shortcuts. Soon, there is a rhythm to each day:

Cut . . . pin . . . sew . . . turn

Iron . . . pleat . . . sew . . . iron

Cut . . . pin . . . sew . . . turn

Iron . . . pleat . . . sew . . . iron

At first, I am proud if I complete five masks in one day. As the weeks progress, I feel like a slacker if I'm not cranking out 20 per day.

I package masks in plastic Ziploc bags along with this message:

These facemasks are CDC-compliant in both materials and construction. After each use, please sanitize by washing in hot, soapy water and drying on high heat. Ironing further sanitizes. Comments and suggestions for improvement may be sent to Nancy Walker at nwalker1949@gmail.com

Then, I begin delivering them. By the end of the first week, I've distributed only 8 masks, and the others I've made are piling up like Strega Nona's pasta. I need to find some outlets.



My husband alerts me to an article in the *Herald Leader* about a woman in Lexington who is making masks and donating them to healthcare workers. I contact her. Yes, 30 nurses at UK's Children's Hospital need homemade masks. I fill the order.

To my delight, I receive the following message:

“Just picked up the masks. I cannot thank you enough for your kindness and generosity in this unprecedented time. It is because of our neighbors like you that we have some peace of mind as we work to help those who are sick. You're making a difference and are so appreciated. I'll be sure to tell my colleagues in other units to reach out to you. Stay well, and thank you again!”

I smile, ear to ear.

Next, I contact the person who has been my BFF since I was 12 years old. She also was our senior class secretary at Hinsdale Township High School in the 'burbs west of Chicago, which means she has organized each and every class reunion for decades. That makes her a saint. And, too, she has the email address of everyone in our class.

“Bets,” I say, “put out the word. I'll make masks for anyone from the Class of '66 who needs them.” After all, each of us is a septuagenarian.

At first, the requests trickle in; then they come in a steady stream. I make nearly 150 masks for classmates and their loved ones. Wearing my own mask, I traipse to the Post Office and mail off dozens of packages. Recipients are delighted to have them, and send me grateful and encouraging notes. “Thank you so much,” one writes. “Beautiful as well as functional. They may save a life.”

This note gives me chills. Is it possible that my mask *will* save someone's life? That thought is almost too good to be true. But, does that also mean that, if I ease up on my sewing efforts, someone's life will *end* because I didn't make enough masks? Whew! The pressure is on.

Many of my classmates offer to pay me for my work and materials. Instead, I suggest they “pay it forward” by contributing to a worthy cause. I am gratified to learn that they contribute thousands – literally thousands – of dollars to good causes: Meals on Wheels, Heifer International, Kiva, early education programs, food banks, an organization advocating for victims of domestic violence, and the list goes on. One good soul donates

\$5,000 -- \$5,000! – to a school making meals for hungry children; then, he gives the five masks I sent him to volunteers required to work the polls for the in-person primary election Wisconsin’s Supreme Court deemed “necessary.” I am blown away by my classmates’ compassion.

By this point, I have enlisted my sister in Wisconsin to join the effort. We both have retired from our careers as psychologists. As fast as Clark Kent entering the telephone booth to become Superman, the Doctors Walker morph into the Mask Mamas. Our husbands, now enthusiastic about this endeavor, order supplies and cut fabric and elastic, and then cook dinner, too.

In March, I honor my dear Michael with the Employee of the Month Award (Lexington Branch) as Chief Shipping Clerk and Customer Service Manager of Zorro Industries. In April he wins again, this time as Company Chef Extraordinaire. In May he wins the Triple Crown: Employee of the Month as World’s Best Elastic Cutter. Being the sole “employee” has its benefits.

By this point, each of my daughters and several friends have donated their stashes of cotton and flannel to me. Kristen and Laura cheer me on every week via FaceTime. Their gifts and encouragement keep Zorro Industries going, and my spirits up. And, too, I stay connected to them by giving art lessons to their children.

But, oh! How I miss seeing my children and grandchildren in person. I miss hugging them. I miss holding them. I miss fist-bumping them. I miss kissing them and tousling their curly locks. Pandemics suck.

Still, we stay connected in the ways we can.

My sister and I call each other every few days. “How’s it going? What’s your number? Did you find a source for decent elastic?”

Harriet has made contact with the Lac du Flambeau tribe in the North Woods of Wisconsin, where she lives. The tribe orders 300 masks, maybe more. I tell her I have given more than 100 to Food Chain, an organization in Lexington that is hiring laid off restaurant workers to make meals for families going hungry, and another 44 to the YMCA, whose staff members are caring for the children of healthcare workers.

We have been close for many years, my sister and I; this mutual effort bonds us further. I cherish my older, wiser sibling. We had planned to meet in Niagara-on-the-Lake,

Canada to celebrate her 75th birthday on June 5th: Theater and good meals and knitting and laughing and talking until the wee hours. But, of course, our plans had to be cancelled. I push aside the thought of never seeing Harriet again because of this damned pandemic. Some thoughts are simply too horrible to endure. *I love you, my dear sister*. That's the thought I focus on instead.

I have no idea where this mask-making endeavor will go, how long it will last, or how it will end. If the coronavirus peaks again (and, perhaps, again and again), I may be in "business" for a long time. If it peters out over time, the need for masks will wane, or even disappear.

A vanishing virus is my most sincere hope.

In the meantime, though, Harriet and I keep sewing.

As the Mask Mamas, we have churned out 1,640 masks so far. But we aren't done yet. Not even close. After all, a group of Amish women in Ohio turned out 12,000 masks in just two days. TWO days and 12,000 masks! Anything worth doing is worth overdoing, a lesson Dad taught us so well.

We have a ways to go.

Anyone need a mask?