



Turning 50 in a Time of Pandemic

It was going to be the party of the year: my 50th birthday. I rented a fantastic place, picked a great menu and sent funny invitations designed by my hilarious friend Brooke. I was counting down the weeks. Then COVID-19 hit. Lockdowns were ordered. No party for me. Yet what replaced it was the purest expression of the best that humanity has to offer, springing from creative forces that neither this virus — nor other negative forces — can kill.

My party being canceled is, of course, a minuscule tragedy compared with the deaths and economic destruction we've witnessed in the last few months. Still, I was sad that what was supposed to be a great weekend spent with family coming from France and friends coming from all over the country has been postponed indefinitely. I knew my teenagers would, no matter what, make the day special — it was Mother's Day, too — and that I would still hear from my friends.

And what replaced the party was so much more meaningful and amazing because it was fueled by my friends' love and creativity, and by the amazing innovators who make coping with the isolation more tolerable.

When I woke up, I was greeted by a video from my oldest friend in France: a fun musical performance of the "Happy Birthday" song performed with a piano and homemade instruments, recorded on an iPhone and sent over the Atlantic Ocean in mere seconds, free of charge. None of that would have been possible had I turned 50 in 2007.

Then came the Zoom family reunion with cousins in three countries, three continents and two hemispheres. While Zoom was created in 2011, the company has quickly become a household name and a business essential during the pandemic. This company succeeds not only because it makes its product free to individuals but also because it quickly responded to the privacy issues that emerged during the pandemic.

After that international celebration came a wonderful video montage of my friends and colleagues from around the country, all orchestrated by my Mercatus Center boss, Dan Rothschild. The simple link that I received on Sunday morning does not boast of the thousands of technical innovations that make this wonder a now-commonplace reality in everyone's homes. Remarkably, I drank in this love and well-wishing all from the comfort of my bed.



Written by [Veronique de Rugy](#) on May 14, 2020

I soon discovered another gift at 11 a.m., but it was delivered to my house around 8 a.m. and would be picked up 12 hours later. This one is 100% a pandemic innovation, triggered by the thousands of life events that couldn't be celebrated during these times of social distancing. As I opened my front door, I discovered a beautiful sign wishing me a happy birthday. It was festooned with balloons and cupcakes right there in my front yard, all orchestrated by my loving friends Ashley and Kevin.

The company, Sign Sisters, didn't exist before this crisis. It's an Arlington, Virginia, startup, and, just like its signs do, it displays the creativity and thoughtfulness of so many local entrepreneurs throughout the country — creative people who come up with ideas to satisfy needs, such as enabling celebrations when most of us remain in isolation.

That said, in the end, nothing surprised me more than the way my friends managed to reinvent my birthday celebration in this time of pandemic with a giant drive-by caravan of honking, decorated cars filled with cheering from people I cherish. As the neighbors came out of their houses to share in the celebration, I could feel my heart explode with gratitude, and I certainly didn't feel alone.

After spending a few minutes Googling drive-by celebrations, I found out that friends, neighbors and families around the country are organizing these drive-bys both to celebrate birthdays and graduations and to honor health care professionals, celebrate recovery from COVID-19 or simply offer moral support. New companies have been created to offer all sorts of festive designs for cars and trucks.

There was Andrew's video montage with priceless testimonials from my kids, family and friends. There were flowers and other thoughtful gifts delivered throughout the weekend — many ordered online, another innovation we now take for granted. So, in the end, while I'll always have slight regret about not having my party as planned, my birthday weekend was way better than it would have been without this pandemic. I will never forget it, and I will always marvel at people's endless ability to love, connect and create.

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