Don James McLaughlin//

On June 26, a video began circulating of a man growling "I will not be muzzled like a mad dog" at a special meeting of the St. Lucie County Commission in Florida, held to discuss a proposal for a face mask mandate. Bared teeth notwithstanding, commissioners voted to approve the ordinance on July 1. Nevertheless, as disputes over mandates carry on, this complaint that face masks are muzzles, guilty of violating free speech, has become a fixture of American political debate over coronavirus response. After months of shrugging off their importance, the president has at last admitted face masks are "good." Even so, he remains opposed to the idea of a nationwide mandate, the logic being that such a move would be an affront to freedom.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, the city I call home, where the president held his kickoff 2020 campaign rally on June 20, cases of COVID-19 have spiked dramatically. Health Department Director Dr. Bruce Dart, who warned beforehand that a rally would likely exacerbate regional spread, now reports that his grim forecast is being confirmed. In response, Tulsa Mayor GT Bynum (who, despite Dart's data-driven advice, declined to halt the rally) established a face mask ordinance on July 15. But the time and lives lost to partisan neglect of health officials' guidance raise pressing concerns.

However disingenuous the analogy between face masks and muzzles may seem to many, it has exercised demonstrable sway over people's perceptions and behavior. Why have people made mask mandates their primary foe while facing a deadly disease? Is the mask really just another word for a muzzle? Being an expert in nineteenth-century rabies history (seriously), I feel obliged to venture some answers.

The present pandemic is not the first time Americans have disagreed about the enforcement of face coverings to curb infectious disease. Journalists have turned to the influenza pandemic of 1918 as a source of face-covering controversy, but there is a deeper precedent. In fact, the history of rabies revolves around a little-known breakthrough: prior to widespread vaccination of dogs, it was regulated muzzling that provided the first successful solution to rabies transmission.

The history of rabies in the nineteenth century is bewildering. Unlike our current predicament, the pandemonium far exceeded the fatality counts. Reasons for this discrepancy are numerous. Combining encephalitis with spasmodic convulsions and the dehydrating effects of a fear of swallowing water, rabies is a lousy way to die. The fear of water was considered such a dire and telltale condition that rabies went by the name *hydrophobia* for centuries. Moreover, prior to widespread muzzling and leash law, bad encounters with dogs were quotidian. The lag time between being bitten and the appearance of hydrophobia usually takes one to three months; before vaccination helped people better grasp the parameters around incubation, anticipation of hydrophobia could last indefinitely.[1] As a result, many Americans (including celebrated editor of *The Atlantic* William Dean Howells, in his youth) succumbed to a protracted fear of an impending rabid demise for significant portions of their life. All a person could do was wait it out.

Rabies pitted Americans against each other. In her phenomenal book *Mad Dogs and Other New Yorkers*, Jessica Wang shows how government responses to rabies outbreaks in New York evolved from the antebellum deployment of a bounty system, which legalized the confiscation and killing of unmuzzled dogs by private individuals, through decades of seismic change as the New York Department of Health faced off with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals over protocol.[2] The Department of Health held that enforcement of muzzling was required to stamp out transmission to humans. The ASPCA maintained that the benefits did not outweigh the distress foisted upon the muzzled.

Anti-muzzling sentiment was fierce. In 1914, *Life* published a satirical poem submitted by Bideawee titled "Muzzle 'Em," dedicated to Health Commissioner Dr. Sigismund Goldwater.[3] "Muzzle 'Em" captures the exasperation many felt in the vicinity of increased regulation:

> *Muzzle 'em up—yep—muzzle 'em up,*
> *Muzzle the horse and the cat and the pup,*
> *Muzzle the roach and the angleworm, do;*
> *Muzzle the bee and the butterfly, too.*
> *. . . Safety first makes the poor quadruped*
> *Travel around with a cage on his head.*

This same apprehension motivated a muzzle makeover in earlier decades, as muzzling ordinances accelerated. In the mid-1870s, ASPCA president Henry Bergh recommended a newly patented "automatic muzzle," which used a spring to allow dogs to drink water and pant with their tongues unhindered.[4] In 1868, Sarah Josepha Hale's *Godey's Lady's Book*, a women's magazine in Philadelphia, published a DIY piece teaching readers how to crochet a muzzle appropriate for a "lady's pet dog," one that was sure to be "less troublesome" to one's companion "than a wire one."[5] (Widespread interest in making muzzles more comfortable bears resemblance to proliferating adaptations of the face mask in 2020, which, as disability activists have underscored, belong to a genealogy of crip innovation in fashion.)

In one of the most pivotal public health victories following the *fin-de-siècle* growth of medical microbiology, doubling down on muzzling paid off. By 1915, as Wang documents, New York's Health Department felt it had reached a new era, achieving near-total cessation of rabies in humans and a significant decline in rabid dogs. As Neil Pemberton and Michael Worboys demonstrate in *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, London and most of Great Britain had claimed a comparable accomplishment, credited to muzzling, by 1899.

Public health achievements are complex. They cannot be taken as proof that everything was done right along the way. Nonetheless, one conclusion remains inviolable: muzzles worked.

So what lasting insight should we take from the history of the muzzle in the time of COVID-19?

First, muzzle ordinances worked because they kept dogs from biting, the primary means by which rabies lyssaviruses travel to the nervous system of a new host. COVID-19 likewise spreads through the mouth—via respiratory droplets emitted in various forms of exhale, from sneezing to singing. This juxtaposition sheds light on the civic responsibility in question. In brief, face masks preempt an imperceptible, inadvertent, figurative biting in public.

Second, there is good reason to take seriously the confession that face masks make people uneasy because it feels somehow like being muzzled into submission. University College London professor Xine Yao distills the dilemma succinctly: "because masks conceal our faces from one another, they frustrate our efforts to express ourselves and connect with others."[6] Stubbornness may come off as mere nihilism, but lives now depend on sustaining active dialogue until minds are changed. To be sure, one reason we should take anti-scientific quibbles over the face mask seriously is that they divulge the extent to which Americans have forgotten the necessity of heeding voices other than their own, health officials among them, if we are to solve emergent crises cooperatively.

Face masks do not suppress speech, but they do aptly visualize the merits of listening.

The incentives are self-evident: by putting on face masks, we keep ourselves from unknowingly spreading coronavirus. By submitting to a reciprocal protection, we nurture a good will more conducive to keeping us safe.

In covering my own mouth, I am reminded that there are times when I need to be silent, so I can be receptive to people who possess critical wisdom.

At this juncture, the next question on your mind may not be, what would Jesus do? Yet one of the most iconic Biblical stories has customarily received a germane mistranslation. It begins with Jesus asleep on a boat on the Sea of Galilee. During his slumber, a storm starts to billow. Luke 8:23 explains, "there came down a storm of wind on the lake; and they were filled *with water*, and were in jeopardy."[7] The apostles panic. They beg Jesus to wake up, knowing that if nothing is done they will die.

In an act that has inspired many a hymn, Christ rebukes the storm, and it settles. Mark 4:39 says, "he arose…and said unto the sea 'Peace, be still.'" Alas, translations tend to take eyebrow-raising liberties with this utterance. As I have confirmed in correspondence with my sister Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby, a PhD student in the School of Theology at Boston University, the original Greek reads differently.

Christ says to the sea, "Σιώπα, πεφίμωσο."[8] "Siōpa, pephimōso." "Hush, be muzzled."

In the Gospels' most spectacular episode of water-phobia, Jesus orders the recklessness of the waves themselves to be muzzled. This juxtaposition of water-phobia and muzzling is coincidental; other passages in the New Testament and Torah situate the metaphor in muzzles used on livestock, not rabid dogs.

Still, there is another component that brings this story into an arresting constellation with *muzzle*'s subsequent etymology. As the storm pacifies, Jesus asks the apostles, "Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?" Here the scope of the metaphor expands: the aorist passive imperative command to "be muzzled" frames Christ's interrogative indictment of fear, instructing that it is time for this faithless fear, too, to subside.

Having one's mouth obstructed does not convey censorship universally. Without a doubt, the face-mask-wearing protestor, endeavoring to observe social distancing when possible, will persevere as one of the greatest, enduring emblems of what has made 2020 significant: a testament to the compatibility of having one's perspective heard and taking care to honor the vulnerable breath of neighboring voices.

While sometimes mistaken for weakness, silence can be a sign of strength. Texas Woman's University professor of queer and disability rhetorics John Smilges has used the term "rhetorical quieting" to distinguish between "passivity, low volume, or lessened intensity" and our capacity for "self-regulation," a consensual quiet that refocuses "attention on the rhetorical opportunities afforded by silence."[9]

Smilges's recuperation of "rhetorical quieting" calls to mind a final idiom pertinent to the history I have been tracking: an expression drag queens use to signal that another queen has done or said something exceptional. In the event of being taken aback, pearls literally clutched, the drag queen

says reliably, "I'm gagged." This state of being gagged in drag parlance embodies belonging to a shared consciousness—one that encourages the experience of being awed by the elegant precision of an interlocutor's message to the point of self-silencing.

If the question is whether the face mask is a muzzle in that the former is alleged to desecrate free speech, we should not humor such false equivalencies. If the question is whether the face mask belongs to a lineage of muzzling in that the latter was used to contain a life-threatening virus, the reply can be only "partially, yes." We lack the capacity to fully articulate the nature of the epidemiological strategy to dogs, an ethical ambiguity inapplicable to COVID-19.

If the question is whether the face mask may be understood to represent the public health function of timely self-quieting, so we may listen on behalf of a collaborative healing, the answer is clear: the face mask participates in this worthy tradition. In wearing it, we pursue a more just path to collective wellbeing; in good faith, we manifest a willingness to seek peace by acknowledging and responding to the demands of a common future.

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Cover image: Wood engraving of a crochet muzzle in the March 1868 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*. Required materials include "Fine twine; dark-red Berlin wool; two little buckles; a gutta-percha tube;" and a "small bone hook."

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Notes:

1. See Don James McLaughlin, "Hydrophobia's Doppelgänger: Toward a Literary History of Emotions in Early American Rabies Narratives." *Literature and Medicine* 37.1(Spring 2019): 113-35.

2. Jessica Wang. *Mad Dogs and Other New Yorkers: Rabies, Medicine, and Society in an American Metropolis, 1840-1920*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/title/mad-dogs-and-other-new-yorkers.

3. Ray J. Hoppman, from the Bide-a-Wee Home Association, Inc. for Friendless Animals. "Muzzle 'Em." *Life*. Nov. 19, 1914.

4. "The Persecuted Dogs." *New York Times*. June 22, 1874.

5. “Dog’s Muzzle.—Crochet.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. March 1868.

6. Xine Yao. “Rethinking Masks.” *BBC*, 1 July 2020.

7. English translations are taken from the King James Version.

8. “Mark 4:39.” https://biblehub.com/text/mark/4-39.htm. Accessed July 5, 2020.

9. John Smilges. “White Squares to Black Boxes.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2019): 79-92.