

## The Upside(?) of COVID

By Diane Burke



I did not need to be reminded of how much handbells meant to me - I had dedicated a large portion of my waking hours to it. With 3 rehearsals a week in different churches, a 4<sup>th</sup> every other week in another, and at least 2 church services a month, I had even figured out how to work my day job around it. Because I was out of the house more than I was in, one of my friends jokingly asked my husband if he would still recognize that little blond woman who lived here, and his reply was, "Well, I could still pick her out of a lineup, so I guess that's good." Ah, love!

And then came March 17<sup>th</sup> in Massachusetts - and life changed immeasurably. It was hard to grasp that essentially the world had shut down because we had never seen anything like it before- nothing in our toolkits to prepare us for something so pervasive and unknown. For anyone who spent the better part of their day outside the home- and especially doing something that nourishes the soul, brings people together, and provides musical refreshment not just for its members, but for a larger audience - this was devastating. Although I was still able to go to work, I felt so empty without the fellowship and anticipation of rehearsals each week, and the opportunity to make music for spiritual sustenance, just plain fun, and everything in between.

My groups all took to Zoom each week to check in on other, and my Sudbury group decided to try some virtual ringing, which yielded 3 pieces that were used for their virtual church service. I was thrilled that we all stayed in contact and helped each other cope, but all the Zooming in the world cannot replace that wonderful palpable feeling we all have when we're in a room tackling a new piece, polishing an old one, or feeling proud of something we've offered to the congregation that morning.

Somewhere along the way, however, when days became weeks and months, the utter sadness and how-do-I-fill-this-hole-in-my-heart feeling found a smaller place in my consciousness, and I began to appreciate things I had never given the time to before. Of course I finally got around to cataloguing all my handbell music, old Overtones editions, church bulletins, and workshop classes I had taught, and there were moments of sweet memories when I came across a piece we had played that gone particularly well. But I also realized that I had accumulated too much "stuff" in my life, and a lot of it was unnecessary. I spent more time outside, where I have any number of feral cats, raccoons, squirrels, possum, skunks (and a woodchuck!) to commune with, and sitting on our back steps on a summer night watching them all, I found a different kind of sustenance. By far, the best upside was doing anything- or nothing- with my husband, and remembering why we chose each other 16 years ago. We are partners in this life, come what may.

Does all this mean that when 2 of my churches recently gave the go-ahead for us to hold live rehearsals that I had to think twice? Not even for a millisecond! With all the proper protocols in place, I can tell you that when my Marlboro group played the opening measures of Michael Joy's "Appassionata" their first night, I was overcome with gratitude and joy. I expect I'll have the same reaction when Sudbury gathers for the first time this week, because that's the place handbells hold in my life- a place of passion, creativity, and joy. But the past 6 months have been a welcome (if forced) reminder that there are simple and abundant joys in my life that I want to give my time and attention to a little more often- and whatever the future "normal" is, that I continue to hold a special place for them in my life as well.

I asked my ringers what they've learned over this time of separation and isolation, and here are some of their responses:

"how much I don't mind my own company"

"how much I value my friends and the web of connectedness"

"life's undramatic pleasures, such as a socially-distanced visit on the porch with a friend, a moment watching the clouds over the river, the pleasure of stroking a well-loved cat."

"how connected we've all stayed with our friends and families"

"who knew I could video edit virtual bell music?"

"creativity"

"the ability to be patient"

"a sense of solidarity with the wider world"

"My garden was a metaphor of life and hope"

"having a comfortable life that allows me to help others"

"things that before the pandemic were completely unnoteworthy, unremarkable, and just ordinary- I found myself immensely grateful for so much."

What's **YOUR** simple joy???