



Perspective/Opinion

“Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end”

By Joan Weiss

Joan Weiss, recently retired Program Manager for the Kern Institute, reflects on the last two years...

Two years ago this month, we saw the first haunting images flash across our tv screens as we listened to the reports that conveyed the pandemic had begun its spread across the globe. Every corner of the world was impacted leaving us feeling shocked, confused, and helpless. All that changed when masks were found to be one of the most effective tools at deterring the transmission of the virus. Enter Rebel Converting, the Saukville-based manufacturer of hospital-grade disinfectant wipes. Upon learning that there was a shortage of PPE, they devised a way to make masks at home from the same material used to make their wipes. Rebel made a commitment to provide all of the materials necessary to get masks into the community, we just needed to find the volunteers. Without hesitation, volunteers from MCW, Children's Wisconsin, Froedtert Wisconsin, and the community rose to the challenge resulting in millions of masks being provided to clinics, social services agencies, essential workers, and the homeless. Student volunteers delivered them across the city and to our surrounding communities, all while using their own vehicles and refusing to accept any compensation for fuel. I had never before witnessed such courage, commitment, and cooperation.

As we transitioned from working in our offices to within the four walls of our homes, a new rhythm surfaced. We turned to learning the ins and outs of video conferencing, online learning, and how to communicate and collaborate virtually. Masks quickly became a fashion piece, and sweatpants replaced office attire. With smiles often hidden behind masks, we focused on each other's eyes to gauge consensus, but as our gaze met, we also sensed the care and concern that we had for each other. We soon learned that technology encouraged innovation, allowed us to transcend geographical distances, and that collegial connections could still be made and fostered.

With the pandemic continuing to unfold, we were brought to our knees by its rapid spread. We feared for our colleagues working on the frontlines and our hearts broke over the daily tally of new cases and lives lost. Despite enormous physical and mental challenges, courage and fortitude prevailed, and lifelong bonds were forged. Working in an ever-changing environment, often with limited staff, the highest standards were upheld, and compassionate care provided. Dedicated nurses balanced Ipads while comforting patients as they passed from this world into the next and ensured that no patient died alone. When at their stations they cried and comforted each other.

As we prepared to welcome in the new year, my father had a medical emergency and was admitted for care at the VA Hospital. Normally busy with a flurry of activity, the halls were eerily quiet, and the sense that Covid stealthily lurked in all of its corners and dark places permeated my thoughts. Not long after that, visiting restrictions were once again implemented and I was no longer able to visit. Then the call came. His doctor called to inform me that he had developed a cough overnight and tested positive for Covid. My father passed away several days later. As for countless others, the pandemic was no longer just on my tv screen. It had hit home and left no opportunity for goodbyes. Over time, the details and heartache of this experience will begin to fade but burned into my memory and forever written on my heart are the faces and names of the doctors, nurses, aides, and staff that cared for him. While doing so, they cared for me as well.

In our lifetime, there are few events that occur as a collective experience and make a significant impact on the way we function as a society. Now, two years later, the U.S. is nearing 1 million recorded COVID-19 deaths and we have either personally had Covid, known someone who had Covid, or in the worst of cases, lost someone to Covid. Around the world there has been staggering loss of life and we have all been psychologically impacted in one way or another. Together, we cry and mourn. The pandemic has also shed light upon the social inequalities and health inequities that exist, and political views have further divided the country. We have much to grapple with and cannot look away. Yet, despite the unrest, fear, and sorrow, in equal measure I have witnessed or been the lucky recipient of an abundance of kindness, caring, empathy, and compassion.

As the numbers continue to decline and our lives return to some sense of normalcy, the pandemic extends an invitation to contemplate how we're currently living and begs the questions, how can we live our best lives amidst the changes that continue to take place? What will our new normal look like and how will it impact and benefit our families, our community, our jobs, and ourselves? What stories should we tell and what should future generations hear and learn about this period in time? What opportunities does this create for formal and informal education in our roles as parents, teachers, students, and community organizations? The answers, as all good work, begins with L*O*V*E. As we ponder these questions, Seneca reminds us that "every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end" and Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes encourages us to not lose heart.

"...In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or un-mended in the world.

Do not focus on that... We are needed, that is all we can know...

One of the most calming and powerful actions you can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show your soul. Soul on deck shines like gold in dark times... When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe.

There can be no doubt. But... that is not what great ships are built for."

~ Clarissa Pinkola Estes, PhD

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