

Perspective/Opinion

Hugs in Grand Rapids

by Wendy Peltier, MD - Froedtert & MCW Geriatric and Palliative Medicine Division

The trip to Grand Rapids is five hours when there is no Chicago traffic. For me, the time is usually filled with road trip snacks, juggling kid's requests from the back seat, and trying to steal a few moments in a magazine without getting carsick while my husband drives. This February, it was much different.

I tried to keep myself from getting excited the week before, knowing that at any moment, there might be cause to cancel. I had already received my two vaccine doses so I was less worried about my COVID-19 test results, but I wanted to be doubly sure to travel safely. I found myself more worried about a kid requiring quarantine, a caregiver falling sick, or a dreaded Wisconsin snowstorm forcing us to reschedule.

When the day finally arrived, I was giddy. On the road, I smiled between the tears as my car crossed into Illinois. I marveled at how this once familiar road now seemed foreign and crisply *real*. It was just me, my "Faves" playlist on Spotify, a hot mug of coffee, and an unnerving sense of being too close to big semi-trucks. *Could it really be over a year since I had seen my folks? Could it really be that I would have four uninterrupted days to share with them, just the three of us?*

It seemed I processed the year of the pandemic as the miles ticked away.

This time of solitude in the car brought waves of relief, joy, gratitude … but also guilt. I felt keenly aware that so many in my community, our nation, the world, no longer had this opportunity. For those of you with aging parents, it's all too familiar that the gnawing fear of a serious health issue might arise in

normal times. This year of COVID-19 amplified that considerably for us and led my family to forgo highly anticipated time together for our "do-not-miss" Fourth of July gala at the summer cabin, holiday gatherings, and my Mom's 80th birthday celebration. Like so many of my colleagues in health care and education, we just couldn't take the risk of being together.

Although we connected regularly by telephone and Zoom calls, it felt insufficient for the magnitude of what we were facing with the pandemic. We tried to be positive on those calls, but much of the worry and fear we were experiencing was left unspoken. We tried to lift each other up and connect, but there was always a distance created by the ever-present technology snafus, "noises" in the household, and pressing deadlines to meet. Throughout the year, the stilted interactions became normalized, and it became harder to remember the last moments we were actually together.

This trip was so different for me, compared to the many other times having been on this same road. I brought with me the immense sense of relief that my parents had also been vaccinated. We were safe to be together. As Michigan got closer, I realized how many nights I had lain awake worrying about what might happen should one of my parents contract the virus. In caring for families at the hospital, with a loved one ill or dying from COVID-19 in isolation, it felt so close … *this could be us, my family*.

I finally arrived.

That first big bear hug was pretty incredible. It was hard to let go. I had that same heightened sense of reality, of all my senses being activated at once by the familiar smell of home, the beauty of the space, and the overwhelming sense of relief. I think my folks felt that, too.

Then, the relaxation and fun began. I was so touched by how my mom made all my favorite foods without asking, how much I enjoyed being part of activities that had filled their daily lives during this long quarantine, and how quickly we settled into our old habits of being together. The weekend was filled with reconnecting and taking time to just relax in each other's company. The

gnawing feeling in my stomach began to lessen, and I felt a renewed sense of strength and energy. I felt lucky.

On the ride back to Wisconsin, I felt lighter, and a bit more normal again.

It was obviously hard to leave, but I left with knowledge we would be together again soon. It seemed I could finally believe that the worst of the pandemic was over. It was time to look ahead to new challenges and opportunities, both at work and for my Wisconsin family. It was time to focus on healing rather than simply surviving.

As I write about this experience, I sincerely hope that similar reunions will be coming for so many of my friends, colleagues, and extended family as we look to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. I hope we also continue to seek opportunities to honor and support families who have lost loved ones during this tumultuous time. And that when it's truly safe to do so, hugs will abound!

Sixteen Months

by Doris Larson
mother of Wendy Peltier

How do you measure
A sixteen-month absence
From a beloved daughter?

In Pride
For a caring physician
Dedicated to her patients.

In Fear
For her safety
Daily in the hospital.

In Gratitude
For her supportive husband
And loving sons.

In Anxiety
For the spread of COVID
Surrounding us all.

In Hope
For a vaccinated world
Forever changed.

In Joy
For the daughter's visit.
The restorative power of hugs.

Wendy Peltier, MD, is an Associate Professor of Neurology and Medicine in the Division of Geriatric and Palliative Medicine at MCW. She is also a member of the Faculty Pillar of the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medical Education.

Doris Larson is a loving wife, mother of two, and retired teacher, turned artist. She lives in a senior community in Grand Rapids Michigan, and enjoys summers on Beaver Island, 'where my soul was formed!'