



Perspective / Opinion

“apathy, ignorance, and Intimacy”

By Christopher S. Davis, MD, MPH and Kate Stark

A few weeks ago, we were asked to write about what we have learned from the pandemic in the sense of what surprised us, what has or has not changed, what we need to do to be ready for next time, what sticks with us, etc.; in essence, to distill a collective reflection of the past two years of pandemic life in the 21st century into a short essay. Ok. On it...

As Kate and I reflected there was a clear theme leading to failure in response to the pandemic pointing to both disinformation and societal ignorance. Although the [recipe for success to combat the pandemic](#) was *understood and proven* over a century ago, the contemporary hole dug by unchecked, unverified, and purposefully fueled conspiracies, myths, and fears has led to the unnecessary deaths of tens of thousands of Americans. Read that again. This is a FACT, now needlessly and sadly verified by THE FACTS, of which the course was entirely known and predicted by physicians, scientists, and public health professionals in even the first few days of the pandemic. In that context I have no way to explain (i.e., excuse) the failure of the will to preserve human life other than blatant apathy and/or ignorance to the human condition of suffering (where greed fits into this I have yet to place – but I would suggest that apathy is a pre-requisite of greed).

The above is dark, raw, awful, sad, and—for all intents and purposes—avoidable. Those disproportionately subjected to structural racism have predictably suffered even worse during these times yet again. How was it that the underserved’s burden of death from COVID-19 was a “surprise” to so many? Kate and I would argue that this is a failure of our public education model, in that the majority of the American public doesn’t understand the basic viral, biological, and evolutionary concepts of life. Therefore, as a consequence, many Americans do not understand the basic premises of viral and immunological concepts, and how and why public health recommendations (such as social distancing) and scientific measures (such as vaccines) are effective. Unequivocally, health literacy and literacy in America in general is an abject failure.

And this is normally where I would excuse myself from my “soap box” and hope I’ve made a little impact with my rant. But not this time, not yet, because despite the darkness and my

shoes ever-so-more-often covered by the blood of our neighbors, I will proceed. I am, as are my partners, witness to the violent atrocities of life as they have been allowed to exist for decades in Milwaukee, and they have been allowed to worsen two-fold further yet during this pandemic. Even to this very day we are [outpacing back-to-back record-breaking years of homicides](#).

So, now I've highlighted my views on apathy and ignorance which are, arguably, what has led us here. Note the lower case of those words (apathy and ignorance) in the title of this piece and throughout and forevermore in my writing—which is intentional—because in no context do those words deserve grandeur of any kind and, in fact, they honestly only still exist out of some sad and humanly contrived necessity.

What I sense to be the antithesis to apathy and ignorance is Intimacy, and the existence and depth of human Intimacy is what I believe to have discovered during this pandemic to be our most primordial bond and, if not, our Cure! For this I will give you two first-hand accounts...

Intimacy

Number 1:

In my role as a trauma surgeon and critical care intensivist I was rounding in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit late one night. A 19-year-old black male had been the victim of a gunshot wound (rendering him paraplegic) during the day, and he was ready for his breathing tube to come out during evening rounds. After extubation, he expressed that he wanted his mother to be with him, but because of both legal and pandemic protocols this was not allowed. After hearing and understanding this he was both fearful and tearful, and he literally would not let me go. In hindsight he was rendered a child as even the strongest of us would be in the circumstances and we hugged. I put down the guard-rail of the ICU bed (and in retrospect my own guard-rails) and put my head next to his to pat his head as he sobbed. The difference in the texture of his hair from that of my own children's was particularly noticeable that night. When I was done with ICU rounds I, too, cried, both because his mother and father couldn't be there, but also because all he had then was to be comforted by a white man of whom he had all the reasons in the world to be distrustful and scared of. I just hope I did okay that night, but still feel I could have, somehow, done more.

Number 2:

I have a *tremendous* friend who, well, is more of a friend to me than he knows. My friend is Dan Schwarzlose, and he has allowed me to share his story. Ultimately, we crossed paths by way of the Medical Alumni Association Board for Northwestern University and there were some awesome John Elway and Denver Broncos stories...but that stuff, however cool, is trivial now. Though I am entirely non-musical myself, part of

what has given me joy in our friendship is Dan's participation in the Northwestern Medical Orchestra (NMO) and to see the joy in my children when they are around him playing the trumpet. Most importantly, what I want to highlight is that during this pandemic, my friend, Dan, and his wife, Savy, had a stillborn daughter at twenty-six weeks of age. Rather than shy away from this as the expectation may be, Dan decided to publicly play a piece in memory of their daughter, Scarlet, during the last virtual NMO concert. As you will see, Dan not only invited the many watching the virtual concert into his home, but the world at large was lucky enough to see a window into both this man's special soul and his deep suffering. Thank you, my friends Savy and Dan, and likewise your beautiful daughter, Scarlet. For me, watching the live concert from my living room with my kids who call you Uncle Dan, and their silence, and the world's simultaneous silence...what an incredible example of Intimacy during this pandemic. Please watch [his video](#) in tribute of Scarlet.

In light of this all, have we learned anything new since Dostoevsky's protagonist in *Crime and Punishment*, or any human before or since? Life moves on in our age, too, as do the drumbeats of apathy, ignorance, war, disease, and death. When will we prize Intimacy? When?

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