

One Year and Counting

By Doris H. Goldstein

Are we there yet? No.

When will we get there? Soon.....I hope.

Like those living in diverse cultures world-wide, Americans are constantly celebrating or finding ways to remember important events; sometimes personal (birthday), sometimes historic (4th of July), sometimes emotional (death of a loved one). Now there is another anniversary we will mark with everyone alive on March, 2020 no matter their nationality, gender, race or age.....the onset of Covid-19, the world wide pandemic.

Unbeknownst to the general public as well as most of the scientific world, it began sometime in late 2019 in China, spread by travelers to the U.S. and Europe early in 2020 and soon engulfed the entire planet. It has taken all of 2020/21 for polymathic scientists to isolate and name it, discover its characteristics and develop strategies to combat and contain it. Unfortunately, while the quest for knowledge slowly advanced, there was horrific death and disruption everywhere.

My husband and I were blissfully unaware of what was potentially lurking in every droplet as we boarded a cruise ship in Los Angeles in late January, 2020; destination, French Polynesia. Enjoying the warm breezes sailing across the blue Pacific, feasting on the explosion of color and texture of exotic flowers and trees and delving into the rhythms and culture of several islands of the archipelago, after two weeks, our ship docked in Pepee and we headed home.

Now unprotected by the relative isolation of a floating luxury hotel, inextricable bits of the impending crises crept into our consciousness like a chyron on a television screen. Now there were various scientists' faces expounding one theory or another, suggesting evolving solutions for individuals and society, political leaders disagreeing with the science and each other, leaving ordinary citizens in complete confusion. Within weeks, images of cruise ships marooned in the ocean, some of their passengers and crew infected while others imprisoned in their cabins were common scenes. But for a random decision to leave on an earlier date, that could have easily been us.

We happily celebrated the festival of Purim in early March in-person, in our synagogue dressed in flowery garments and seashell necklaces acquired on the trip, unaware that it would be the last time for the foreseeable future to be in the building, the last familiar religious service and the last time to embrace the accustomed sight of friends and fellow congregants.

Suddenly, it seemed, the demon of infection and death burst its tentative boundaries, forcing everyone into lockdown wherever they lived. Self-isolation, the only solution at the moment for not becoming infected, venturing out cautiously, only for necessities like food and medicine, became the norm as everyone painfully adjusted to a new lifestyle. What many imagined would be a temporary status of a few weeks or months at the most became an indefinite permanence.

Now it is early March 2021. The One Year Anniversary. Will our remembrance be personal, historic or emotional? Probably all three.

Looking down into the deep caldera of the pandemic, a swirling farrago of facts, fictions, anger, frustration, despair, hope, gratitude appearsin short, a continual wave of emotions depending on the status of the pandemic at that particular moment. Many responded with phenomenal dedication to their professional responsibilities while others answered with originality and resilience to marshal resources in order to alleviate pressing needs of others. Non-profit organizations, cultural, religious and educational entities that had been built over the years through the hard work of volunteers scrambled to find ways to survive and continue serve the every changing needs of their constituents. Businesses, large and small, prosperous and marginal, were presented with overwhelming challenges. Many did not survive.

Millions lost their jobs across every strata of society. Well over 500,000 died. The widespread disruption exacerbated and laid bare long simmering societal problems that never seem to be addressed. The greatest burden was borne by those least able to thrive; minority low-income communities lacking resources to call upon in an emergency. Not too surprising, there were those who used Covid to their advantage by inventing schemes to defraud the public and enrich themselves. Each and every person grappled with how to live in such an unalterable new reality.

My personal remembrance. I realize every day that I am among the privileged who did not have to face this past year alone or be burdened with financial insecurity or health issues. For the past 60 plus years, I have had a person with me who has loved, comforted and supported me through all of life's joys and challenges. In spite of that great blessing, however, I have felt a deep sense of longing for the day to day, mundane contact with others. Be it in a formal setting such as a scheduled activity or a chance meeting in the grocery store or even brushing shoulders with strangers and exchanging pleasantries; all of that has left a gnawing sense of loss.

Although I am accustomed to my adult children and their families living in distant cities, the fact that it was now impossible to hop on a plane and be together for holidays or special times in our lives added to my disquietude. It is as if a whole year of birthdays, religious and secular holidays and special occasions didn't exist...disappeared forever as a liminal haze. The existential need for human contact be it with family, friends or even strangers is so basic within each of us that its absence was impossible to ignore.

Historic. March, 2020 will become another date in a long list Americans of this generation will remember....December 7, 1941, 9/11, January 6th to name a few of the most recent. As the years pass, what will historians, pundits, religious leaders, philosophers and others write when marking this date? Will it eventually fade into history as did the Spanish Flu pandemic of a century ago only to be revived as another medical emergency erupts? Will the lessons so painfully learned be repeated? Will those who were children tell their children and grandchildren what it was like to not go to school, see their extended family and friends, wear a mask, stand in a line at a Food Bank, or hear their parents

worry about being evicted? When remembering this past year, will we be reminded to be more compassionate to those less fortunate than ourselves?

Emotional. Watching the memorial to the lives lost on the eve of President Biden's inauguration should have stirred even the most stoic among us. Those lights flickering on the Tidal Basin of the National Mall recalling the memory of those who succumbed to Covid-19 and the families they left behind was an image that told the story without a single word.

On the other hand, the euphoria at the news of a vaccine that would protect us lifted us beyond the darkness and gave us reason to be optimistic about a return to some normalcy. The wonders of modern science and the appreciation of those who labored behind test tubes and computers restored our faith in the capacity to overcome whatever obstacles to health and well-being confront us.

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