

Linda Leighty

2020: WHEN WE WALKED BETWEEN RAINDROPS

Literary Arts

Essay

Greenville-Pitt County Senior Games, 2021

2020: WHEN WE WALKED BETWEEN RAINDROPS

Yes, we experienced a global pandemic and the loss of more than half a million people whom we or someone like us loved dearly and miss terribly. Accompanied by a shattered economy, isolation, increased homelessness, and untold suffering, disruption, despair, and heartbreak. Grief and loss deformed our society and will never be forgotten. Yet these disasters also provided clarifying moments which energized our personal efforts to walk forward. Let's identify some significant moments on our walk between the raindrops.

BYPASSING THE GREATEST OBSTRUCTION ON OUR WALK

Confronting the global pandemic, we witnessed a remarkable outbreak response. Light first penetrated the hovering 2020 rain cloud when a Chinese scientist sequenced and shared the coronavirus genetic sequence, its DNA, with an old friend, a virologist at the University of Sydney in Australia. Edward Holmes, the friend, almost immediately posted the sequence on the Virological.org website and on Twitter. Their global alarm initiated a flurry of activity.

Prior to recent groundbreaking advances in genetic sequencing, an average vaccine took about 10-12 years to be developed. But in 2020, companies with experience in making vaccines at scale allied with biotechnology companies, corporations, governments, international health organizations, and universities. With unprecedented speed and common purpose, they adapted new techniques to develop and manufacture vaccines in less than one year. At some risk, thousands of us volunteered to take the experimental vaccines so that safety and efficacy could be tested and proven.

And personally, we...

embraced the power of science and better appreciated the medical personnel in our communities. We lined up for “jabs in arms,” hoping for a return to normalcy. The rain lessened slightly while the sunshine grew.

FOLLOWING NEW PATHS TO HEALTHCARE

As we were locked down, seeking more light through that cloud, telehealth expanded across the country and was no longer limited to specialty care. Insurance companies began covering all telehealth visits at the same cost as face-to-face visits. Requirements for some prior medical authorizations and referrals were eliminated. Nationally, between 50 and 175 times more of us consulted medical personnel via telehealth.

Our North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services created a dedicated telehealth section on its website, a benefit to all and a vital tool in more rural areas; twenty counties have relatively few primary care physicians (3 counties have none). Our locations (40% rural) didn't matter as we sought any form of healthcare. Nevertheless, North Carolina ranked as 2020's 4th worst state for healthcare. Will our ranking climb with increased use of the telehealth expansion?

And as a state, we... saw that Telehealth wasn't the only innovative healthcare delivery system pioneering new routes. In May, the North Carolina non-profit, Novant Health, launched drone distribution. From its emergency drone fulfillment center in Kannapolis, it became the first organization in the U.S. to be granted a waiver by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to use drones for distribution of critical medical supplies and eventually organs for transplant. At present, operations are confined to the Charlotte

area. But for the future? Just imagine the benefits of using a drone to deliver a 10-pound box rather than a 3,000-pound aircraft with 600 pounds of aviation fuel and two pilots.

STRIDING ALONG THE DETOUR TO OUR WORKLIFE

We redefined who is an essential worker, recognizing with newfound appreciation the dedicated truck drivers, grocery and store clerks, farmworkers, meat packers, and so many more who continued to work from their usual locations, risking their lives to keep the economy from collapsing as they courageously supported us all. The pandemic normalized remote work as approximately 40% of US workers abruptly shifted to working from home. Our costs for gas, car maintenance, transportation, parking fees, a professional wardrobe, restaurant lunches, and more were reduced or eliminated. Without stressful commutes, many gained an hour or more to their day. When normalcy returns, will a hybrid model eventually emerge that will try to balance the efficiencies gained by remote work with the benefits of social interactions and the creativity and innovation generated by working in person with others?

And those of us working from home... suffered no more rushed breakfasts, no cold cars, no lunch packing, less laundry, and happier pets. We wore sweatpants and tees and didn't fret about daily fashion choices. We weren't interrupted by ringing phones and overheard arguments. We had an office with a window that opened. Breaktime meant a walk around the yard instead of the parking lot.

TRYING NEW WAYS TO SHOP

The online shopping industry had been evolving rapidly, thanks to the ongoing digitalization of modern life. The United States led the world in 2020 online purchases. Consumers spent \$861.12 billion online with U.S. merchants in 2020, up an incredible 44% year over year. That's the highest annual ecommerce growth in at least two decades. It's also nearly triple the 15.1% jump in 2019. Seventy-five percent of shoppers now purchase items online at least once a month.

And, almost immediately, we... chose remote access to obtain almost everything: groceries, take-out, clothing, etc. The largest proportion of online shoppers were those aged 55-74 (42%). When North Carolina closed restaurants on March 20, we switched to ordering online for our favorite meals, opting for delivery or curbside service. We had more time for personal activities. We had less exposure to illness.

And North Carolina received a fiscal surprise after bracing for a shortfall. Our sales taxes for all those online purchases soared and kept North Carolina afloat, exceeding forecasts by almost \$4 billion. That's definitely a silver lining.

SIDESTEPPING CHANGES IN OUR HOMELIFE

Mealtimes Became disordered. More than 8 in 10 Americans changed their food habits. Some of us often didn't have enough to eat. In response, a greater number of us volunteered and financially supported food banks, schools, churches, community centers, and neighborhoods as they tried to fill the food gap. Others of us cooked more at home, choosing to eat healthier. But many also surrendered to snack attacks. About one-third of Americans are snacking more. Our doctors have simply accepted weight gain as normal under the circumstances and do not fault us for what they call the

“COVID-19” weight gain. Congratulations if you gained fewer than two pounds a month, the average reported weight increase.

Daily life changed. We adapted by setting new routines even though, for many, 2020 seemed like a long year of house arrest. Our homes were often filled with too many people doing things the spaces were not designed for, such as school, work, and exercise. Family cohesiveness, family interpersonal relationships, family responsibilities challenged everyone, especially parents. Businesses expected employees to put in regular and productive hours. Schools expected parents to supervise and supplement home schooling. Children chafed at their restrictions, sometimes rebelled against their isolation, and generally didn't understand the new reality. As an antidote, many families formed COVID-pods or bubbles. Who could have imagined that we would welcome the concept of living within either?

As we travelled down our road, we continued to modify our behavior, gaining new insights and skills. We learned that homeschooling is HARD and finally recognized teachers for the heroes they are. We discovered that remote learning isn't just for kids. We reconnected with distant friends, relatives, and colleagues as we became familiar with new ways of being together while apart. Grandparents, either down the block or further distant, became starring figures in many families' lives. Zoom calls? Video chats? Meeting virtually for coffee or happy hour? We did them all. Pat yourself on the back for becoming better at personal interaction that doesn't involve being face to face. We even sang while washing our hands, often off-key. Anyone for a chorus of “Take Me Out to The Ballgame”? It surely must be time for a 7th inning stretch!

Activities and routines that commanded crowds, -- visiting museums, attending concerts, working out, traveling, partying -- ceased or found a new life online. With vacation destinations and museums closed, we visited them virtually. We also virtually explored state and national parks, zoos, and even Mars!

We found alternatives to staring at a screen. We reintroduced puzzles and board games, started journals, dusted off and practiced old instruments, and improvised exercise equipment. We had time to read again. And, as if we needed any reminding, the virtual world will never replace a hug from a child or grandchild.

ENJOYING THE OUTSIDE

We were not confined to our homes. Outdoor recreation flourished, a benefit for the North Carolina State Parks System, which admitted a record-breaking attendance of 19.8 million visitors in 2020. The second highest number of visitors on record, over one million, visited The Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Fifty-one million people enjoyed North Carolina's outdoors in 2020, generating an economic impact of \$12 billion.

And locally, we...
bought bikes, helmets, and other accessories. We exchanged greetings with our neighbors as we passed while walking near home. We embraced outside activities and purchased a record number of new NC hunting licenses. The purchase of NC fishing licenses increased by 25%. We took advantage of local areas' expanded greenway systems and used them extensively, experiencing fresh air and exercise. We attended drive-in movies and concerts. We held drive-by children's birthday parties.

MAINTAINING EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Have you heard of the “happiness gap”? Research with national samples has confirmed that, despite the virus, we who are aged 50 and over experienced better emotional well-being and more positive daily events. Age brings a more tranquil, self-confident, and resilient expectation for the future.

That’s especially good news for us seniors. We kept walking, adjusting our routes as we walked, dodging those raindrops. We recognized our risks and rejoiced in our rewards. We altered our responses to the pandemic world and confidently expect to meet the challenges of a post-pandemic world.

ALL IN ALL...we walked between those raindrops, we prevailed, and we were amazing!