

Pandemic Perspective - Human Connections and the Pandemic

It has long been said that people often do not realize or appreciate what they have until it is gone. Although this phrase may sound like an old cliché, it unfortunately has been the reality for most of us during this pandemic. The Covid pandemic seemed to sweep in on us in the early spring of 2020 seemingly out of nowhere; for most people, the response was that it was a minor inconvenience. Indeed, some even welcomed the prospect of an extended March break and time to relax and rejuvenate with family, or maybe get some tasks done around the home. As time passed, however, and we entered into the second and third waves, our positivity began to wane and was replaced with the realization that we were longing for the everyday things we had unknowingly taken for granted. Jobs which we once reluctantly went to or jokingly commiserated about with others are now daily outings and routines that are missed, students yearn to return to their traditional classrooms where they can learn in familiar environment and something as simple as sitting down to eat in a restaurant is now seen as a far off goal. Despite these changes, what has been most profoundly affected by the pandemic are the relationships between and among people. This, however, is not inherently negative. Although the Covid pandemic has indeed created feelings of isolation, distance and a sense of loss, it has also made us recognize and reevaluate our relationships - both the ones we took for granted and the ones we did not even realize we had.

Covid has indeed resulted in a shift in mindset for many. While the pandemic has

created conditions which have kept us from our friends and loved ones, it has also made us keenly aware of how very much these relations mean to us. The public health measures that were first implemented in the spring and which have resurfaced several times since, have separated us physically but also forced us to look for alternative, non-traditional ways to connect with others. Although these were sometimes more difficult to navigate than face-to-face encounters, we adjusted quickly and soon found that warm connections could still be found through a click of a mouse or the view of a monitor. Zoom meetings, emails and texts came to replace our regular interactions and many of us found that we eagerly anticipated each virtual encounter. Our time together became more precious as it was now something that we had to plan for and gave us something to look forward to. Seeing the faces of our friends and families on the screen in front of us made us acutely aware of just how much we missed the everyday interactions we had previously taken for granted. Similarly, in the periods where restrictions have been lifted and we have been allowed to be together we have embraced the chance for such encounters. We braved the elements and formed makeshift gathering places and forms of entertainment; we met and connected in driveways, parking lots or the seats of parked cars. Whether we were separated by a six foot safety zone or a screen, the end result was that we realized our relationships were *worth* the effort. We became profoundly aware of how little the material things in life meant in contrast to the relationships with our friends, families and neighbours. This new mindset allowed us to reframe our perspective and in doing so, re-evaluate our

priorities and in some cases, our lives.

In addition to making us rethink our relationships with those close to us, the pandemic situation has also led to the realization that many of the relationships we engaged in on a daily basis or which were, perhaps, not adequately recognized, are actually central to our everyday experiences and sense of normalcy. Teachers who lamented the large size of classrooms and jokingly referred to how nice it must have been to teach in the “good old days” of straight rows of desks and quiet children now yearn to see a full classroom of faces before them, actively engaged in busy learning with others. Students who protested working in groups or waiting in long, crowded cafeteria lineups now walk through silent, empty hallways and imagine the voices of both their friends and students they didn’t even know echoing off of the bare walls. Parents who begrudgingly did their grocery shopping each week now realize, as they click the “add” button on their Instacarts, how much they missed the seemingly mundane chatter they engaged in with the cashier as they checked out their groceries or the brief conversations when they ran into people in the aisles. In these and a million other ways we have come to realize that often the most miniscule interactions created an environment which was predictable, comfortable and dependable. They were part of human experiences which were often overlooked or under-appreciated. They were the ebb and flow of our day-to-day existence, and when Covid disrupted them it made us recognize that it was not just concerts, sporting events and parties that mattered, but the small ways which we connected to others on a regular basis. We have recognized

their importance and will no doubt not take them for granted again in the future.

Finally, and perhaps most important is the way that the pandemic has made us more aware and appreciative of not only our close relationships but has also opened our eyes to the importance of connections within our community and our collective responsibility to each other. Before this crisis many of us tended to function within our own worlds and in many ways we were oblivious to those around us; however, Covid has made us more aware, more compassionate and more responsive. It has caused us to take notice of those within our community and extend a helping hand. On social media there were numerous offers to pick up items for those who were housebound, people reached out to lend a hand or offer a sympathetic ear to individuals dealing with the negative mental health implications of the pandemic, and many offered assistance in various ways to anyone who was in need. Neighbours checked on neighbours, homes displayed signs praising our frontline workers for their heroism and communities came together to celebrate drive-by graduations, birthdays and anniversaries for people that they had never met. Social media feeds were full of inspiring quotes, uplifting images and memes which made us laugh in the face of our situation. In these and many more ways, the pandemic has reinforced the often forgotten idea of the community and has helped to strengthen bonds between citizens. In doing so, it opened our eyes to the fact that we have a responsibility not only to ourselves and our immediate loved ones, but also to our neighbours, our town and our global community as a whole.

Our collective pandemic experience does not define us, but it has in many ways

shaped us. It has provided us with a new outlook and a frame of reference with which to evaluate ourselves, our priorities and our lives. It has strengthened our desire and appreciation for family and friends, made us recognize the pleasure in the small moments of daily existence and has created a sense of responsibility toward others. As Henry Matisse famously said, "There are always flowers for those who want to see them". Amidst the weeds of the Covid pandemic, we have found the flowering of a new perspective, and for that we can and should be grateful.