

Healing from COVID's Collective Trauma

Category: COVID Redux

written by Mindy Oshrain | January 5, 2024

On the first anniversary of COVID, I watched the trees remember how to hope, pushing out new buds, celadon haze on bare branches against the grey March sky. Daffodil spears of dark green shot up, their eagerness piercing the stiff brown magnolia leaves scattered on the awakening earth. The bluebirds returned, unbidden.

That spring, each cell in my body was etched with the terror of the past year. I recoiled from a proffered hug, usually so welcome from a dear friend. Would we recall how to turn our faces towards each other, as flowers know to follow the sun? Would I slowly recover that which has been lost?

Four years on, the terror has abated. We have drifted into a new normalcy, without a true resolution of our collective trauma. People seem jumpier, more reactive. While there are many reasons for that, I believe the pandemic is one. Tectonic plates abruptly shifted beneath our feet, gaps appearing in the earth. Anyone might fall through and disappear, at any moment. When did we stop washing groceries, not touching those we loved?

Vaccines and Paxlovid helped provide some sense of safety. Masks and PPE became available, protocols protected healthcare workers. Still, some part of the trauma remains. As a psychiatrist, I know that experiences which are overwhelming, which threaten the integrity of the self, lodge in our bodies and stay there. I've worked for decades to identify the sources, work through the hurt places, attempt to heal the damage for those seeking to recover.

What would that process look like for us collectively, or individually? I honestly don't know, though I have been pondering it of late. I still mask in grocery stores, hesitate to eat in restaurants. I've begun to calculate what I might be losing in the fullness of life, given my residual, not completely unreasonable, fears. As an older person, my husband with chronic illness, the calculus is complex.

Perhaps we need to re-open the conversation, discuss our collective loss of normalcy, grieve together for the sense of safety which disappeared, seemingly overnight, four years ago. There is still politicization and misinformation; Florida's surgeon general just recommended against giving mRNA vaccines. Just as I might with a patient who has experienced trauma, identifying the sources, a public discussion naming what happened and validating our emotional responses might go a long way towards our communal and individual healing.

Mindy Oshrain

Durham, North Carolina