

Learning Empathy

Category: COVID-19, Chapter 2

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | May 1, 2020

I met Marv in 1990, when I began teaching at a Michigan public middle school. We shared many of the same eighth-grade students—in my Language Arts classes and his American History ones. We also retired around the same time, in the early 2000s. Marv, however, developed advanced multiple sclerosis, leaving this once active man—who had coached sports and taught driver's education—wheelchair-bound. For the past two years, he has been confined to his apartment. During my frequent phone calls with him, I have told him that I understand how isolated he feels and I have encouraged him to make the most of each day.

But COVID-19 has taught me that I've been a liar.

I understood nothing about Marv's situation. The encouragement I offered was based on no reality. Only now, in my seventh week of social isolation, do I have some sense for what he has endured for the past two years. Every day repeats yesterday—and foreshadows tomorrow. I wake up, experience a minute of thinking that everything is fine, and then remember. I tell myself to find a project to do, but I lack the energy to engage in anything but watching television and napping.

I create mental lists of what I miss: sharing dinner with a friend; going to the theater; taking classes through Osher's adult learning program; visiting the library and discussing books with my favorite librarian; shopping at the grocery store without having to depend on a friend to get my groceries; doing laundry in my building without wearing a mask; looking forward to returning to my university teaching post in the fall. The more items I add to the list, the more despondent I become.

To survive, I try to focus on what I still have. My two adult children—my daughter in Manhattan and my son in British Columbia—call me multiple times every day. Zoom lets me see them and friends—although our conversations are superficial, since no one is doing anything special. So far, I feel healthy, as do my children, brother, niece, and their families.

As a Broadway aficionada, I also rely on stage songs to sustain me. *The Secret Garden* reminds me that “it's the storm, not you / that's bound to blow away,” and *Annie* convinces me that “the sun will come out tomorrow.”

Marv, COVID-19 has given me empathy—for you and all socially-restricted people. I hope we come out of this pandemic as stronger, more compassionate people.

Ronna Edelstein
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania