

Apocalyptic Ping-Pong

Category: Silver Linings

written by Claire Unis | August 29, 2021

So tired of wildfire smoke and pandemic and stress.

So grateful for clearer skies this weekend, my son's team winning their soccer tournament, the brief moment of clean-enough air yesterday evening that allowed me to ride my horse and feel a moment of balance before diving into a new week.

So tired of masks and wariness and worry.

So grateful for my children's gladness at going back to school.

So tired of absorbing anger about masking from parents at work.

So grateful my family has stayed well so far.

Ping-pong, back-and-forth. It's amazing how angst cannot exist without gratitude. I felt such joy when my son's team won their tournament—and then surprise at my excitement. While there are a multitude of small things to celebrate even when things are bleak, it's been a while since I felt truly joyful. Lately, I've even had trouble tapping into gratitude.

We-who-care-about-others carry a heavy weight. We take responsibility not only for ourselves, but also for those around us without selfless impulses. The core value that many of us grew up with—that we must take care of one another—has been summarily discarded by many people in favor of “facial freedom” and “don't tread on me.” But when those ideas fail, and their proponents become our COVID patients, no one feels *glad*.

Last Friday, I did something I haven't done in a long time: I went to Starbucks before work. I was determined to have a good day, even if it meant a bit of guilt about consuming my daily sugar allotment for breakfast, but when I got there I realized what I'd really come for was something I hadn't planned on. In fact, I am not even sure what I bought—it was for the stranger in the car behind me. She got free Starbucks goodies, and I got a little feel-good boost.

Sometimes, I wonder how taking care of patients has become so *fraught*. I do this because I want to give: knowledge, consideration, hope, love. But lately, anxiety—about masks, vaccines, health risks, 18 months of uncertainty—sits in the exam room with me. No matter what I offer, anxiety lingers like wildfire smoke.

But I know I made at least one person happy on Friday. It was a small gesture, but a potent reminder that there are many ways to give—and that giving, all by itself, makes the giver feel better.

It wasn't an easy day, as it turned out. But I felt just a bit better about

myself, which made it easier to notice that some things aren't so bad. Suddenly, I was playing ping-pong again: angst and gratitude, doing their best to balance one another out.

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