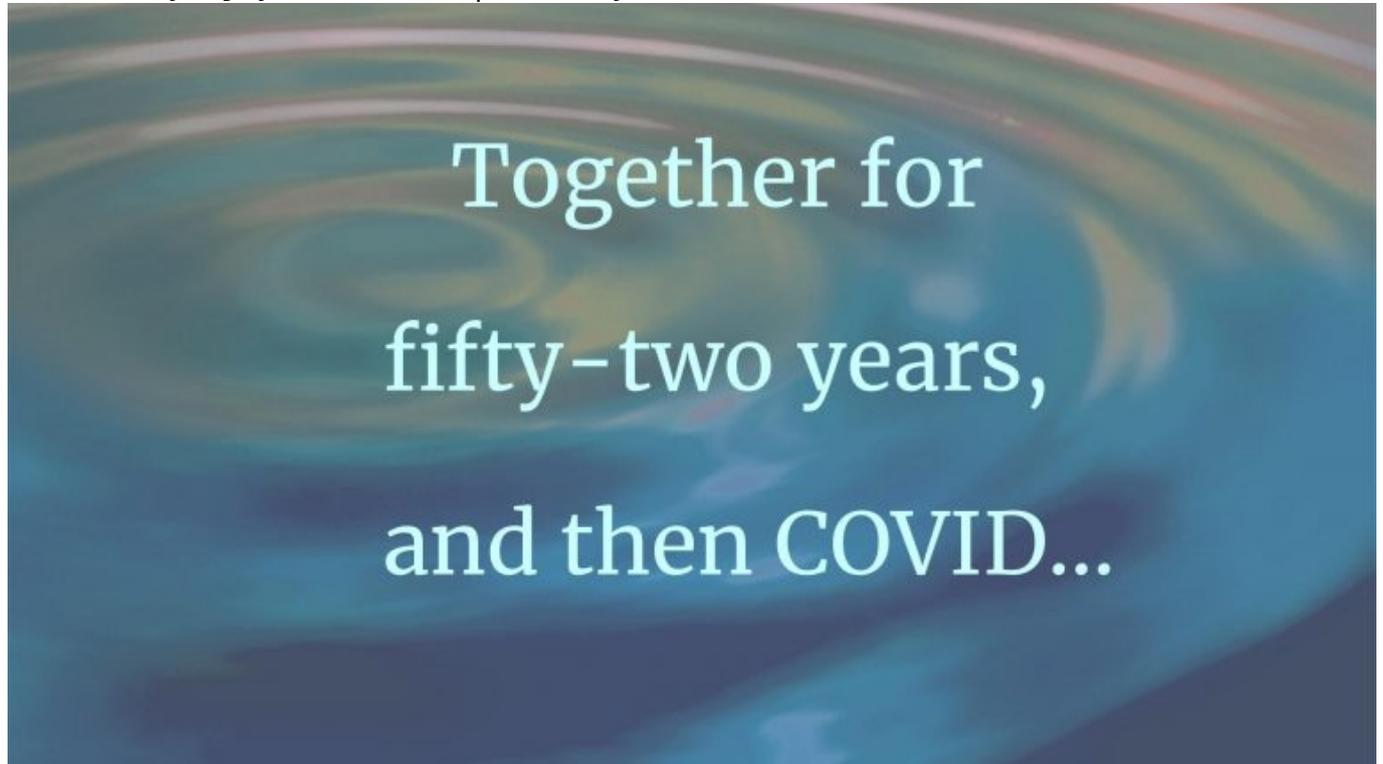


Perspectives on COVID-19: Bonds of Marriage, Part 1

Category: Stories

written by Ajay Khilanani | January 19, 2021



Editor's note: This two-part series presents the stories of Wim and Jo, a husband and wife whose lives were profoundly impacted by coronavirus (COVID-19).

Wim's Story

My name is Willem, and I go by Wim. I'm seventy-five years old. I moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, as a young man with plans to go into seminary. That's where I met Jo, my wife. We didn't go together too long before getting married. She supported me while I redirected my studies towards a master's in education. Since then, I've taught grade school, worked in school politics and had jobs in sales before retiring a year ago.



Wim sharing his story over Zoom videoconference

Family defines everything to me. I'm proud to say that my wife and I have been married fifty-two years. Like everybody, we've had our ups and downs. But we've gotten through them, and that's all that matters. I can go off the deep end, and my wife keeps me honest and steady. She's not afraid to confront me. She's the one who sent me to the hospital when I became ill with COVID-19.



Jo and Wim during their early years of marriage

Before getting sick, I would've described COVID-19 as a new flu. As new hospitals were built in China, and as cases flared in Detroit and New York City, I started to think, *I have to be more careful. I need to keep my distance and not walk in groups.* I was most worried about Jo, because of her health issues. To keep safe, we stayed away from people and only left the house for grocery shopping. The only thing I did wrong was grab the refrigerator handle in the store—for milk or whatever. I didn't use hand sanitizer, and we know this virus lives on surfaces. That's my theory on how I caught the virus.

Generally, I tend to ignore illness. But in early April, about a week before being diagnosed, I knew something wasn't right. I can't explain it more than that. I'm prone to coughing, but this felt different. I blew up the air mattress, moved into our loft and stayed away from my wife to protect her. Obviously, that didn't work because she ended up with coronavirus as well.

Over the next week, I had rising fevers despite taking Tylenol, and Jo said I didn't look like myself. The alarms went off in her head, and she called the COVID-19 hotline. She says that I resisted, and I believe her, but I just don't remember that. Within minutes, the ambulance arrived. That's how my twenty-six days away from home and family began.

In the ambulance, I was organized and in control. I conversed with the paramedic and shared the medication list I keep on my phone. I remember being transported on the stretcher through the hospital doors and down a hallway. After that, all my experiences become fuzzy.

I only have a few recollections from my early hospitalization. They had me on oxygen. They placed ice packs under my neck and armpits to control my fevers. I remember wetting and dirtying myself, and that was horrific to me; I apologized repeatedly. The nurses, however, remained patient. They reassured me with kind words and cleaned me with such love and care. On the fifth day of hospitalization, I collapsed onto the bathroom floor. I was rushed to the intensive-care unit (ICU), where they placed a breathing tube. But none of these are my memories. They're just fragments of my story, pieced together after the fact.

My memory starts to return just before they removed the breathing tube. Around that time, I was hallucinating, fighting being held down, biting on the tube in my mouth and chewing my lips raw. I heard people saying, "You're okay, you're in the hospital," but I didn't believe them. Some spoke with foreign accents, and I assumed that I was on the other side of the world. The loud noises that barraged my ears and the changing geometric figures that invaded my sight only made me fight harder. I have no idea how long this lasted; I just remember feeling like I could never relax.

I felt utterly alone. Did I think of Jo, my kids or my grandchildren? No. It was just my forsaken self. There were no gods, no devils, no angels, no demons. The extreme isolation was, by far, the worst part of this illness. Total despair. Hell on earth. I suspect I'll describe it this way until the day I die.

Hope arrived when the breathing tube was removed, eight days after being placed, and I was more conscious. Even then, my thoughts remained a disorganized mess. I'd refer to myself as "we" instead of "me." I combined notions of my brother's identity and my own into a mixed perception of myself. I'd yell at myself: "Who is this person?!" The confusion resolved the first time I saw my face in the mirror again. That's when I finally relaxed and thought, *Oh, this is me.*

Over the next few days and nights, I yelled at the flashing images that flew across my room. "Don't you dare come near me!" "Go back to the computer screen where you came from!" The hallucinations were disturbing. They were not my usual train of thought. They included familiar and unfamiliar people and faces, grotesque dancing figures and even bestiality. Mostly, they were things I couldn't relate to and didn't want to think about. Sometimes, I'd swat them away with my hospital menu. Other times, I'd reassure them and proclaim, "It's not your fault. I understand, this is me hallucinating." The doctors told me I was delirious, and that the terrors would go away once the sedating medications left my system.

When I was wheeled out of the ICU and transferred to the regular ward, I was surrounded by forty to fifty staff members, applauding, wishing me well. It was the most emotional experience of my life. It was a moment of absolute joy, and I cried the whole time. It was like one of those graduation moments you see on TV. It's good that people care for others. I'm here because people cared.

Despite my having been hospitalized for more than two weeks, the medical team sent me to a rehab facility before letting me go home. My first day in rehab, I walked only 329 steps and was completely out of breath. It took me an hour and a half to shave and shower. Surprisingly, none of the other patients came out of their rooms, except for one gentleman. By this time I craved company, and we formed a strong connection. We shared our life stories and our experiences with COVID. These conversations became a daily ritual for us, and part of our rehabilitation. By the tenth and final day, I was able to walk 2800 steps without a break, and shave and shower in fifteen minutes. Before leaving, I shook my new friend's hand, even though you're not supposed to, and thanked him for helping me. I'm going to miss him.

I think Jo was lonely and scared, not knowing if she'd see me again. Obviously, she caught COVID-19 from me. But I never experienced any of her illness, because I was out of it, on a breathing machine. I know it's irrational, but I still feel guilty that I didn't care about her being sick. I just didn't know.

When I left rehab, the crisp air and cold rain hitting my face were refreshing. It was exhilarating to be free again. My brother-in-law drove me home. When we arrived, I saw Jo standing at the door, waiting for me. I hugged her, told her I missed her and said, "I love you." I couldn't get anything else out. I think we were both too emotional for words. The last time she'd seen me in person was twenty-six days earlier, when I'd been taken away in the ambulance. This was the longest we'd been apart in fifty-two years.

I'll never forget this experience, but I won't think about it too often, either. I see every moment as precious, and I'm not going to waste them. As a younger person, I was more of a loner. As I've gotten older, I've become more social and connected, and even more so after COVID. If I were to describe COVID-19 now, I'd say it's a killer that hasn't been controlled. I get angry when people are nonchalant about this virus. Don't they know they could get others sick? My wife had polio when she was nine years old. The polio vaccine never made it to her, because there wasn't enough to go around. That disease completely changed her life. We need to work on COVID-19 together, so that it no longer has this power over us.

For me, COVID has completely changed my life. I'm one of the survivors. It is what it is, and it was an experience. After you get it, and if you survive, there's still life after COVID.