

Unmute

Category: Stories

written by Amy Cowan | April 15, 2020



A daughter reckons with COVID~ and her dad...

His name announces itself as a banner across my ringing phone. We share the same last name.

I hit Mute, buying time while I do the math: Answer his call now and stave off three missed calls and two long-winded voicemails, with him clearing his throat in the background; or take the call, along with God knows what kinds of trauma he'll inflict on me. I have avoided calling him lately.

Subconsciously, I know this call won't end well.

I hit Unmute and immediately realize that my math was wrong: I'm too late.

He's already three sentences into his monologue, not pausing for breath as he mansplains the state of the world—telling me, his physician daughter, about COVID-19 and how we should wear masks “like the Orientals do.”

My strategy is to talk over him, louder and with authority. I say things like, “Guidelines recommended by the CDC...and the importance of physical distancing.”

Our shared history is my guide: I know he isn't interested or listening. He's thinking about what he's going to say next.

He tells a generously detailed story about this great little fish market at Miles Crossing.

“They have these fish sandwiches, and you would't believe the portions! I took Max there after we went to Safeway. You remember Max, right?” I mumble recognition of his friend, whom I've never met, as he goes onto describe the fry sauce in creamy detail.

When we last talked, three weeks ago, he told me that COVID-19 was all a *hoax*. The cure was on its way—“They probably already have a cure and are just holding out”—and it was a rip-off that the NBA wasn't playing any ball. He

wondered out loud, "Do you think the US Postal Service would possibly stop delivering?"

Tonight he tells me, "It will probably be over in a month or two, *at the max.*"

Am I supposed to be grateful that some sense of reality is penetrating his insular world? There's no time for gratitude, because, like a naughty child, he's run streaking through the house, dirty hand prints smudging beige walls. I've chased him into an altogether different room, and he's talking about international travel.

He's certain that, in the future, "There better be some really good laws on the books to keep the Orientals out. You know, that's where all this came from!"

I've heard enough, yet I don't say anything.

I'm part of the problem.

"If people die in China, it's not a big deal. There's so many of them. They could lose a million people over there, and no one would even miss them." I imagine him smiling on the other end of the phone, confident in his cruel analysis.

I feel nauseous and trapped.

We share the same name. That name is inscribed on the plaques, awards and diplomas that line my walls. That name is embroidered onto a long white coat that hangs in my office. My identity is all tied up in that name—from what I do to who I am and who I'm becoming. Perhaps it is in that good name that I interrupt him.

"Don't talk like that in my home," I say firmly into the phone. Hanging up on him ends our call immediately.

I catch my breath.

His disregard for my beliefs and values may not be intentional, but it's disrespectful. My anger quickly meets rational thought, and I remember, *This is how he is, COVID-19 or not.*

This virus has violently crashed into all of our lives. Mine has become isolated and lonely. When I'm not doing inpatient medicine in our hospital, my days are spent home alone in my apartment. I'm socially distancing while slowly going crazy, having run out of things to clean, sort and organize. During the week, my boredom is punctuated by conference calls. These are supposed to help prepare the hospital staff for what lies ahead in the coming weeks. Instead of feeling more prepared, I'm left feeling a muted anxiety. I'm holding our place, saving a seat, waiting for the end of the world that still hasn't arrived—and I hate it.

In the last three weeks, there has been nothing about this virus that I can control. My flimsy sense of safety has abandoned me, leaving a void where a rich social life, community and even joyful play used to live.

How I fill that void is up to me, I tell myself.

I choose something different from the paralyzed rage I usually feel in these situations: I try wishing my father well.

He is seventy-seven years old, living his life as he always has, independent and self-assured. If he dies from COVID-19, may his death be swift, in sharp contrast to the decades-long suffering of chronic morbidity that afflicts so

many older patients. May he remain in his own home with dignity. He has always avoided deep emotional connections with other people; if COVID-19 takes his life, I hope that he'll be surrounded by all of the things he spent decades collecting and protecting, instead of relationships. While we will never see eye to eye on just about anything, for better or worse, I have a soft spot for the old man. Despite our differences, and a rocky history filled with mutual frustration and pain, I still can't cancel him out of my life.

We share the same name, after all.

About the author:

Amy Cowan is a hospitalist at the George E. Wahlen Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Salt Lake City, UT. She is an assistant professor in internal medicine at the University of Utah. She grew up in rural Oregon, where her father still lives. "My father was a single parent raising three children under the age of six, in the Eighties. He raised me to be resilient, and the rest I learned from the world. I have been writing since I was sixteen. It's how I comfort myself, make sense of the world and try to stay the most reasonable woman at the table. Which I frequently fail at being."