

FREEDOM, LOSS AND HOPE

What do I miss or lament? What am I learning? What is it that gives me hope, strength, or comfort?

Well, the first thing that struck me when the lock-down happened is that I had lost my freedom. I was diagnosed with kidney failure more than 34 years ago but have been fortunate to have the treatment of two kidney transplants (thank-you to each of my sisters). It does mean, though, that my immune system must be always suppressed to protect the security of my kidney. I've lived with this for years, though, and don't worry about it too much. I learned a long time ago to wash my hands frequently and accept that I likely will get 3-4 colds/flu per year and that it will take me a bit longer to get over it. I typically roll my eyes inwardly at what I see as overcautiousness, even an overreaction, by health professionals about my health status ("I'm just fine", I grumble to myself) and I usually have felt a confidence about my ability to handle my health status. For the first time, though, my transplant meant that I had restrictions. See... before this, having a transplant meant no dialysis, an abundance of energy, and the freedom (that word again!) to eat what I liked, go where I wanted to, and do what I wished. I never fully understood how much my transplant represented freedom to me until this experience. I now have to isolate and work from home and limit my social activities because to get COVID-19 would be very serious indeed. I believe that likely I wouldn't die if I caught COVID (although my risk is higher) but that I could lose my kidney or experience significant complications.

And so, because I don't want that to happen, I made the decision on March 17th, 2020, to work from home and I have not gone back to the office. I'm a counsellor and I am able to connect with my clients either by telephone or through an on-line video format. It's tiring and it is not as satisfying for anyone but it is possible to still provide the support and to witness change and growth. And, over time, like most things, I have adjusted to it and learned (most days) to flex with the technology glitches. I know that I'm very fortunate to continue to do what I love and to still have an income through all of this.

The other significant loss in this is the social connection with friends and family. I do get to see my Mom who lives here, of course, but just as things were shutting down, my sister and niece had to cancel a planned trip to Victoria. It was the right decision but again, just like with my work, telephone and zoom calls just are not the same thing. And I miss wandering around shopping, going to concerts and festivals, eating out, etc.

There have been benefits of the isolation, believe it or not. My husband, Warren, and I have been able to spend more time with one another and strengthen our relationship. My dog, Tammy, is loving the additional walks and I'm appreciating the opportunity to exercise more. And we have worked hard and completed many projects around our home and yard. We even planted a vegetable garden and for first time ever, I enjoyed eating carrots from my own garden.

What I have learned is that community expresses itself in times of difficulty. I recall the joy I felt as we walked around the neighbourhood and saw the creativity with the hearts in the window, or heard the clapping for the health care workers at 7:00 p.m. each evening, or experienced the graciousness of others we passed on the street as they stepped aside to provide a safe distance between us. I have felt well-cared for by our health professionals such as Dr. Bonnie Henry, and yes, even our political leaders, as each does his or her best to guide us through this. I have appreciated how much I trust science and

scientists to tell us what is going on, to give us direction on the best way to protect ourselves, and to eventually develop a vaccine. I have learned that I am adaptable and, with time, am able to adjust to a new normal.

I have also learned that social isolation is hard, tiring, lonely and sad. It is the right thing to do right now but it is not a good normal. We are meant to be in community, to share and laugh with one another and to feel the strength of a hug from one another. In this eighth month into it, the jokes on Facebook about the year 2020 no longer seem as funny but instead bring a sigh – they seem old and tired. We are all COVID-weary and yet, we must persevere.

So, what brings hope? I'm not sure. Certainly, the recent news of possible vaccines felt hopeful. I do have a belief that this will pass, but when I feel swamped by the fatigue of it, it is hard to remember that. I think, honestly, it is the kindness, generosity, encouragement and care that we give one another that offers us hope, lets us know that we are not alone, and connects us with our faith and courage as we journey toward what is to come.

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