



Reflections on the path forward

by Pam Marsh, May 18th 2020

Every afternoon since March 15, I've walked out of my back door and headed up the street, climbed the hill to the edge of the watershed and traced the meandering backroads down and through Lithia Park into the silent downtown, and then back home.

I've tracked the progress of this coronavirus experience through late winter and spring as the flow of the seasons proceeds unimpeded by the threat of viral contagion. I've watched the dogwood and rhododendron bloom, proud and raucous turkeys strut across an empty band shell, and resident mallards dabble for morsels in the upper duck pond.

In nearly every walk I've wondered about life after COVID-19. Because unlike the natural world, our human-made ecosystem has been turned upside down.

This has been a harrowing and disorienting time for all of us and catastrophic for some. Small businesses, the beating heart of our local economy, have fallen silent. Our beloved Oregon Shakespeare Festival has canceled its schedule for the rest of the year. Many of us have lost jobs and are struggling to pay rent. Health care workers have faced family and work disruptions along with very real risks of exposure.

At the same time, even in the midst of COVID-19, we've done our best to take care of each other. The small and large gestures I have witnessed are too many to name, but you know what you have contributed to your neighbors and your community. A pandemic, it turns out, brings out the best in us.

If all goes well, by the time you read this, Jackson County will be taking the first tentative steps toward reopening. But it won't be the "normal" we remember from a few months ago. The stark reality is that coronavirus pulled the rug out from under our economic feet, and ongoing precautionary measures will govern the way we do business for some time to come. This summer will see no festivals, no parades, no concerts, no plays.

New perceptions and new habits will result from the personal and political insights born of a pandemic. We've shopped for our neighbors, and now we know who is isolated or alone. We've cared for the homeless, and we're no longer willing to accept a safety net system that has been revealed as stunningly fragile. We've seen the data, and we can't look away from the truth: the poor and people of color have disproportionately shouldered the health and economic impacts of this disease.

Then there are midnight anxieties, existential fears that bubble up when assumptions that frame our lives are suddenly thrown into question.

The question I ask myself is: How do we move forward?

A community that has sustained trauma can become weakened and even fracture. But I don't think that's who we are, and I don't accept collapse as an acceptable option.

We can choose a path of reflection and resilience, understanding that reinvention can be good for our souls as well as our financial bottom lines. Undoubtedly, we will need to throw out some of the expectations we took for granted before the pandemic took over. But here in Southern Oregon we have already learned a lot about grit and fortitude from our experience with seasons of smoke and wildfire. We are not ready to throw in the towel.

Walking through downtown last week I was struck by the simplicity and grace of a sign posted in the front window of Travel Essentials: "Stronger Together."

The next stage of our recovery can result in a renewed community. But none of us can do that alone. The key to our resilience will be recognizing, nurturing and rebuilding on our interconnections.

As we tell our own stories, we will begin to understand what we've learned and what we don't want to forget. As we listen to each other, we will share lessons and new aspirations. And as our individual voices blend, we will recognize the depth of compassion and support and kindness that has carried us through a seemingly endless timeout and that will strengthen us as we step into an uncharted future.

One thing is certain: we're all in this together.

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