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Title: When Fear took Form

“Life is like a box of chocolates you never know what you are going to get” (Forrest Gump).

This quote is a vivid reminder that we can't control every situation in life, but we take what is given to us each day and appreciate those moments because we never know what will happen the next day, Covid 19 pandemic taught us that lesson.

For me personally, this life changing experience started on a usual workday. That morning, I got into my regularly scheduled routine. It was me versus the clock, so I had to move on point. When public transportation is your only option, and you must deal with the delays and switch problems, every second counts. I woke up at 4:45 a.m., had my devotion/meditation, shower, dressed, and packed my lunch. I made a cup of my favorite coffee and began to drink it without even stopping long enough to take a deep breath of the dark roasted aroma. I dashed out the door, headed to get the bus which was the first leg of my journey into the city. I joined the throng of souls hopping from one mode of transportation to the other heading to the daily grind.

Breathing is so essential to life, but the blend of unpleasant odors that were emanating from the homeless, cannabis smoke, perspiration, urination and toxic fumes made breathing rather difficult. On multiple occasions I had to take evasive action by holding my breath. I didn't mind starving my system of a few moments of oxygen for the sake of not projectile vomiting.

As the train snaked its way through the tunnels my senses were heightened, as I become aware of the ecosystem of which I am a part. I would immerse myself in Candy Crush or whatever reading materials that were available. I would be locked into a positive mental sphere so as not to focus too much on the negatives that could potentially happen. In that self-imposed isolation one could be considered as “in this world but not a part of it.” I learned not to make too much eye contact, touch or push anyone, or to engage in random conversation with strangers. For my personal safety and well-being, I would make myself small and insignificant. On the long ride into the city, patience was tested, human interaction was challenging. A cordial greeting was not the norm. A friendly smiles, eye contacts, casual conversations, just a few of some of the things that defines us humans as social beings were scarce commodities. The adaptation techniques required to survive in our environment were deeply embedded into the psyche of so many. We were so focused on competing for the necessities of life such as: space, health care, food, shelter and clothing, that there was not much time to process and reflect on the bountiful simplistic things that life offers. It didn't occur to me in those moments how much we were missing out. We were taking so much for granted, but we would soon come to realize how important social interaction and connectiveness are to us humans.

On that morning, before I settled into my daily routine at work, as usual I would scan the app on my device to see what was the latest in the news. As I scrolled through the pages, a news headline caught my attention, the topic was about a “novel virus.” As someone who is interested in science and public health, this headline piqued my curiosity, I suddenly wanted to know more about the virus. The report was accompanied by a video, which showed a panel of Chinese health experts, doctors, and what I presumed were policy makers. They were discussing a public health crisis, which I later discovered was an outbreak of a viral infection that was affecting the citizens in

Wuhan. The members of the panel were describing the type of virus and the symptoms of the infection.

As I listened more intently, I remembered hearing terms like “super bug, variant, highly contagious, airborne strain, no vaccine.” That was troubling enough but when I heard one of the panelists say, “It has the potential to be a pandemic,” a different wave of emotion came over me. I know the difference between endemic, epidemic and pandemic, so upon hearing “pandemic” immediately a bell went off in my head, and I knew that it was bad news for the world.

During breakfast with the other staff members the discussion about the viral outbreak came up, so I asked them what they thought it would look like if such a highly contagious virus should reach an overcrowded city such as New York. As they reflected on the question and thought about the potential devastating outcome, they all arrived at the same conclusion, that it would be devastating. I told them that it is a distinct possibility that it could happen; all it takes is one traveler from an infected country traveling to another for a spread to begin. I was not sure how that statement resonated, but we went about our task. For the rest of the week the entire thing was riveting on my mind. On the Sunday of that weekend, I went to church and shared the information with my fellow congregants. I even went as far as to request prayer for what I hoped would never come to pass, a pandemic. There were some skepticisms, was I a prophet of doom? Or was I just declaring the truth based on the information regarding the subject matter the scientists were discussing? We would soon find out.

As the week progressed worldwide focus began shifting to the Corona Virus: Covid 19. It began to dominate the news cycle both nationally and internationally. All types of information,

misinformation, speculations, accusations, conspiracy theories, panics, hateful rhetoric were permeating the atmosphere. Numerous cases were showing up around the globe every day. When the first case was finally discovered in the city, like everyone else, I became increasingly concerned, because I knew that's all it takes to start a pandemic. Fear and uncertainty were accompanied by efforts on the part epidemiologists and public health agencies to find measures to interrupt the chain of infection and to bring the disease under control. They sprang into action doing contact tracing, documenting cases and quarantining those infected. The CDC began to put out public announcements and all kinds of mandates, public safety protocol, and vaccine policy. Policies were issued on preventative guidelines such as hand washing, social distancing and masking. In New York City, which eventually came to be known as the "epicenter", the situation was changing rapidly, and cases were spiraling out of control.

All over the world Covid19 loomed large like the shadowy creature in the T.V series "Stranger Things." Many hospitals became overwhelmed with the sick and dying, entire communities were affected. Family members, friends, and coworkers were getting infected by the virus and had to be quarantined. Many of the most vulnerable were dying by the numbers, these included the elderly and those with preexisting conditions. It was such a sad and heartbreaking time for me to have witnessed so many people, including personal acquaintances, being isolated and ending up dying alone. The healthcare workers were at the breaking point so many became stressed out and mentally traumatized as the situation got worse.

There was a scramble to put contingency measures in place and to find a vaccine as fast as possible to counter the airborne virus which had impacted every aspect of society. The Deserted streets, shuttered businesses, closed schools, places of worship and offices were the order of the day. Because the method of transmitting the disease was airborne from person to person, we

couldn't be in crowded spaces. Mandatory shelter in place order was imposed and communication via zoom and remote became the new norm. Employees were asked to stay home and for those who could, work remotely. Employed as an essential worker, so I was required to show up in person for work. That was the most dreadful time of my life. I was sitting at home watching the confusion and devastation, turmoil, sadness, and grief all over the world and wondering what to do in such a situation. Suddenly I began to experience a strange feeling in my body, starting in my head then my throat. I think it was in that moment fear physically entered my space. The following day I started feeling worse, so I rushed to the nearby health facility. There, the sitting room was filled with everyone sitting 6ft apart and wearing masks. The health care workers were moving at a fast pace because patients were coming in for the same complaint. There was no vaccine, so we were all told to go home and take Tylenol. I went home and made every herbal tea that I could find. My wife was now affected by the virus, and running a fever of over 110 degrees. She was then contorting over the sofa and fear really came a little closer. I am from the tropics, and I could not remember experiencing sweating in my head so much; it was the worst feeling. My sense of taste and smell were affected, the coughing was nonstop breathing was difficult, on one occasion I was blanked out on the bathroom floor. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. If it was not for our faith, I don't know how we would have gotten through those days.

When I was told to report to work, I was petrified, my wife also became worried, she said "I can literally see fear on you." Yes, fear was now sitting on my shoulders; I could feel it. When I went outside it was as if the bustling noisy city, I knew was transformed into a set on a sci-fi horror movie. The sun was shining but it was grey overcast. It was the first in a long time I saw the train station so empty, and it was not a holiday. For once I wasn't glad to see an empty train car, and I was in no hurry to board. When I got on there was not the usual sea of bodies justling for the few

available seats, there was plenty of sitting and standing room to spare. The joy of human interaction was altered, but this time it was not self-imposed, it was forced upon us by something we could not control.

PPE for COVID such as masks, gloves, gowns, face protection and hand sanitizers, became part of our daily lives. Fear was everywhere, as the city fell silent; it was apocalyptic in nature. It reminded me of those ghost towns in the old western movies; the only thing missing was the tumbleweeds. Since migrating to N.Y.C I have never seen it like that. Most of the people moving about were essential workers. Working during those days and weeks was very challenging, the worst time of my life. It took both mental and physical toll on me. I was a nervous wreck. When I went to work, it was like a scene out of the movie “The Rain.” Everyone was under lock down only the coughing could be heard coming from the rooms which were tagged red for those in quarantine. When they emerged, if they did, they would scurry back in as if contact with the outside world was a death sentence. In those days and months fear took on a persona of its own. It became real to me; I was living with it daily as I rode those empty train cars to and from work. I could feel it shadowing me across the lonely city; I could see it in the faces, hear it in the voices, especially those of the sick, lonely, and isolated. This was a crippling feeling I never wish to experience again. The entire event was such a vivid memory – it was just like yesterday. It was a life altering occurrence that changed the way we live and interact with each other. “Hope is being able to see that there is a light despite all of the darkness” (Desmond Tutu). The pandemic of 2020 triggered greater awareness of the societal health, economic and environmental problems. It brought about a dramatic shift in public policies and how we should be prepared to meet future events.

A.C Grayling wrote “A human lifespan is less than a thousand months long you need to make some time to think how you live it.” When I reflected on the COVID 19 pandemic and its devastating impact on the human population around the world, the above quotation puts everything in perspective. It makes me think about my priorities- what do I value most in life and what things do I take for granted. What does family, health, work, money, the ability to breathe freely, socialize, move about and worship mean to me? I appreciate the gift of life even more, and every day I try to live it with a deep sense of gratitude because throughout that entire ordeal and the after-effects of Covid 19, I realize life is transient, and we should truly reflect on how we live it each moment.