

During Covid, We Need to Grieve, Find Perspective, and Seek Safe Connection and Fulfillment

I wrote this letter to the editor of my local newspaper after my community experienced a Covid outbreak from a teen party, resulting in a school closure and much acrimony.

Lara Freidenfelds

To the Editor:

This has been a difficult year. Even those of us who have not lost family and friends to Covid are grieving: this year we have lost beloved traditions, from prom to in-person religious services to the opening of the fall sports season. Our expectations for what is normal and right in our lives have been upended.

Grieving involves sadness, but also anger and denial. It is tempting to ignore Covid so long as it hadn't affected us personally. But right now, denial is dangerous for our community. We need to find ways to acknowledge our losses and grieve without putting our community at risk with unprotected social gatherings that will make us feel "normal" only until community members become gravely ill or die from Covid.

I really feel for the young people who are facing the shock and disappointment of high school and college experiences that are a pale imitation of what we have promised them. My life was upended when I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 25, and I vividly recall the shock at having my expectations for my life shaken so dramatically and abruptly. I was newly engaged and in my first year of grad school. I had done everything "right" to have a happy life, and then this terrible disease dropped from the blue. My fiancé (now husband) and I cried and prayed a great deal.

Here is what saved me.

First, I allowed myself to grieve. The loss was real and pretending otherwise would not have been fair to myself.

Second, I reached outside myself for some perspective. For me, this meant reminding myself that my grandparents were war refugees. They had survived and built a new life. Compared with their suffering, even with this illness my life was manageable.

Third, I decided to focus on what I *could* do and *did* have rather than what I could not. I stopped comparing my life to my old expectations and focused on what was in front of me. I used to say that my dream was to become President of Harvard. Now I focused on each day: was I doing something that I found fulfilling and that I believed would make the world a better place? Did I build relationships with family and friends? It didn't matter how much I

was able to accomplish on a given day, so long as I spent some time on positive projects and relationships.

I hope we will all support our fellow Chatham community members to find safe ways to grieve what we have lost in this difficult year and to find some good in each day. This will unfortunately not be a good year for big parties (which I love, and I am sad with you). But can it be a good year for fortifying deep relationships with a few close friends? We can be creative about supporting the fulfilling things we can still do this year, for example, investing in fire pits and outdoor heat lamps for small outdoor gatherings into the fall and winter. This is also a good year to get a great winter coat, hat, and scarf and find some trails to hike with friends when the weather gets too chilly to sit outside. I hope that together we can seek the things we *can* do safely to build community and support each other through this strange and challenging time.

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