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What Can the Pandemic Teach Us About Life?

By [Adrienne Wigdortz Anderson](#) November 10, 2020

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[Adrienne
Wigdortz
Anderson](#)

In 2020, reciting the words “*On Rosh Hashana, the year’s decree is written, on Yom Kippur, it is sealed, who will live and who will die*” might have resonated more than ever in the midst of a pandemic.

With over [238,000](#) American lives claimed, and over 10 million people diagnosed, we are collectively facing mortality.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us were tangled in the busyness of our day, rarely stopping to smell the proverbial roses. Now we can hit the pause button and take stock.

“Death is no longer abstract,” Dr. Ira Byock, a world-renowned palliative care expert and founder and chief medical officer at Providence’s Institute for Human Caring in Gardena, told the *Journal*. “Throughout history, Jews have dealt with natural disasters and imposed disasters of war and persecution. This pandemic is a natural disaster of biblical proportions. It is a not-so-subtle reminder, we’re in this together.”

Byock raises a core question: What can mortality teach us about life?

“Mortality shows us what matters most. Are there things left undone that should be completed?” Byock said, adding that even with the challenges of a pandemic, we should live life to the fullest. “Use the pandemic as an opportunity to celebrate life and our relationships to one another. That’s the healthiest response to mortality that I know.”

So, start your Great American Novel, plant a vegetable garden, try a Yoga class, and spend quality time with your children.

Unfortunately, not everyone — like frontline and essential workers — has an hour to spare to follow their bliss. Still, Byock said, everyone should find some time for themselves to nurture moments of joy.

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That includes, for example, reaching out to friends and family. In fact, Byock prefers using the term “Physical Distancing” for staying six feet apart because *social* closeness is vital for a sense of well-being. “My wife and I have joined virtual Happy Hours and book clubs. We’re more socially connected now than ever before,” he said.

There are plenty of stories about the creative ways people are reaching out: neighbors are meeting on front lawns to listen to music together, and synagogues are conducting services online. One family, as reported in the *Journal*, even celebrated their son’s “Car Mitzvah,” transforming a parking lot to an outdoor sanctuary, with guests tuning in to the ceremony on their car radios.

Interviewing family members and telling stories are additional ways to connect, said Byock. He invited the public to post their stories and artwork on the Providence Institute’s *Coronavirus Chronicles* website (www.instituteforhumancaring.org/Hear-Me-Now/Coronavirus-Chronicles).

“There are going to be days when the sadness of the world creeps into our lives,” he noted. “That’s okay too. There are real reasons to be unhappy. Acknowledge the grief and breathe through it. Most importantly, be patient with yourself.”

(If depression becomes overwhelming, call a crisis center, such as the national suicide prevention hotline. 800-273-8255.)

In his “This Pandemic Is Personal” essay in *Thrive Global*, Byock quoted playwright Robert Anderson: “Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship.” With that in mind, he and his wife updated their “in case of death” file box to leave for their daughters. Think of an eternity “Go Bag” that includes items such as your will and other important documents, bank account numbers, passwords for financial and social media accounts, and instructions for funeral arrangements.

For many, the pandemic has been a wake-up call to get their personal business in order. Westlake Village attorney Martin Yarnell, for instance, has noticed an uptick in clients seeking help in estate planning.

“It can be an uncomfortable subject. Before the pandemic, people often seemed cavalier about the issue,” he told the *Journal*. “But with the reality of COVID-19, we are all more mindful of our mortality and want to be responsible and care for our families.”

Yarnell explained that failing to plan for death can result in serious issues. Assets may not be distributed the way you wish; a conservatorship may be needed if you become incapacitated; without a trust, loved ones may have to go through a lengthy and costly probate process.

Estate planning documents typically include a living trust, a will, a durable power of attorney for financial affairs, an Advance Healthcare Directive, and HIPAA authorization. (Yarnell recommended not storing the documents in a safe deposit box, as access can be problematic.) “Self-help programs are limited,” Yarnell cautioned. “A qualified estate planning attorney will tailor the plan to fit your unique circumstances and needs.”

Yarnell noted that some people include a statement of values, passing along their wishes and guiding principles to the next generation. This sort of “Ethical Will” has roots in the Jewish tradition but has become widely used by the general public.

The message from Yarnell and Byock is clear: Don’t wait for the last stages of life to communicate your feelings to loved ones.

“Are there important things left unsaid to the people you love? If so, this is a good day to say them,” Byock said. In his *The Four Things That Matter Most* book, Byock prescribes simple phrases to jump-start the conversation: “Please forgive me,” “I forgive you,” “Thank you,” and “I love you.”

“‘Asking and offering forgiveness’ is included because no relationship is perfect. Even the most loving relationships can be marked by misunderstandings,” he explained. “Saying ‘thank you’ and ‘I love you’ might be obvious to those who matter to us, but everyone benefits when love and appreciation is expressed out loud.” This concept is grounded in Jewish tradition. After all, forgiveness is a key part of the Yom Kippur service.

Furthermore, Byock pointed out, “The Abrahamic covenant is not merely between God and people. It’s between each of us as individuals and each of us to the community. In the eyes of God, each person has

inherent worth and value, and we should treat each other with dignity and compassion.”

What are the lessons he hopes stays with us after the pandemic is over?

“We all matter to one another, and life is a gift — don’t take it for granted.”

***Adrienne Wigdortz Anderson** is a freelance writer who lives with her family in the Conejo Valley.*

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