

A Simple Message

I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion.
Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*



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I do not usually have difficulty writing editorials. However, this month was different. I kept coming up with grand ideas that flopped. First, I thought I would write a column entitled, “For What Should We Hope For?” When I started exploring the concept of hope, I quickly learned that there was extensive literature from multiple disciplines and even several centers and research projects dedicated to studying it.¹ It seemed unlikely that I would have anything worthwhile to add to that literature. Then I thought I would discuss new year’s resolutions for federal practitioners. There was not much written about that topic, yet it seemed to be overly self-indulgent and superficial to discuss eating less and exercising more amid a pandemic and a climate change crisis. Finally, I wanted to opine on the futility of telling people to be resilient when we are all exhausted and demoralized, and yet that seemed too ponderous and paradoxical for our beleaguered state. With the third strike, I finally realized I was trying too hard. And perhaps that was exactly what I needed to say, at least to myself, and maybe some readers would benefit from reading that simple message as well.

I was surprised—though I probably should not have been given the explosion of media—to find that Americans were surveyed about what months they hate most. A 2021 poll of more than 15,000 adults found that January was the most disliked month.² It’s not hard to figure out why. Characterized by a postholiday let down, these months in the middle of winter marked by either too much precipitation or if you live in the West not enough; short days and gray nights that are dark and cold. It is a long time to wait before spring with few holidays to break up the quotidian routine of work and school. January is a hard enough month in a good or even ordinary year. And 2022 is shaping up to be neither. We are entering the third year of a prolonged pandemic. Every time we have hope we are coming to the end of this long ordeal or at least things are moving toward normality, a

new variant emerges, and we are back to living in fear and uncertainty.

COVID-19 is only the most relentless and deadly of our current disasters: There are rumors of wars, tornadoes, droughts, floods, shootings in schools and churches, political turmoil, and police violence. American society and the very planet seem to be in a perilous situation more than ever. No wonder then, that in the last month, several people have asked me, “Do you think this is the end of the world?” I suppose they think I am so old that I have become wise. And though I should cite a brilliant philosopher or renowned theologian: I am going to revert to my youth as a rock musician and quote R.E.M.: “It is the end of the world as we know it.” And “most of us do not feel fine!”

The world of 2022 is far more constricted and confined than it was before we heard the word COVID-19. We have less freedom of movement and fewer opportunities for companionship and gathering, for advancement and enjoyment. To thrive, and even to survive, in this cramped existence of limited possibilities, we need different values and attitudes than those that made us happy and successful in the open, hurried world before 2019. No generation since World War II has confronted such shortages of automobiles, paper goods, food, and even medicines as we have.

That is the first of the important simple messages I want to convey. Find something to be grateful for: your loved ones, your companion animals, your friends. Cherish the rainy or sunny day depending on how your climate has changed. Treasure the most basic and enduring pleasures, homemade cookies, favorite music, talking to a good friend even virtually, reading an actual book on a Sunday afternoon. These are things even the pandemic cannot take away from us unless we let our own inability to accept the conditions of our time ruin even what the meager, harsh Master of History has spared us.

The second of these simple messages is even more essential to finding any peace or joy in

our current tense and somber existence: to show compassion for others and kindness to yourself. The most consistent report I have heard from people all over the country is that their fellow citizens are angry and selfish. We all understand, and even in some measure empathize with this the frustration and impatience with all the extraordinary pressure of having to function under these challenging conditions. Though we can take it out on the stranger at the grocery store or the family of the patient who has different views of masks and vaccines; it likely will not make the line shorter, the family any less demanding or seemingly unreasonable and probably will waste the little energy we have left to get home with the groceries or take care of the patient.

You never know what burden the person annoying you is carrying; it may perhaps be heavier than yours. And how we react to each other makes the weight of world weariness we all bear either easier or harder to shoulder. It sounds trite and trivial to say, yet tell people you care, and value, and love them. Although no less than Pope Francis in a Christmas present to marriages under strain from the stress of the pandemic that the 3 key words to remember are *please, sorry, and thank you*.³ I am applying that sage advice liberally to all relationships and interactions in the daily grind of work and home. The cost is little, the reward priceless.

It is good and right to have high hopes. We all need to take care of ourselves, whether we make resolutions to do so or not. Though more than anything else what we need is to be kind to ourselves. It is presumptuous of me to tell you what wellness means for your individual struggle, as it is inhuman of me to deign to tell you to be resilient when many of you face intolerable working conditions.⁴ As Jackson Browne sang in “Rock Me on the Water”, “Everyone must have some thought that’s going to pull them through somehow. Find your own thought, the reason you keep getting up and going to care for patients who increasingly respond with the rage of denial and resentment. Amid what morally distressed public health professionals have called so many unnecessary deaths, choose what gives you reason to keep serving that other side of this life full of heal-

ing.⁵ And if like so many of my fellow health care professionals, you are so spent and bent, that you feel that you can no longer practice without becoming someone you do not want to be, then let go with grace, get the help you deserve and perhaps one day when rested and mended, find another way to give.⁶

I rarely self-disclose but I want to end this column with a personal story that exemplifies more than all these words living this simple message. My spouse is a health care practitioner at a Veterans Affairs medical center. Like all of you on the front lines they work far too long hours in difficult conditions, with challenging patients and not enough staff to care for them. My partner had not an hour to get any gifts for me or our furry children. On Christmas Eve, before a long shift, they went to a packed Walgreens to buy our huskies each a toy and me a pair of fuzzy slippers. We sat by the tree and opened the hastily wrapped packages, and nothing could have been more memorable or meaningful.

All of us at *Federal Practitioner* wish you, our readers, find in 2022 many such moments to sustain you.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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