

Yearbooks: A reflection of our times

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I recently came across my high school yearbook, in which fellow students from the class of 1982 made whimsical predictions of what life would be like in the future. Hopes included being able to save more than 9 speed dials on our home telephones, space tourism, and fear that annual tuition at a private college might one day top \$10,000 (it has actually increased from \$4,100 in 1982 to \$41,000 in 2020.)

The optimism and innocence in these predictions is as jarring as it is charming. I have to imagine that this year's graduation class predictions look quite different. Before the coronavirus pandemic forced businesses and schools to close, high school and college graduates from the Class of 2020 were on track to enter the strongest job market in 50 years. Now this group is graduating into a recession potentially unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes. Add to that the headwinds of social unrest caused by a national history of systemic racism, unconscious bias, and political divisiveness, and there is almost too much to worry about right now. It can be hard to find our footing, but maybe there are some hidden positive lessons for all of us, that can be found within this history-making year.

Economically, we have the infrastructure to survive a prolonged downturn. However, as interest rates rise, future growth may be stifled by the debt for generations to come. Unfortunately, a lot of people are going to be out of work for a long time. This may be the impetus for rebuilding a workforce with a foundation in equitable hiring, job training and safety, healthcare and unemployment benefits, and retirement contributions. Those lucky enough to have retained their jobs or found new work will become more appreciative. We will no longer take for granted a steady job, or a degree of financial security. And fairly priced virtual educations will force more costly private universities to reassess their relative value. Finally, nothing does more to remind us about the importance of saving for a downturn than a recent 40% decline in the stock market.

Social distancing and masks in crowded public spaces will be with us for years, until the threat of SARS-CoV-2 has passed secondary to a vaccine, successful therapies, and/or herd immunity, but future novel pandemics will surely follow. Unrestricted entertainment, sporting, and business gatherings in large indoor arenas or convention centers are likely a year or two away. But general cultural resistance to videoconferencing has evaporated overnight, allowing us to connect with family and friends near and far, and to develop novel ways to celebrate shared milestones meaningfully, if virtually.

International travel will be curtailed and adjusted based on active hotspots. Politically, this could serve to promote nationalism, isolationism, strife, and the rise of authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, the collective discomfort we have experienced could increase not only the salience of the event, but also our understanding of the importance of others. Staying closer to home for a while may promote bonding, solidarity, community, and cooperation, both locally and globally. Regardless, interest in politics is likely to increase along with

voter turnout, as remote voting and stay-at-home telecommuters become more engaged in the electoral process.

It is hard to see how our children, from grade school to University, will not be adversely affected by unpredictable, sporadic school closures. The nature of school sports will be limited. Some young people will experience lasting emotional trauma and unrecoverable academic setbacks. Ad-hoc home schooling and virtual classrooms cannot substitute for the social and emotional learning that takes place in the school environment. Professional education and advanced degrees cannot be taught at the same level of depth and engagement. And yet, the ability to teach remotely will open previously closed doors for students in remote areas, those who lack financial resources, or those who must remain home to care for their families, children, and elder parents.

Social isolation is harmful to all of us, and there is no substitute for the important interpersonal relations developed from grade school through graduate school. Children who are developmentally unready to form functional web-based social connections may be delayed in social development. Young adults are at risk of missing out on years that provide the foundation for lifetime friendships, marriages, families, and community. We may see more dysfunctional, premature relationships, increases in divorce, domestic violence, and mental illness. However, young people are resilient by design. They can adjust to change and define new degrees of normalcy, virtual dating, and even isolated pods of friends who can safely interact without fear of viral spread.

We can't ignore that chronic, underlying stress and delays in preventative medical and dental care, screening exams, and elective surgeries are likely to take a toll on our collective health, worsen chronic medical conditions, and contribute to increased alcohol and drug abuse. And yet, the rapid acceptance of virtual doctor visits has the potential to forever improve the care we can deliver to rural areas and other underserved populations.

Together, we all face premature loss of loved ones from COVID-19 and from the halo effects of this horrific pandemic on our physical, social, and mental health. And yet, as we look back on this year, many of us will also cherish this brief period in which families with adult children reconnected in their "little bubbles." Some have been given the unexpected gift of reliving childhood family dinners, board games, and simple walks around the block to shake off the nightly news. Friends have told me that it has felt like a "return to simpler-times" and we will cherish those special memories.

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As a nation and a world, we are sure to face decades of grief and to suffer some level of collective post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that will surface as the pandemic subsides. There will be introspection, recurrent depression, anger. We may experience intrusive memories, nightmares, emotional numbing, avoidance, and emotional hyperarousal. Some of us will be more vulnerable, and the vast majority of us will recover without professional help. Ultimately, we will find the inner peace, resolve, and determination for healthy emotional acceptance. And when social resilience follows this collective traumatic experience, it should ultimately foster positive behaviour, including solidarity and action. This is similar to the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements that brought victims together

nationally through shared personal experience. These movements were not merely about raising awareness; they have fostered direct action to effect change.

Each of us will experience this collective PTSD differently, as not everyone shares the same hopes, fears, opportunities, challenges, dreams, and losses. I am hopeful that we will live to see a future in which high school yearbooks are once again as charmingly optimistic as my own was. In the meantime, we can reflect, we can appreciate, we can commit to remembering, and most importantly we can roll up our sleeves to take action to ensure that we grow from the lessons these times have brought us.