

Ted Olinger ANOTHER LAST WORD



Journal of the Plague Year

In August 1984, I was in the summer term of my junior year at college in New York City, working part-time and starting chemotherapy for lymphoma. That went on for 11 months, including three months of radiation every day at 8 a.m., which all told saved my life at the cost of the efficacy of my spine and some internal organs I'd grown accustomed to.

Not complaining. That's just what happened.

I was a prolific if not very good writer at 20 and I started a daily journal to document the course of the disease and the treatment.

That lasted maybe a week. Deep in the first cycle of an unforgiving regimen, I was too exhausted to pursue any non-essential activity.

But I also made a decision not to remember what I was feeling.

In the morning I'd take the bus to the hospital, then walk over to class, then take the subway to work, then get a cab back to my shared apartment. I tried to eat out. That didn't work. Tried to see friends. Awkward. Tried to take walks. Couldn't go very far without having to rest on a stranger's stoop. Or, one time, on a stranger.

Couldn't even sleep much — it was the steroids in the chemo — and when I did sleep, I didn't dream. For a year.

Keeping up with the journal would have been useful. Things happened that other people needed to know about later, and it would've been so much easier to hand them a notebook instead of remembering it for them and swallowing the frustration when they didn't seem to get it.

The advent of this novel coronavirus pandemic and the disease it causes, COVID-19, while unprecedented in our lifetimes, is familiar to me in a way I can't put my finger on. But the reality of its impact personally, financially, socially — the fear and denial of contagion — is a landscape I know well.

So, I am going to start my journal again. I haven't been exposed to the virus yet, as far as I know, but it's already here on the Key Peninsula as I begin.

And here is my first entry:

The day starts with two northern flickers drumming away in the giant woodpecker house I nailed to the side of our home 15

years ago. It's the same thing every spring. We gave them their own house to keep them from pecking at ours, and it worked. The sound they make inside that chamber must send them into a wild rapture. We hear their ecstatic cries through the wall.

I go to the post office to buy stamps and mail newspapers, and I'm catching up with the Postmaster. An older man barges into the lobby, past the social distancing barrier and warning signs to stand closer behind me than is wise or even polite.

The Postmaster says, "Excuse me, but would you please wait outside the lobby until I'm finished with this customer?"

"No! This is nonsense! You're just talking!"

"Yes, while he pays for his transaction."

"Well, then pay for mine too then!" He shoves a package at her over the counter and walks off, then bellows from the lobby, "Where's your hand sanitizer?"

My son tells me his foreign exchange student friend has been recalled to her home country. They cannot meet in person to say goodbye. "We'll never see each other again," he says. I remind him he wasn't raised to think that way. He smiles and winks and I wonder if I know what that means.

A neighbor wants to borrow some books. I leave a stack on our porch. He leaves a mason jar of apple moonshine and a note: "You can make sanitizer out of it." I decide to start by sanitizing my taste buds, sitting outside in the dark to look at Venus hanging low and bright in the west. I hear barred owls discussing their business, or perhaps their mutual admiration — one close, one far — before their cries move off, together. Coyotes start up from another direction, down near the shoreline a mile away, answered by a lone sea lion barking back at them in the night.

On my way to bed I notice that our enormous grandfather clock, a 100-year-old heirloom from my wife's family, has stopped.

Ted Olinger lives in Vaughn.

Phyllis Henry COAST TO COAST



Reality Check

I'm 89 years old. I'm doing fine. My apartment is pleasant and my balcony has a nice view. Three meals a day and snacks are delivered to my door. Packages appear magically. Every day I get some sort of brain stimulation — puzzles, coloring supplies, other stuff — which I discard. Instead I

read, talk on the phone, write letters to people I haven't spoken with for years, and watch gory TV crime shows.

I like cop shows. One plot appears on a regular basis where the bad guys (recognizable because they have a facial scar or limp discernible even when they wear \$5,000 suits) have perfected a virus capable of wiping out an entire city — maybe New York or Chicago or Seattle; it doesn't matter which city. Then the good guys — usually three or four guys and one gal who is especially smart get involved. A doctor who happens to be hanging around is an expert on viruses, and she knows that this particular virus is a really bad one.

For an hour I watch gun fights where one of the good guys or gal gets shot, but it's only a flesh wound. Then for some reason there is a high-speed car chase ending in a burning crash, often resulting in a giant explosion which knocks the good guys to the ground, which covers them with smoke and dust, but no debilitating injuries. But a bunch of lower-level bad guys, who could've told the good guys what they needed to know, get killed.

Then a child genius expert on computers finds out that the virus is on a yacht, so the good guys row out to the yacht, climb aboard, and another fight happens. The bad guy in charge holds the vial of virus (the virus is always contained in a small brown bottle with a screw-on lid). There is a scuffle, and the really smart gal gets thrown overboard and she is left to fight for her life in shark-infested waters bleeding from that flesh wound when she got shot earlier.

One of the good guys reaches for the bottle of virus and it goes flying (in slow motion) out over the ocean. Luckily, the gal while swimming away from the sharks is able to reach up and catch the vial before it hits the water. Dramatic, but not necessary. It turns out the virus loses its potency when it is immersed in water.

New York City or Chicago or Seattle or wherever is saved. Switch channels and watch "Golden Girls" reruns.

We are Americans. Virus plots have to be foiled. Yet today we are living in a reality show where the virus is actually killing thousands of people. What happened? Why didn't the plot writers take over? Where are the heroes to save us?

These heroes don't carry guns and chase bad guys. The heroes are doctors and nurses, postal service personnel, grocery clerks, janitors and delivery people, and all the other brave souls who go out into the world every day so I can cower in my apartment.

We are all living in a reality show, and I feel I must play my part. It's like when I was a little kid, and in the days before Christmas I tried to be really good because Santa was watching — filling in for God, who spied on me the rest of the time.

Occasionally I discuss our plight with my elderly neighbors. The consensus is that we have all lived a long time and dying is not a big deal, something we are expecting anyhow, but have assumed that the death would be occasioned by a heart attack or stroke or kidney disease or something equally droll.

We don't want to die in a hospital bed with staff trying to save us, while younger people die because there is no empty bed for them. We don't want to pass on the disease to our neighbors and families or to the medical staff that tries to save us.

Enough of this. I want to find my TV remote so I can flip channels and find an old "I Love Lucy" rerun.

Award-winning columnist Phyllis Henry lives in Gig Harbor.

Joseph Pentheroudakis ON THE WING



Language in the Time of Plague

"Stay safe," the cashier at the checkout said as I was putting my groceries back in the cart and getting ready to head out.

It was a couple of weeks after Gov. Inslee had issued his stay-at-home order in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I hadn't been to the store — or anywhere, for that matter — since the day of the proclamation. Amazingly I had managed to keep my refrigerator stocked to the gills for a while, but after two weeks my supplies were dwindling and I could no longer delay a trip to the store.

I had recently begun to notice that "Stay safe" and "Stay healthy" were becoming the preferred ways to end emails between friends, but that moment at the store was the first time I had heard that spoken in real life. Along with keeping the required distance from the customer in line ahead of me, it was a clear acknowledgment of these perilous times.

My mind was still on pre-coronavirus autopilot though. In that version of the interaction the cashier would have said "Have a nice day" or something similar. It took me a couple of seconds to recalibrate and respond. The world was different now,

Ted Olinger

ANOTHER LAST WORD



Journal of the Plague Year: Part II

When this whole thing started, the family indulged in these long, elaborate breakfasts since there was no place anyone had to be, except maybe a Zoom meeting. Baked eggs, Dutch babies, sourdough waffles; things we once reserved only for Christmas or New Year's.

Now I'm down to half a banana and a pot of green tea I nurse all day. My wife drinks protein shakes between her online meetings or the classes she teaches, then sits cursing to herself while rage knitting.

I hear children playing outside. I get up from the computer to stand on our porch and listen. It's a lovely sound. I start for the neighbor's backyard to investigate, then stop. It's not children; it's just his chickens foraging in the garden, a different kind of lovely sound I haven't appreciated before.

My own child — though at 18 he's hardly that — is on our roof scrubbing the skylights. He asks permission while I am typing away at something and I say sure without thinking about it. Then I hear the extension ladder rattling and him banging around up there. This is the same high school senior who can't keep his room clean, but now he's clinging to our high-pitched roof 30 feet off the ground scrubbing moss. Then I wonder why I said sure without thinking.

At the end of almost every day he runs five or six miles at different parks after his online classes. One Friday he returned later than normal. Coming home across the Purdy Spit, he saw some friends standing next to their cars on the shoulder and stopped. They watched the stadium lights at Peninsula High School come on at 8:20 p.m. — 2020 hours — for 20 minutes to honor them, the class of 2020. Then they stood there in the dark for a while before going their separate ways.

I get an email from a relative. "We can't let the cure be worse than the disease," he says, adding "There's nothing political about common sense — spread the word." I ask what he knows about C-19 that I don't. He sends me a DIY pattern for a tinfoil hat.

I'm driving home on a sunny, breezy day after I've finished conducting interviews and running errands behind a mask. I think I've forgotten something and check

my list: Mail, pharmacy, groceries, wine from this one place, then more wine from this other place — all done. But I know I'm forgetting something. I look around the car. Seems normal. Put stuff away at home. Uneventful. Drink a cup of cold tea outside for a minute and watch clouds scudding across the sun. I should be out sailing on a day like this. That's it — that's what I forgot.

The dog is acting different, but we don't notice. I run him every day and he's getting slower and slower. I think he's just being stubborn because we put him on a diet. But now there's a bad smell and we examine his 114 pounds of bear fur and find a terrible wound from some skin allergy.

We can't get in to see the vet but we send photos and she prescribes antibiotics, steroids and some kind of spray. How had we missed this? We're with him all the time. Are we that preoccupied?

We stay up with him the first night he's on meds; he is restless and thirsty and unable to settle. I am usually pretty good at interpreting his looks but only because his meaning is usually pretty simple: feed me, walk me, play with me. Now he doesn't want any of those things and looks at me with an expression I can't interpret, and don't want to.

I am startled awake on the couch by his muffled barks. He's twitching and growling as he pursues, I hope, his favorite prey in a familiar dream. I think he must be feeling better, and I relax. I fall back to sleep and into my own recurring dream, sailing my dad's boat, though Dad and his boat are long gone. But this time I am sailing deliberately into shallows and between reefs to escape a dangerous shore.

Ted Olinger lives in Vaughn.

Carolyn Wiley

DEVIL'S HEAD DIARY



Socially Distant Amusements

In this era of social distancing, being out of the loop has been an adjustment, especially since there are no loops to be in. With meetings canceled, routines disrupted, latte stops eliminated, the squares on the kitchen calendar have become virgin territory.

What to do with all this unscheduled time?

My husband, David, and I were once habitual, even chronic, exercisers. The first disruption was the pool closure, setting our daily water aerobics group adrift. The

second blow came when the YMCA shut down. No more tai chi, no sword form for me; no weightlifting or treadmill for David. We were soon bemoaning the deleterious effects of our innate couch potato natures. Were we really going to watch all 635 episodes of "Gunsmoke"?

We thought a walk up to the mailbox would do us good. The round trip is one mile with a wee incline that Fitbit counts as four flights of stairs. The saunter put a dent in our cycle of inertia, but not quite enough to quell the restlessness. Adding a bit more to the walk made sense. But for the purpose-driven, a walk should have a goal, so we toted plastic bags along to pick up cans, bottles, candy wrappers and other treasures along our tributary of the Key Pen Highway.

I feel no remorse about my lack of compassion for graceless people somehow compelled to discard their debris along the road. I can only imagine these pampered but ill-fated souls had mothers or maids to pick up after them, depriving them of the opportunity to learn how to deal with detritus or master other basic life skills.

But de-littering a local road has its own subtle rewards: It is akin to spying on your neighbors. In the first few days, their signature behaviors became evident.

There was Cigarillo Guy. Obviously, littering the interior of his vehicle with cigarillo plastic tips was unthinkable. He — and I unapologetically assume he is a he — usually finishes his skinny cigar within a few yards of the intersection at 88th Street.

Another neighbor seems to need one more drink before tucking in for the night. He (or she?) tosses their mini-bottles between 72nd and 76th. Do you suppose the impact of favorite watering hole closures has created a boost in mini-single-serve booze sales?

Also, I do sympathize with the habit of those anonymous smokers repulsed by the idea of retaining their own cigarette butts, avoiding periodic in-vehicle clean-up by just flicking away that annoying ciggie stubble. But I hereby request that they please use the installed purpose-built receptacle — some call it an "ash tray." They may have no worries about starting a roadside fire, but the worst offenders are those who opt for tossing their butts in gag-inducing mixtures of partially filled booze bottles.

But our litter reduction efforts have paid off. Our right-of-way is now relatively trash-free, except for Cigarillo Guy and mister or miss One-More-for-the-Road.

To compensate for the reduction of entertaining treasure hunts, and missing

the benefits of deep squats, we went to work on the Scotch broom.

Although we are making steady progress dislodging the golden horde from our road south to Devil's Head, several stands still flourish. We have encountered dense patches of resistant individuals that will not yield to hand-pulling. More aggressive attacks with shovel and weed wrench will soon be part of the battle plan.

You may think this is a curious way for a couple of 80-year-olds to spend their twilight time, but for several years I thought it would be fun to make April "Scotch Broom Eradication Month" on the Key. I thought a catchy tagline for the effort would be "Pull Your Own Weight — In Scotch Broom," especially appropriate if the kick-off date was April Fools' Day.

One motivator for our ongoing effort was figuring out exactly what "Pull Your Own Weight" entailed. Upon reflection, I realized that for me the stated goal may be out of reach. I have learned that by leaving the bigger plants for David and not working fast enough to generate a my-size bundle means that if I am going to pull my own weight, I will have to go back on a serious diet.

But when I paused to look back at our handiwork, the unsightly Scotch broom debris left behind was appalling. As soon as David empties the truck of gravel he uses to maintain our private road, we need to drive that 4-mile stretch of the Key Pen Highway to pick up the scattered golden wreckage. Who knows, by the time that happens we may even uncover another month's worth of spent liquor bottles and cigarette butts.

Award-winning writer Carolyn Wiley patrols the byways of Longbranch.

Caleb Galbreath

RISING TIDES



In These Uncertain Times

I have been bombarded with this phrase through emails, ads on TV, radio, news media and everyday conversations. But it doesn't resonate with me. The times have always felt uncertain to me.

I think this is largely a product of my age. I'm young — or at least that's what I'm told when I complain about feeling old — and most of my life thus far can be characterized as uncertain.

I know I'm not alone in this, most of my friends feel the same way. I once asked a

Dr. Art Jarvis
GUEST COLUMNIST



To the Community

We in the Peninsula School District join the rest of our nation in sad recognition that many children and families are in pain right now, but especially our Black children and Black parents. As educators, we cannot live our lives in isolation or be immune to the protests. Our work must include a look at our own policies and practices to ensure we are part of the solution and not contributing to the pain. When we meet, we must talk about our own organizations and look inward.

As a school district serving 9,000 young people, and the largest employer in the area, we acknowledge that clashes in the streets have vividly exposed the daily hurt and trauma that some of our students, families and staff suffer because of the color of their skin. The murder of George Floyd, like so many others, has ignited protests from coast to coast in America.

To all, I first offer my heart in sympathy. Unfortunately, as a school system, we are unable to gather with our students to talk at this crucial time. Instead, we offer ourselves, our teachers and our counselors as resources to families. For our Black students and Black families, we know you are deeply affected by this and we offer our assistance and our commitment to helping find answers. I urge others to do the same.

What can you do? There are no bystanders, and I urge all to look for ways to move us from violence to solutions.

A major charge looms for us in the school business. Like many of those who are old enough to remember the 1960s anti-war protests, Civil Rights Movement, Watts riots and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., this 2020 violence feels even stronger. I reflect on words echoed over the last century, “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

As educators, our responsibility is here now. The answer may not be as complex as it might sound — in our business we must teach. In today’s world of immediate access to information, it has become evident that one of the most important things we do is help students learn to think and evaluate what they see, hear and read. Learning standards are clear that students must be discerning if they are to become contributing citizens. Similarly, to be good citizens,

students must know how to contribute to their own well-being and that of others.

We are working to have our website access the wealth of pertinent writings that are emerging for students and anyone interested in the huge questions surrounding racial violence. At a minimum, we urge you to keep checking our website psd401.net for these excellent materials as we continue to grow our library.

Our schools are places for young people to grow and learn, including how to address questions of decency and justice. The violence, anger, death and crime are not passing incidents with little consequence. It is an element of our society that will undoubtedly affect our young people for the rest of their lives.

As we close this school year and anticipate the next, the world of civic awareness and responsibility must be a major focus. To all, we dedicate ourselves to offer a safe place called school. To those for whom school is not yet a safe place, we dedicate ourselves to that aspiration. Our children deserve it.

Dr. Art Jarvis is the interim Superintendent of the Peninsula School District.

Ted Ralston
A TED TALKS



An Ode to Volunteering

First printed in the August 2019 edition of the KP News.

Volunteering for civic organizations on the Key Peninsula is often associated with rearranging furniture, separating the recyclables and raising enormous amounts of money from the community just to give it back to them in a new and improved format. There are many unknown joys and unsuspected challenges in this noble pursuit.

I encountered a variety of each when I volunteered to sell fireworks at the Key Peninsula Civic Center stand in Key Center in July. Running the stand was the easy part; guarding it overnight was not.

Having buttoned up the stand for the night, I was just pouring a slosh of fine single malt scotch into my crystal glass and preparing a Cohiba for a leisurely smoke when suddenly four roaring pickup trucks materialized. Each disgorged demonic occupants usually associated with All-Hallows Eve, i.e., trick-or-treaters; in this case, middle-aged pranksters pretending to be “civic-minded volunteers” who were there

to help me “protect” Key Center through the long watches of the night.

Their first demand was to find them seating. But this turned out to be no problem, since some had thoughtfully arrived with their own ice chests full of beer that we arranged around a brimstone-laced firepit with built-in cupholders. Next, they wanted their own crystal glasses. I provided plastic travel mugs out of my camper, though I was also compelled to produce another four cigars.

With the refreshments taken care of, we turned to the real business behind their rather sudden manifestation. The five of us proceeded to enjoy a late-night to early-morning confab, which (it turned out) was the only objective of these so-called volunteers, sitting in solidarity to guard Key Center from whatever might come.

As it was my first year as a fireworks seller, I was unaware that the fireworks stand doubled overnight as a venue for erudite literary and artistic criticism, along the lines of Dorothy Parker’s “Vicious Circle” Algonquin Hotel Round Table.

Ergo, the first discussion challenge: “What’s your favorite opening scene from the movies?” posed by one with a noted affinity for obscure and esoteric cinema. The gauntlet having been thrown, a battle of increasingly more tendentious and nebulous analysis raged as to the fundamental overarching thematic content of various extraordinary films — most of which most of us had never seen.

As the single malt gave way to a fine bourbon, gradually the subject switched to the more ethereal and cosmological, such as “Is that a bat or an owl?” and “Why are those planets moving so fast?” and “How come the scotch is gone?” A significant amount of time was spent looking at constellation maps on our smart phones in a vain attempt to work out why Saturn and Jupiter seemed to be so obviously in the wrong positions, and whether Mars was actually red. However, none of us could see our phone screens clearly by this point, so we agreed that Jupiter and Saturn were indeed planets in the sky, and left the complexion of Mars to a future debate.

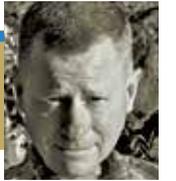
The final challenge of the night was to lower our voices, as the patrons of the nearby eateries could neither hear nor appreciate the deterioration of overnight traffic behavior in Key Center as more and more gigantic diesel pickup trucks and tiny foreign two-doors barreled through at high speed with each passing hour. We pondered the utility of speed

bumps (with and without spikes), roundabouts, engine-destroying EMP emitters, and a permanent detachment of Washington State Patrol cruisers, but came to no conclusion.

Whatever lawless activity may or may not ordinarily menace Key Center after hours, the only crimes committed that night were those of misjudgment perpetrated and endured by me and my fellow volunteers, but of course it was all and only for the benefit of the community.

The next day was the Fourth of July and we sold the rest of the fireworks.

Ted Olinger
ANOTHER LAST WORD



Journal of the Plague Year III

I was already in southern Turkey on my way to Syria when the Gulf War began in earnest in January 1991.

I’d been unsuccessfully reporting on life in Eastern Europe behind the newly fallen Iron Curtain since the previous September. And there was this girl I liked in what was then Yugoslavia, and her family who liked me in spite of or perhaps because of an impenetrable language barrier. But when the time came none of that mattered. I wanted glory.

Of course, had I remained where I was I would have been fortunate to survive the glory that followed. Less than a year later, Yugoslavia tore herself apart in an inter-necine bloodbath not seen in Europe for 50 years. I kept in touch with the family, but not for long.

The closer I got to the Middle East, moving from trains to buses to shared rides, the more I tried to keep a low profile. It was winter and I had a big coat with a big collar and I wore a knit hat I could pull down to my eyes.

So many people were already on the move, and this was just the beginning of what was to come.

I was standing in line for a visa in a freezing lobby more crowded than the average Westerner could imagine. Everyone talked at high volume in a variety of languages and we leaned against each other in a manner most would consider intolerable, for most of a day. The way they stood, the way they spoke, and the distress of their children, all told their stories.

You can’t hide in a crowd like that.

This big guy behind me in line started barking at me. I didn't know what he was saying. But the old ladies in front of me, they looked back at him, and then at me, and said nothing.

If the old ladies aren't on your side, it's not good.

Then he gets out of line and pushes forward.

He's pointing at me and bellowing at the crowd. He's about 20 and bigger and stronger than me, but I can see he's somewhat impaired and wants to make a show of something. I try a couple of my phrase book languages until we get traction in French, of all things, since the region had been under the control of France for decades after the first World War.

Qu'est-ce que c'est? I ask him what his deal is. Ta guerre! He's angry about the war. So am I. What? Yeah, I love your country, you think I like winter here — I'm a reporter. You write? Yeah, a writer. Oh, OK, let's get a drink, man, yes, yes, we should talk, let's talk. Yeah, we should, but it's on you, right? Yes, yes, I was rude, but I saw you and it's like, what, they want us from both ends, you know? N'est-ce pas? Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. Je comprends.

We stood together talking like that until he got a visa to do construction. Being a nobody tourist in wartime, I was refused entry.

"Come on, come home, meet my family, and we'll have some raki. You like raki? We'll drink raki," the guy said.

It sounds bizarre, I know, that a half-drunk 20-year-old in Turkey would invite a strange Westerner home to meet the family after a public confrontation. But in that part of the world and at that moment in history — before 9/11, before Afghanistan, before Iraq, before ISIS — it was normal. The stress had gotten to the guy and he lost it in public and he knew it. His invitation was an apology. Refusing it would have been an insult. By accepting, I allowed him to regain his dignity, which is a real thing in the East. He was grateful, and a gracious host.

He lived with his parents, which was not unusual. I met his younger sister, Meryem, who was just a teenager then and grew up to become a biochemist. Unlike her family, she spoke proficient English as well as French, and sized me up immediately. Thirty years later we remain friends, along with her children and ex-husband.

We have talked more in the past three months than we have in years. About the pandemic. The civil war. Her work in Syria that began with tracing chemical weapons. Then to tracking diseases. Then sheltering refugees against the wishes of

her government.

But now she asks me about my country.

"Oh, Meryem," I say.

"Je comprends," she says.

Ted Olinger lives in Vaughn.

Vicki Husted Biggs A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE



Coping With Stress and Trauma

There are 18 pounds of coffee in my refrigerator right now. Somehow, it helps me feel safe. I am aware this makes no sense. But for me, coffee is a source of comfort, and the only correct way to start the day. That beautifully brewed cup of coffee is the balm for my anxieties. Hoarding coffee is one way I am coping with life right now.

Anxieties abound in 2020. Shall we briefly recap? COVID-19, the national political scene, murder hornets, economic depression, massive loss of life, isolation, fear, racial tensions, days and nights of rage and riot, and shortages of food and toilet paper. There have been milestones in our lives that have gone without celebration or ritual; births, deaths, weddings, graduations.

This is not a list of irritations that can be soaked away in a bubble bath. These are major events affecting everyone. The accumulation of recent changes in our lives feel chaotic, disruptive and traumatic, possibly affecting physical, mental and emotional health.

Peering down, deeper into the well of our lives, we see all the things that have been hurled down, one atop another — just this year. There are a few things that we can know about this jumble. These are the types of events that can shatter our sense of security and safety, create feelings of helplessness, and encourage us to perceive our world as a fearful place.

We should not minimize the ability of these events to produce upsetting emotions, memories or anxiety that will not go away. People can become angry, numb, disconnected and unable to trust others. Some are fortunate enough to be thoroughly insulated from any ill effects of these times. Most are not. Ongoing, soul-grinding stress requires patience and compassion to restore our mental and emotional health.

Everyone has what is known as a "window of tolerance" where we can comfortably operate. Some of us have large windows, enabling us to deal with problems, tensions and trauma to a greater degree than others. Some have small windows of tolerance, with

little room to maneuver when difficulties arise. It might be said that if you are inside your window, you are operating effectively. If by some means you are thrown out of your window, you may be dealing with the experience by fight, flight or freezing — our innate responses to danger or stress. Having some insight into the size of our personal windows can help us cope with stress. We can help ourselves get back inside our windows.

People respond to abnormal events with normal reactions. Emotional and psychological symptoms can be shock, denial, disbelief, confusion, difficulty focusing, anger, irritability, mood swings, anxiety and fear, guilt, shame, withdrawal, sadness, hopelessness, numbness, disconnectedness. Physical symptoms of psychological trauma can be insomnia, nightmares, fatigue, startle reflexes, racing heart rate, edginess and agitation, muscle tension, aches and pain.

In taking stock of ourselves and individual situations, there are some things we can keep in mind to help sort out all the things that have been tossed down the well. First, it is important to just get through these times. Be compassionate with yourself and with others. Mind the windows.

To cope with hyperarousal or fear, or disruption of your body's natural equilibrium, exercise and movement can help repair your nervous system. Try using rhythmic movement that engages your whole body, like dancing or walking or shooting hoops.

Do not isolate yourself; keep up your social connections as much as possible. Try to express and experience negative emotions. Allow yourself to recognize and accept suffering instead of avoiding it.

Keep a log of your coping methods. This is called self-monitoring. A log can help you determine if your coping skills are helping you or making things worse. Are you sleeping much more than usual, or drinking more alcohol than usual, or not eating enough?

Dr. Sheela Raja, a clinical psychologist and associate professor at the College of Dentistry in Chicago, Illinois who lectures widely on post-traumatic stress and trauma has said this about the times we are living in: "If you are struggling, don't feel defeated by the psychobabble. In the near future, very few people will be emerging as fitter, calmer, wiser individuals. Many Americans will be struggling, but most of us will be able to return to some kind of baseline functioning with some time."

She also said, "The narrative of continual self-improvement can be harmful. We live in a culture where we are trained to run away from negative emotions. Often, we want to

'skip to the end,' where a person emerges victorious and strong. Unfortunately, our mental health doesn't work that way."

Hoarding coffee is a strange method of self-soothing, I'll admit. As far as I can tell, it's harmless yet effective. The liberal use of humor is also a great coping skill. A belly laugh aimed down the old well everyday can work wonders. At the close of this writing, I am sipping a cup of coffee and watching one of my favorite old comedies.

Vicki Husted Biggs is a longtime social worker. She lives in Home.

Joseph Pentheroudakis ON THE WING



The Old Man and the Sea Lion

I can count on the fingers of one hand the times the universe has surprised me with bits of unexpected joy these last few months. Don't get me wrong; there are plenty of things I do every day that make me smile and dispel the bleakness of the times. But I also expect the universe to do its part every once in a while, to give me some unsolicited candy out of the blue, for no particular reason. I'm easy to please; it wouldn't even have to work that hard.

For the most part, though, the friendly, playful side of the universe seems to have gone AWOL. Instead it's all angst, grief and uncertainty all the time on all available frequencies and wavelengths.

I want to fight the good fight as much as the next person, but as the years and decades pile on I'm finding I could use some help, a latter day deus ex machina that would swoop in unannounced from time to time and to blow the gloom away. The days when I could handle it all on my own, the universe be damned, are long gone.

So if there ever was a time for some good old-fashioned escapism, this is it. For me these days escapism is spelled k-a-y-a-k, so on a clear day last month I loaded up the boat on the truck, drove down to the beach, and was soon paddling from Herron Island north to Dutcher Cove.

Spring migration on the water had been wrapping up. The surf scoters, buffleheads and mergansers had already moved on, but there were still a few straggler loons here and there, as always maintaining their distance from one another. Gulls, cormorants and pigeon guillemots were out as well, looking their very best. My mind's lens slowly began to swivel away from my own baggage to all the activity in the water.

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