

LETTER

Being at Home Has Its Advantages

Discovering a “new normal” together

Ken Wells

We all worry about “bad things happening” to us, and to those dear to us, in these pandemic days. There is growing anxiousness about the waning of our livelihoods and our environment, looming just over the horizon. I admit I feel cut off from my former routine and occupation, giving me too much time to worry about my grown children who are at risk as “essential employees” in the high-risk environments of grocery retail and an urban medical research lab.

But as frightening as these times may be, it is also true that times of adversity are when we learn of inspiring stories about acts of kindness and bravery, of neighbors reaching out to help their neighbors, and about everlasting bonds of life-long friendships being formed. These are great things that don’t simply “happen to us,” but are things that we deliberately go out of our way to do for each other.

We are blessed to be where we are right now, in the middle of rural New Hampshire. I think back to a wonderful story written by Donald Hall, *String Too Short to be Saved*. He described summers he spent driving a horse-drawn hay wagon and tramping in the woods around his grandfather Wesley Wells’ farm near Ragged Mountain, almost a century ago.

Many things are different today than they were in Hall’s youth, but most of the important things haven’t changed. Whether our roots here go back generations, or whether the winds of fortune brought us to alight here just recently as newcomers, we are so fortunate to find ourselves in the midst of a caring community, surrounded by natural beauty and resources, and importantly, living at some distance from the first shock wave of the pandemic. Nevertheless, we know change is coming. We have been granted time to contemplate our next move together.

As one looks at how societies have changed over time, one sees long periods of slow, evolutionary change that altered little, interspersed with short, intense disruptions that caused major upheavals. Looking at it optimistically, those upheavals are opportunities for people to re-think what “leading the good life” means to them and gives them a chance to make different choices about how they choose to live. We are at just the beginning of such an upheaval.

There will be no going back – the future will be different from the past, as always.

The key to survival and success in such a fluid situation, if one has been granted time to think it over, is to coolly assess how the worst might come about, and then devise a plan to avoid that. Then with some clever re-thinking of what is most important to us, we might even discover a “new normal” that puts us in a better situation than our “old normal.” Passively resisting the change will not lead to the best outcome, nor will a refusal to acknowledge the existence of new risks.

While my family and I searched for our own “new normal,” we discovered that being active and constructive is an excellent way of coping.

“Staying at home” has a dreary, shut-in ring to it, but “being at home” sounds as inviting as a month of Sundays. While we were “being at home,” we baked cookies and stitched masks for the hospital and an old folks’ home. We took our dog for walks that were as long as the old boy hoped they would be. We worked in the yard and enjoyed the emerging daffodils, and on the rainy days we repainted a room for a fresh look.

Slowing down to watch the natural world transition into spring has been more refreshing than any new coat of paint. I’m hopeful about reports that worldwide, the atmosphere and wildlife have already shown signs of recovering, as worldwide pollution has declined in the past months. Can we imagine a “new normal” that finds new ways of making the things we need, growing our food and transporting it, buying less “stuff” that gets thrown away after one use, and doing more work from home, so that the health of our world improves?

Most of all, I hope we can all find good ways to cope, asking others for help when we need it, and offering to help others as we can. You can start very simply by merging your grocery lists with, say, two neighbors and taking turns with them to do one weekly shopping trip. That way, each of you ventures out in public only once every three weeks, you save fuel driving one car instead of three to the store, and you reduce the risk to the grocery workers by reducing the number of people they come in contact with.

I’m sure that many readers will have their own great ideas to share about how we can help each other and how we can discover a safe, healthy, and uplifting “new normal” together!

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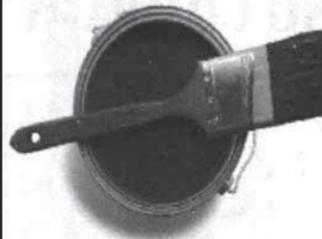
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