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COVID-19 Reflections: A Period of Enlightenment

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COVID-19 Reflections: A Period of Enlightenment

Dr. Jesse M. Redlo

COVID-19 for me and possibly many others has sparked feelings of loss, trauma, and anxiety. Paradoxically, the pandemic has also led to a remarkable period of reflection, self-growth, and self-improvement, which causes me to view this pandemic more as a period of enlightenment than as a dark hour in history. Here is my COVID-19 story.

I recall being in a classroom teaching in early February of 2020 when a student asked, "Dr. Redlo, what's COVID?" At the time, I responded, "I have no idea." The student continued, saying "Based on this article I am reading, it could shut down the country!" I immediately retorted with, "Nothing could ever shut down America." WOW - I was shortsighted! No more than 1 month later, I began my full-time role as an Educational Technologist at St. John Fisher College. My first couple of days were pretty normal (orientation, meeting people, state mandated training webinars, etc.); but, on day 3, my world was turned upside down. Dean Cooney Miner announced to her leadership team (which took me a minute to realize included me - a scary thought for someone fresh off their doctoral work) that all classes in the School of Nursing had to be moved online ASAP. My initial thought was a simple one - Holy S**t! I began to think about all of the intricacies associated with this change; 50+ faculty, undergraduate programs, graduate programs, and a doctoral program. Meanwhile, I have been employed for approximately 72 hours and I thought - can I actually handle this? All of the sudden, a part of me I did not know existed turned on and I went into a survival mode. In a seemingly chaotic manner, I just started taking action, working with each course and each faculty member 1 by 1 to begin this daunting task and inside of 2 weeks, as a team, we did it - the show continued online!

Once the classes were functioning well online for a bit, I had a sense of relief, a feeling akin to - WOW, I managed to survive! May 2020 was upon us and I began to get hopeful for our capacity to keep functioning well in the upcoming summer and fall terms. Feeling like a capable administrator, I volunteered to join the campus reopening task force, which consumed much of my time in May, June, and July. This quickly became one of the most valuable experiences of my career, as I was part of a team of people who joined together from all across the college to boldly face the challenge of - how do we continue providing high-quality education to our students during the pandemic? While no solutions are perfect, I think our team did a fantastic job with the limited resources and options at our disposal. Professionally, I was soaring during this time, but personally, I was beginning to crumble.

My father had been sick for a little over 4 years - liver disease/liver transplant, kidney disease, misdiagnosed Chron's disease, and diabetes. Prior to accepting my role at Fisher, I had resigned a tenure-track teaching position at a community college in Syracuse, NY to come home and take care of him. In late June, he had an episode of acute Kidney failure, but he was in the hospital improving - just when the odds seemed insurmountable, he tended to thrive. On Monday, July 6th, I woke up, had coffee, and called my dad (like many other mornings) - little did I know how this day would change my life. The doctors were planning to discharge my dad from the hospital the following day, so I went about my usual activities. Around 2:30pm, I received a phone call from one of our favorite doctors at Strong Memorial Hospital, saying

“Jesse, your dad has been unresponsive for 10 minutes, do we have your permission to continue life-saving measures?” I immediately said, “Yes, do whatever you can”, hung up the phone, and stared at my friend whom I was visiting with in utter disbelief. She had overheard the conversation and tried to comfort me with some hope, but in my heart, I knew the truth...

20 minutes later, as I was sitting in a parking lot, I got a call from the same doctor saying, “Jesse, we did everything we could, but your father has passed away.” In the following moments, I had an out-of-body experience: I knew I was functioning, but mentally, I was a million miles away. I took a couple weeks off of work to gather myself, spend time with family, and grieve. I came back to work thinking everything would be the same, but it wasn't. I put on a brave face during the day, but nights and weekends I was a wreck. After a few weeks of operating like this, I remembered the lessons my dad taught me about self-care and I sought counseling.

Early in my counseling journey, I was tasked with “make a list of things that are important to you.” After making the list, discussing it with my counselor, as well as some close family and friends, I realized I needed to make some changes. As grateful as I was for my administrative job at Fisher, I knew my heart was in the classroom, so I submitted a letter of resignation in late December of 2020 and went back to focusing on my teaching at Fisher and RIT. Along with that change, I increased my community activities through activism work, as well as volunteer work through the Rotary - my daily happiness level is rising exponentially.

Where am I now (March 2021)? I am a loud, proud social justice activist and passionate educator who gives his all to his students and his causes, while also focusing on self-care. This is staunchly different from the full-time workaholic and full-time caretaker I was: I have no regrets of who I was, but I am happier with who I have become.

How does all of this connect to COVID-19? If it wasn't for the pandemic, I may not have had the opportunities to change my professional and personal trajectory. Moreover, the pandemic gave me courage and inspired me, as I saw the chaos and struggling in the world as a call to action to do my part to help. Overall, COVID-19 has been a period of enlightenment for me and when viewed as an opportunity for growth, it could be enlightening for you as well.