Tis the Season: Looking ahead

2020 is ending. The year is nothing like we expected when we rang in the New Year. What next?

December 2, 2020 By Andrew Spieldenner, PhD

It's World AIDS Day again. For those of us in the HIV community, it's filled with events. For those outside of our community, there might be a red ribbon on your social media here or there, but mostly you're more concerned with the end of this year.

And what a year! Pandemic, protests, presidential elections – and social and economic upheavals. The loss of lives, and livelihoods. Entire worlds shifting beneath us.

2020 has confronted us with some grim truths:

- Not everyone's life Is valued the same by the government;
- The US healthcare system is insufficient and needs change;
- Race is a critical component of how we get to live and thrive; and
- Most of our personal economics are fragile and can be disrupted easily.

For those of us living with HIV, we are not surprised. This has been the fabric of our truth since we were vulnerable to HIV, after we acquired and were diagnosed for it, and in our searches for healthcare, housing, a way to make a living, friends, family and lovers.

While we know these truths to be self-evident, we have also faced people – sometimes people we are close with – who refuse them.

"It's not SO bad, right?"

"Don't you think [that group] makes too big a deal about this?"

"Well I don't like the way he acts, but he's good for the economy."

These are the arguments my parents still make. I have tried to build a relationship with them in adulthood after a difficult time connecting in my teens and 20s. Being queer and brown and living with HIV in a mixed-race religious family has been an ongoing difficult fit. I try not to be angry anymore (though it's hard): I back away and focus on what I want out of my life. 2020 has reminded me that what I want out of this world matters, that I don't need to make it smaller just

so others are more comfortable.

The weight of 2020 has sat hard on all of us. We have each dealt with this in different ways.

For the first few months of the pandemic, I was scared and stressed. I shut myself away from others, watched the news and social media far too much to be healthy, and only left the apartment to walk my dog. I drank too much, ate too much and was at a loss for what to do with my life. I could not write, even this blog. I saw one friend and his family regularly.

Then the summer hit. And my dog, Ace, died after an amazing 15 years together. Something moved in me. Why was I still living in San Diego, paying rent and bills, when my work and HIV advocacy worlds had gone online? My life felt like it was getting smaller, heavier. I needed to change.

So I moved to Guadalajara to live with a friend. Mexico, and the state of Jalisco, have taken the pandemic more seriously than the US: masks and temperature checks are standard practice. In addition, most of Guadalajara restaurants seem to have some kind of outdoors seating. I have not been exposed to much of the US elections news at all, and I have not seen any MAGA gear.

It's been nice.

I realized how many industries, technology and resources have been put behind putting us "back to work" but how little has been used for the rest of our lives to flourish. I bring this up because we have all had to learn new ways of being, living, engaging and healing this year. Many of our old strategies just weren't working. For those wanting to get "back to normal," let's keep in mind a lesson from 2020: THAT normal didn't work.

In a letter to Pat Parker after battling cancer, Audre Lorde writes, "A year seems like a lot of time now at this end - it isn't. It took me three full years to reclaim my full flow. Don't lose your sense of urgency on the one hand, on the other, don't be too hard on yourself - or expect too much."

We have all suffered losses this year. Make more space in our lives for us to feel, to connect and to thrive. During the pandemic, I started sending postcards to people as a way of connecting without a screen. A small gesture to remind folks we are not alone.

As we gear up for 2021 with a new Administration and an effective COVID-19 vaccine, let's remember all that's changed, all that's been lost in our communities, all we've done to stay afloat to make it through 2020. I don't want us to lose ground on our battles: healthcare is a right; policing is unequal and the processes and budgeting of these agencies need to be reviewed by the community; Black lives do matter; trans lives do matter; being an immigrant or migrant is not a crime; and together we can win.

If anything, I have learned to value the other parts of my life too – not just the work and the meetings, but the connections with others and myself. Moving to Mexico – even temporarily – was an unexpected choice but it has helped me immensely with my personal life. After so much time

measuring my life based on my work.

Consider the unexpected options, ask for what you want in the world – even if it makes others look at you differently, and remember we are not alone.

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