

## ***Bearing the Unknown***

By Barbara Stimmel

Therapists will be writing about this time in journals for years to come. While respecting the profound difficulties we face let us marvel, even if just a little, at the human quest to cope with misery, fear, and death.

### **Bearing the Unknown**

Life is a march through the unknown and COVID-19 is one arduous leg of the trail. It is unknown when the virus will abate, a vaccine will be developed, or life will return to its familiar rhythms. The spurious predictability of everyday living is one layer of denial allowing us to tolerate the unknown.

### **Catastrophic Change**

New York is on pause or, less euphemistically, it is shut down. “Non-essential” work is done from home on telephones and computers as we spend our days quite differently than in the ordinarily busy, quotidian, frustrating, rewarding ways as before all while seeing few people, sometimes none, for long periods of time. We are grieving for our lives as we know them and for those whose lives will never return to normal - jobs, homes, sustenance, dignity have been taken from far, far too many. We grieve even more poignantly for the sick, dying, and dead. They are hospitalized and buried in isolation with no loving caresses or celebrations of their lives while their loved ones mourn alone.

### **Our Whole World Mourns Together**

This pandemic has spread around the globe. My first view of this new world was a Chinese student’s description of quarantine; I could neither fathom her daily life nor imagine ever living that way. Soon after, an Italian colleague was noticeably crestfallen, defeated, sad;

however, she was on a different continent in another country. Then my continent and country, and city, succumbed.

Borders are shut world-wide but the human experience transcends lock-downs as we all live through this together. Amazingly worldwide, people are dating and joyous couples have married on city streets, on balconies. On zoom, birthday celebrations pop up virtually while dinner parties meet online. Conductors and directors bring their musicians and actors onto virtual stages. Recorded concerts, ballets, opera, theater dominate our computers - old movies are all the rage; culture abounds. Families talk meaningfully, truthfully. One friend gives facetime cooking lessons to her teenaged grandson, another dons a mask and drives hours to see her grandchildren. Adult children shop for elderly parents, leaving food on driveways while adorable grandchildren sing and dance at a distance. Together we play games, sing songs, tell jokes, share secrets - open our hearts weeping, laughing, connecting. Is it the same as when in each other's homes and arms? That silly question has a profound answer. NO!

However, recently I heard a brilliant speaker state that self-care is essential because we have *clinical*, *ethical*, and *personal* responsibilities. Everyone on this benighted earth shares this requirement. That is all I mean to say about a pandemic in mid-May - we have to keep on truckin' ... together.

### **Addendum**

This was written just after Labor Day, several months after the above. I am still living in a very different geographical setting—not “home” in the city, New York, my city.

I include these thoughts although those written in May still hold true. But, four months have brought us to a new level of malaise, torpor, and loneliness - and they heavily weigh us down. The upcoming election, imbricated with all this misery, diverts us weirdly yet

importantly, giving us outlet for COVID blues and anxiety. Nonetheless, even as New York, city and state, has managed an impressive turn-around from benighted to proudly tall, we are still apprehensive, probably untrusting, and certainly still lonely. Our work continues, as so many of us have made interesting adaptations to practicing 'at home' and as our lives are underlaid with expectations of normalcy, someday! Most of us will return, if not to status quo ante exactly, then to a wiser world. The opera, libraries, museums, movie theaters, and restaurants have found the strength, commitment, and creativity to hang around, come back and improve. So too will we. I am not myopic rather, optimistic; I am not unmindful rather, hopeful; I am not alone, we are together.

**Barbara Stimmel, PhD, FIPA** was an early representative from NAPsaC to APsaA and IPA; is a Past President of Contemporary Freudian Society (CFS) and served as Associate Secretary to Otto Kernberg on the IPA Board. She analyses, supervises, and teaches in New York City and has contributed numerous papers to the analytic literature.