

Keep heart and carry on

By Andy Wulf

I remember vividly the first time I witnessed the direct effects of a pandemic on human beings. It was 1989 when, as a freshman at the University of Southern California, I accompanied a photography student who was shooting portraits of terminal AIDS patients at a hospice not far from campus. I carried her lights and cables, and served as her tech support.

This was the '80s, when the AIDS diagnosis was tantamount to a death sentence, not to mention a social death that would be suffered by many. While several geographical and social segments of the population were declared to have brought about this illness, it would become clear it was most commonly transmitted between heterosexual people all over the world. And people were dying from it, as they are today, though now it is referred to as a global epidemic. Semantics.

The AIDS hospice, like my university, was in South Los Angeles, not far from "South Central," which, then and now, maintains its notoriety over decades of vicious media depictions as a prime example of urban living gone wrong. The perceptions of the city's "weird" history are due as much to the sunshine boosterism of the 1920s as they are to *noir* writers like Raymond Chandler in the 1930s. From controversial battles over water rights—think "Chinatown"—to the 1992 Rodney King riots, the City of Angels would evolve into a megalopolis where many sought dreams of success, and few actually found them.

As of today, over the last 40 years, more or less, around 790,000 Americans have perished from AIDS-related illnesses. Around half that number, over the last year, have died from complications of COVID-19. Sure, one pandemic cannot be compared to another. But while the world as we know it is convulsed with personal loss and grief, against a backdrop of social isolation, economic downturn, and political upheaval, we must remember so many carry on to make life better, from frontline medical staff to virtual and in-person teachers who educate our children, to artists, who, despite circumstance, continue to create.

While there is no value system that can serve as a panacea for the human predicament, art and the experience of art can help. I salute those who carry on with heart and creativity, while we must remember those creatives we lost. To AIDS, over many years, we lost the likes of Keith Haring, Robert Mapplethorpe, Rudolf Nureyev, Rock Hudson, Anthony Perkins, Freddie Mercury, Liberace, and Halston. To COVID-19, in *less than a year*, we have been forced to say goodbye to Charley Pride, Carol Sutton, John Prine, Ellis Marsalis, David Prowse, Terrence McNally, Kenzo Takada, Bruce Williamson, and Wallace Roney.

That freshman year, and the years following while a student at Southern Cal, I volunteered with folks who were at death's door. They knew this was it. I knew this was it. All those people who laughed, cried, and suffered are long gone. This last year, from COVID-10, my neighbors died. My family's best friend perished. New friends I had made in my brief time here in Albany also fell to the pandemic.

What lessons have I learned? Then and now, I would offer: take time to praise creativity, to be creative, embrace the work of living artists as well as those who are creatively living their "best COVID lives" right now. The arts are a saving grace. Humanity is a saving grace. Kindness is a saving grace, if we let it flow.

Late in life, philosopher Aldous Huxley was asked to give his perspective on things. He said, "It is a bit embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than 'Try to be a little kinder.'"

I'm trying, too. What's the alternative?

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