Memories of My First Epidemic

If you’re like me, you’re still trying to find your bearings in this first-in-a-lifetime experience in a pandemic. When I was 5, my little brother Bobby died of a strange condition – new to us – called polio, or infantile paralysis. My mother was devastated. Then the teenage son of a neighbor who took care of me and my older brother while my parents were at the hospital with Bobby also died of polio. My mother felt guilty about that for years. Swimming pools were closed; fairs and carnivals and parades were cancelled or postponed.

There were heart-rending stories about young bodies trapped in hideous contraptions called “iron lungs”, which kept people alive but one had to wonder whether that existence could truly be called life. There were adults who walked with awkward limps, and children who had to lug around heavy braces on their little limbs and face a future of isolation and dependency.

But most people still went to work – my father continued to make sales calls in the homes of prospective buyers of Prudential insurance policies, my mother continued to trade her dressmaking skills for hair styling services, and my surviving brother went to Boy Scout camp. For the first – and only – time of her life, my mother became active in civic affairs.

It was called the March of Dimes. To work off her grief, my mother joined millions of others in a comprehensive effort to raise money that could finance research in the effort to develop a vaccine against polio. On a single night, donors throughout America were asked to leave their porch lights on and greet volunteers at their doors with donations as small as a dime. Think how our country has changed.

A donation of 10 cents had value. Most Americans knew this campaign was scheduled and thought it was worthwhile. Most people turned on their porch lights, or improvised something that could serve as a welcoming beacon for the volunteers. Each year, the public was informed about progress being made toward the vaccine’s development.

Finally, after years of fundraising and scientific searching, we had a vaccine against polio. It was a mutual achievement; many Americans were old enough to remember the devastation of other epidemics – particularly those affecting children -- chicken pox, mumps, measles, diphtheria, whooping cough, etc. As vaccines were developed, most parents were eager to have their babies and kindergarteners inoculated.

What will we do now? How will we fight this catastrophe? Will we have a more just and compassionate society once humans can be protected with a vaccine? Will science be elevated to a higher position of trust?

As I hold my breath until my son and his family are safely out of Spain and healthy in New Hampshire, I’m determined that we will find the equivalent of the March of Dimes to fight the effects of Covid-19. This time, our weapons are likely to be in the usual AAUW arsenal: education, human rights protection, civic action, and selective philanthropy.

Once we all become more conversant in the post-Covid communications tools of Zoom, Skype, etc., the Poughkeepsie Branch’s International/Diversity Committee will be discussing our new challenges. Those challenges will form the basis for our new program ideas – e.g., Global Friends Sharing Circles will start to look like Hollywood Squares, as we start to share in that new format.
The services and emotional support we had hoped to offer our community will need to be delivered at a distance for a while, but they will still be delivered in some form. Some of us have helped neighbors shop for groceries; others contributed items to the Student Pantry at Dutchess Community College.

As I spun from one concern to another in March, I finally found an outlet to reduce my anxiety: Turn off the television, get away from the computer, and bury myself in a sewing project. That’s why you haven’t heard from me. I have made covers for N-95 masks to extend their use in a local nursing home, as well as anti-virus masks for my family in Spain; friends; AAUW members; clients of The Fortune Society, which helps former incarcerated people re-enter society; and Dutchess Outreach, which distributed them to homeless residents in the area.

To satisfy my need for social interaction, I have been participating in the Fall Kill Creative Works series of Open Studios, offered twice a week in two-hour Zoom sessions. Each free session is held in the work space of a local artist’s studio, and participants are encouraged to work on something of their own while listening to the artists explain his/her creative process and joining in the general discussion among members of the group. I refrain from using my sewing machine during these sessions, but I can cut out patterns, pin pieces together, turn stitched items inside out, and press them with a steam iron, etc., without disturbing the group.

Featured artists have included weavers, potters, painters, textile artists, basket weavers, print makers, a porch-painter – there’s no limit. I recommend this series, and I’m sure there is room for more participants. Contact Kate Mitchell at director@FallkillCreativeWorks.org

This week I am enjoying a great new benefit of belonging to the World Affairs Council of the Hudson Valley, which has had to cancel its usual series of lectures held at local colleges. Instead, all such Council members throughout the country have been allowed to join presentations, produced via Zoom by local groups, on a variety of international subjects. Today the topics I’ll hear about are “International Exchange in a Time of Isolation”, with input from the Mexican Consul General; the effects of Covid-19 on the aviation industry, presented by the aviation director of the Charlotte, NC, airport; and the continuing challenges of global engagement, by a former ambassador to Bolivia. Wednesday’s topics will include gender inequality throughout the world, economic dignity throughout the world, and resuscitating globalization. Still more will be offered on Thursday and Friday.

I’ve also been able to listen to audio calls available to NY Times electronic subscribers that feature interviews by Times reporters of interesting people, as well as webinars produced by the National Press Foundation, AAUW, and The Transition Network.

I am finally at the point where I can attempt to organize a Zoom session for this committee. I hope you will want to share your ideas and tell us about your own Covid-19 experiences and how you are coping with them.

Keep tuned.

Marti Madory, Chair
International/Diversity Committee