



DICK
HUGHES
OTHER VIEWS

There is no back to normal

It was supposed to be over long ago. Only a month or two. Then life would be back to normal.

Back to eating in open, pleasantly staffed restaurants. Back to hanging out with family and friends in real life instead of over the internet. Back to sitting at office desks and wearing proper business attire. Back to attending sporting events in person without donning masks and showing proof of vaccinations.

Instead, the COVID-19 pandemic rolls on — like a roller coaster with its ups and downs, bringing out the best in Oregonians. And sometimes the worst.

We laud health care workers for their skills and endurance amid long hours. Then a few of us turn around and question whether these dedicated medical personnel did all they could to prevent our loved one's demise from COVID-19.

We finally appreciate that store clerks are essential workers. Yet if a store runs out of goods, some of us turn surly, or worse. We unload our wrath on clerks, expecting them to exert a mystical power that undoes the global supply chain bottlenecks.

We love being back in eateries and drinking establishments. But some of us ignore the national labor shortage and blame the existing workers if short staffing delays our meal. Indeed, blaming seems ever more popular, pushing aside gratitude.

Amid all this, we give mere lip service to honoring our democracy, as our minds fall victim to loudmouth extremists across the political spectrum.

Yes, we long for a return to normal. But that normal no longer exists, and never will. There is no going back. The pandemic has inexorably altered how we go about our daily lives, from how we shop to how we worship and how we obtain health care.

There is nothing to be gained by pining for the past. But there is room for gratitude. In fact, there is much for which to be thankful, although not always at first glance.

Let us start with the reality that being governor amid a pandemic has proved a thankless job. Yet two dozen men and women already are running in hopes of winning that job. Some are well-qualified, giving Oregonians a wide range of choices among political insiders and outsiders in next year's elections. There will be change, but how much? As the two main political parties turn ever-more-partisan, will this be the era when Oregonians go independent?

And while the labor shortage has created havoc, the income gap among Oregonians has narrowed a bit. As employers have increased pay, especially at the bottom rungs, workers earning less than \$20 an hour are experiencing real economic improvement despite inflation.

Along with an economic reckoning has come a refocus on family. Some employers have adjusted their work requirements and schedules to make them more family-friendly, the jobs more appealing and, ultimately, the workers more productive and loyal. Meanwhile, there is continued progress toward increasing access to decent, affordable child care throughout the state and the nation, enabling more parents to enter the workforce.

Schools have innovated. Distance learning was difficult for many students and underscored the divide between the broadband haves and the have nots. Yet some students flourished with distance learning, underscoring the need for a rich array of teaching methods.

Health care providers have expanded doctor visits by telephone and video, cutting the wait time for many appointments. Yet access to care remains an issue. Vaccines, while imperfect, have proved effective. New medicines may further reduce the severity of COVID-19 symptoms — if Oregon can get those prescriptions to newly diagnosed patients in time.

We could go on and on.

Our resilience has been tested. Our nerves have been frayed. Yet our nimbleness and creativity have been unleashed.

And there's even a chance that we can learn to be a bit nicer to each other, despite our personal frustrations and political differences. For that, we give thanks.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.



MEANWHILE, IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST...

Look for the good — it's always there



LINDSAY
MURDOCK
FROM SUNUP TO SUNDOWN

The smell of sweat mixed with popcorn made my nose tingle as I shoved a licorice rope further into my coat pocket. The bold words “effort, attitude, sportsmanship, attention and preparedness” caught my eye as I entered through the side door of the gym.

Basketballs were bouncing in a rhythm all their own, and the bottoms of clean, new shoes squeaked and screeched their way up, down, and all around the court. Basketball season had arrived, and I found myself once again in a place I've grown to love as a spectator, observer and onlooker of some pretty great moments.

I climbed the steps of the bleachers one level at a time while the two teams warmed up, looking for a vantage point that would give me an unobstructed view of both ends of the court — not too close, but not too far away either. I wanted to be able to see clearly, but I also wanted to blend in a bit too, standing out without standing up at all.

Was there such a place for me to watch from? Does a place like that even really exist? A place where perspective isn't just a physical location, but a mindset as well? I wasn't there to visit with everyone around me, nor was I there to rehash the calls the refs may or may not make, and I certainly

wasn't there to get caught up in any sort of sideline drama about ball hogs or bad coaching techniques. I was there to cheer as loudly or as quietly as I needed to for my boys, their teammates and even their coaches. I was there to see more good than bad when the score wasn't in our favor, and I was there to keep my own set of stats that had nothing to do with rebounds or take-downs. I continued smiling at the familiar faces around me while I unfolded my comfy stadium seat, also acknowledging a few strangers near me with a hopeful nod, and then quietly sat down. The game was about to begin, and even without setting foot on the court, I knew I had a pretty critical role to play as well.

From the sidelines of football fields, to ringside in show barns, and even near half court inside school gymnasiums, many of our stories hold tight to the places and spaces in which we have witnessed so much of our children's lives unfold. Season after season, year after year, many hours have been spent as spectators of highs and lows, and everything in between. In fact, I bet if you close your eyes right now, you can clearly see years of Christmas performances, a missed free throw or five, a buzzer beating shot, maybe a slam dunk, some amazing tackles, the correct feet placement of show animals at just the right time, and even a dance move or two that took your breath away that happened right in front of you from the bleachers.

I would also bet that you can hear judges speaking about how one small change could lead to improvement, teach-

ers sincerely applauding students' efforts of getting homework done and turned in on time, and coaches shouting plays from the bench or even the dugout as you make your way down the memory lane of life in the stands. These experiences have not only provided us with opportunities to learn the art of observation, but they've also extended our understanding of what the word “impress” really means and how impressions leave lasting marks, not just on the players, but on the people in the stands, too.

Many of us will be entering through a variety of gym doors over the course of the next few months. We will be filling the stands and sidelines to watch a select few play a game that allows only one team to win. We will be given opportunities to cheer, support, and encourage the best we know how. Will we get it right every time? Absolutely not. But wouldn't it be the coolest thing to know that our role in the audience as the bleacher people helped get everyone a little closer to the finish line in the greatest ways possible? That's the impression I want to make and one I hope you do, too.

Be discerning, think before you react to something you have no control over, look for the good (because it's always there), and make a conscious effort to lean away from criticism and into grace, because the truth is, even bleacher people can leave an impression in the greatest of games.

Lindsay Murdock lives and teaches in Echo.

Addressing addiction problems in the new year



JOSEPH
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OTHER VIEWS

Thanksgiving has come and gone, and largely, we survived. The COVID-19 pandemic put last year's festivities on hold, so these holidays are the first opportunity that many have had to gather and celebrate. But this could also mean that many people who've become addicted to drugs and alcohol are seeing their family again, which could bring a lot of things to light.

That's because the COVID-19 pandemic drastically worsened America's already horrific drug epidemic. Last year was the deadliest year for drug overdoses in American history. More than 93,000 people died of an overdose in 2020, which was an increase of more than 30% from the previous year's total, as reported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. And in 2021, those numbers are still climbing.

So, we have a large number of people who have begun abusing substances or have increased their use, leading to the worst point we've seen in our country's history of addiction. And many of them

will be joining their families for the holidays, a time of year when addiction is usually at its worst.

According to Marcel Gemme of Addicted.org, the holidays are already a recipe for overindulgence. Many people's holiday plans involve consumption of at least alcohol, which can easily lead to misuse. Those who already struggle with addiction may find the holidays bring up negative emotions or additional scrutiny from family members. They may use even more substances to cope with the negative feelings or try to hide their drug use. All these things can lead to consuming drugs or alcohol when one might otherwise not.

With addiction rates increasing and more people gathering this holiday season than any time since 2019, the chances of the year ending in tragedy are much higher than experts would like to see. But instead of preparing for the worst, this time could be viewed as an opportunity to solve the problem.

A solution to America's drug epidemic is needed. We have poured an excessive amount of time, attention and resources into fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, and those efforts are what are allowing us to have this holiday experience in 2021. Tackling the nation's addiction problem with even a fraction of the same intensity level

given to COVID-19 could potentially end one of the worst public health threats we've ever known.

After all, drug overdoses alone have taken more lives than the coronavirus has in America, with a death toll that's more than 25% higher. And that's only taking into account drug overdoses since 1999 and does not include other drug-related deaths such as those from accidents and illnesses.

This new year, let's aim to address this problem once and for all. We can each go on hoping it gets better, which it isn't, or we can do something about it.

Taking action to solve addiction may start small. But it starts with each of us. Take this time to see your loved ones and really check on how they're doing. You might just save the life of someone you love, and that's all that matters whether we're fighting COVID-19 or addiction.

Joseph Kertis is an experienced health care expert turned journalist. His experience in the field gives a unique insight into one of our nation's most challenging professions. He utilizes this knowledge in his writing to give an expert viewpoint that spreads awareness through education. He is a featured author of the health care website ECDOL.