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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



Hope for a better year

hortly before Thanksgiving, my husband and I went to the Oregon Humane Society to adopt a 10-week-old black kitten named Binksy.

With a pandemic holiday season ahead, we wanted a new family member who could bring a positive, loving energy to our home. Binksy is at times a rambunctious, athletic Tasmanian devil. Then he makes up for it by turning into a cuddly, lovable kitten sleeping in your lap. He's been a blessing, even when he gets into trouble by knocking things over. He's helped us to remember better times, and his sense of playful adventure has been inspiring during a year of great concern about our personal health.

Let's face it, 2020 was a horrible year. Everyone I know was more than eager to be done with it. COVID-19 changed this country. More than 351,000 people have died from the disease, and many more will be afflicted with complications from it for years to come.

The announcement of vaccines gave us a silver lining toward the end of the year, though they likely won't be readily available to most Americans until summer, depending on the number of vaccines that are ultimately approved and if the distribution is efficient and effective. But even after vaccination, we must continue to live cautiously. The norm will still be to avoid large gatherings and wear a face covering throughout most of the year. Even in my theater work, it's projected that we cannot think about staging productions indoors until September.

Some other good news arrived when we experienced the largest voter turnout in American history and a new president was elected. After four years that to me felt like a bombardment against people of color, immigrants, the LGBTQI+community, lower income folks, and others, I hope for a return to reason and empathy, yet I foresee a slow pathway to finding some form of normalcy.

For many people, 2020 meant losing family members through death or political division. In addition, people lost jobs, businesses, and incomes as well as their homes. Families have struggled to help their kids learn online. Some college students, who would rather not pay tuition for long-distance learning, took a year off. Many restaurants and bars closed, some permanently. Those that remain open are struggling to stay afloat mainly through takeout orders. The travel industry has faced major layoffs and the hotel industry is barely hanging on. Life has changed a lot.

One of the few positives came at a bitter cost.

The killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so many other Black Americans stirred a racial reckoning across the country that has brought serious attention to police reform, reallocation of funds, and a call for mental health and community programs to help address 911 calls that would be best handled by specialists trained in de-escalation techniques.

Healthcare employees, first responders, and essential workers have all emerged as the true heroes of 2020. They have risked their own health to do their jobs, keeping us alive and the country running. For this, we owe them an immense debt of gratitude

Some other positives include the entertainment industry and small nonprofit theatres starting the long overdue process of reviewing the lack of diversity and equity within organizations in order to make structural change.

When travel was restricted and shutdowns occurred in many industries, the pandemic brought on a sudden worldwide drop in greenhouse-gas emissions. Our air was cleaner. According to the National Institutes of Health, both air and water quality improved around the globe. Whether this step in the correct direction is sustainable is yet to be determined. Travel in the future will have to be more thoughtful.

People in every walk of life, including myself, had time for self-reflection in 2020, and to take stock of our lives and careers while connecting to others from a distance.

With the ushering in of a new year, we need to have hope, especially younger generations. There is an urgency to be more careful and thoughtful about our health. We can no longer afford to laugh off the winter cold and flu season; we must adopt practices that allow everyone to be safe.

I long to return to a world in which I had only moderate anxiety about my health and future. It would be lovely to travel to another country — or at least go to Hawai'i. I dream about working on any project involving actual in-person groups of people.

My wish is to be as fearless as Binksy as he tears through our house, knowing that my husband and I will take care of him. We're his safety net. If anything, the goal for 2021 is to restore a modicum of safety and symbolically get our country back on its feet.

For all of you, I wish for hope in this new, better year.

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