

All I Really Need to Know I Learned During a Pandemic

Credit: Furman University, South Carolina, Blog Submission by John

Nearly 35 years ago, author Robert Fulghum gave us the now well-known book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. In the book he describes how the simple lessons he was taught in kindergarten (share, don't hit people, take a nap every afternoon, etc.) continued to have significance throughout his life. The subtitle of his book is "Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things."

I have borrowed Fulghum's sentiment in giving this reflection the title, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned During a Pandemic." If I were to have a subtitle, mine would be "Common Thoughts During Uncommon Times."

"Uncommon times" is an understatement, isn't it? Campuses are empty and are being described as ghost towns. School buses are running, but the only passengers are the prepared meals that are being delivered to students who need them. Stores are closing (some temporarily, some permanently). There is even speculation that there may be no football in the fall. You know things are bad when that happens.

Of course, the primary thing on our minds is health and safety — of ourselves, our families, our neighbors, and all of the helpers who inspire us each day. These are uncommon times, for sure.

This situation has been the source of many lessons for me, and I would like to share some of these with you. Some of my observations are silly and some are serious — but regardless of the circumstances that taught me, the lessons themselves have been profound, at least for me.

So here we go. During this strange time of quarantines, social distancing, and precautionary living, I have learned ...

1. That the first step in a project does not have to be to buy something. When I embark on a new project at home (a repair or improvement of some kind), my first thought is usually “what can I buy to make this work?” These days, running out to the store isn’t advisable (or even possible in some cases), and so I have been forced to start the process with more creative thinking. What do I already have that can help with this? Perhaps that is how I should always start a project.

2. That I will be just fine if my first choices aren’t available. We ran out of my favorite snack recently (KIND bars, if you are interested). A few weeks ago I would have gone right to the grocery store to remedy this situation. This being now, that wasn’t possible. I took a second look in the cabinet and found some other options. Good stewardship matters.

3. That some things really don’t matter. I don’t like the way my thick hair looks when it gets long and bushy, and I winced when I first realized that I won’t be able to get a haircut for a while. While this initial reaction is embarrassing to admit, I am glad to report that I am over it now. In the grand scheme of things, this, of course, is of very little concern. You may think differently when you see me, but I trust that the sight will be a reminder to you that some things really don’t matter.

4. That some things really do matter. Although I am fortunate to be with my family during this time, there is still a longing to see other people — other family, friends, etc. I think others are feeling this, too. I notice this in the first few seconds of every meeting on Zoom. Eyes light up when each new face appears. It is good to see and interact with people. I also notice it when I am out for a walk or a run in the neighborhood. I’ve noticed an increased number of waves and acknowledgements. People want to be with people. That matters.

5. That light can be found in the darkest of times. The children’s television icon, Mr. Rogers, was the source of many profound insights. Our current situation reminds me of a favorite quotation from him.

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.”

Look for the helpers. They are everywhere — and in the mirror.

6. That I may not need everything that I have. Knowing that I would be unable to have access to my office, I had to bring home the things that were essential for carrying on with school. Those things fit on the corner of my dining room table — my makeshift office. Do I really need everything else? I recognize that there are things in my office that I will need in other situations, and so I'm not ready to box up everything and get rid of it. It has been enlightening, though, to realize that my list of essential items is shorter than I might have thought.

8. That I don't need to be going somewhere else. Prior to our current situation, much of my day was spent going from here to there to here to there. Sometimes the travel was to a different city or state, sometimes it was across town, and sometimes it was just walking from my office to a classroom. I've realized that there is something about "going" that provides a sense of accomplishment. Here in the house, where there aren't many places to go, that particular sense of accomplishment is missing. It has been good for me to realize that it is ok to be still.

9. That I don't always need to be thinking ahead to the next fun event or outing. I have a habit of doing this. What's the next thing for me to be excited about? The concert next week? The trip next month? These days, I have no idea when the next "big thing" is going to be. This has helped to remind me to appreciate and enjoy the present.

10. That others have wonderful gifts to share. We have all seen the remarkable gifts that caregivers of all types are providing, and we are so grateful for their efforts. I have been the beneficiary of some other types of gifts as well. Through emails, phone calls, and social media sharing, I have been moved by beauty, inspired by creativity, and uplifted by humor. I love that people are sharing in ways they can share. What a great example of people living up to their callings!

11. That trying to be perfect is exhausting. In shifting from regular classroom instruction to remote instruction, I have worked to create videos for my classes. My need for them to be flawless has led me to spend hours and hours (take after take) to get them just right. I need to get over this. I don't think the students will mind if I stumble over words here and there. They don't seem to mind when I do it in person (I think).

12. That I should not overlook the significance of any job/profession. Society has long attributed importance to the services that medical professionals provide for us. This is clearly evident in times such as these. My personal list of heroes has grown, though. We are surviving now because of the good work of grocery store stockers, truck drivers, toilet paper suppliers, and the like. Everyone has value, and everyone contributes.

13. That people, divided in so many ways, do have the ability to work together to face a common challenge. It has taken a little while for it to happen, but it seems to me that people are coming together on this. People who normally disagree with one another about almost everything on social media are now saying and sharing some of the same things. Sure, there is still some degree of finger pointing and blame spreading, but in terms of the importance of social distancing, other good practices, and appreciation of caregivers/heroes, the message is unified. I don't like that it has taken a crisis to bring this out, but nonetheless it is uplifting to see people thinking and working together.

There are many more lessons to be learned, I'm sure. I imagine that you share some of these with me and that you have some of your own as well. Our current situation will end at some point, and we will likely go back to a way of life that resembles (at least somewhat) our pre-pandemic lives. I hope that we will remember these lessons when that time comes.

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