

Pandemic fatigue and the gap year 2020



SCRIBBLER'S NOTEBOOK

By Jamie Etheridge

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On February 25, I planned to take my daughters to see the Al-Farsi kite festival in Bnaider. We go almost every year and spend the day playing games, flying kites and enjoying the desert winter weather and the colorful kites. Unfortunately, the coronavirus showed up in Kuwait just before the holiday and we ended up heeding the government's advice to stay at home and avoid going out.

Nearly six months later, we continue to follow this guidance. We go to work and the grocery store, have been to the mall once or twice only for much-needed items, visit the beach or park only in the early morning or early evening and always maintain social distance and wear a mask. We have also avoided all gatherings, crowded events or other public activities. Like so many others in Kuwait, we are battling this pandemic the only way we can - by staying home and staying safe.

Doing this has not been easy but we are among the lucky.

There are tens of thousands who have suffered from months of lockdown, lost their jobs or income, saw their businesses closed, possibly never to reopen.

Children have also been without school for six months now. Summer for them is usually the holiday period, a time when families travel for at least a few weeks abroad rather than endure Kuwait's sweltering 45C-55C summer heat. Because of the pandemic, however, most people are not traveling for vacations. Pools and gyms remain closed as are all children's activity centers.

And though we are trying our best to stay positive, to stay active and healthy, to keep anxiety and fear at bay, the days have begun to wear on us. The children bicker more frequently, us adults are more short tempered and we are all ready for a break.

We've crossed into the land of pandemic fatigue, where the crisis has transformed from an unusual event into the every day. Pandemic normalized. We don masks before leaving the house, schedule zoom meetings and live with the constant worry that our family, friends and communities will suffer greater losses - of people dying, of businesses ruined, of salaries cut, jobs terminated.

Everyone I talk to is feeling the stress, the pressure of the pandemic. No one is immune because even if your family managed to hold on to their business or work or haven't had anyone get sick, the children are still out of school and the

economy is stagnated.

So what to do? How to get past this fatigue, this overwhelming sense of fear and despair when there are still hundreds of new cases each day and its unclear if there will be a second 'wave' in the fall or even when the pandemic will end and life will return to normal?

There are no easy fixes, especially for those facing financial difficulties or health challenges. One way that I've adopted to address the uncertainty is to stop looking forward to or waiting for the 'return to normal'. Instead of holding my breath and counting the days until life resumes as we once knew it to me, my family and I are carving out a new normal that includes the reality of the pandemic.

This pandemic life assumes a certain amount of uncertainty. Rather than waiting for life to resume, we are moving on with life as it is. Rather than lamenting virtual learning for the fall, we are finding ways to make learning at home fun, engaging and meaningful. Rather than mourning the missed summer travel, we are exploring ways to be productive and creative in our home environment.

The circumstances are not ideal but since we have no choice in the matter, we are viewing 2020 as a gap year for us all, a break from our normal lives and routine and hope that we survive this pandemic with our lives, our families and emerge with new passions, new skills and new opportunities.

Lebanon and learning from history to overcome tragedy

IN MY VIEW

By Ahmad Jabr

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Specialists at UK's University of Sheffield Blast and Impact Engineering Research Group described Beirut's blast as "unquestionably one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in history." The explosion was the equivalent of 1,000 to 1,500 tons of TNT, which is about 10 percent as powerful as the Hiroshima nuclear bomb, they told the Evening Standard.

As soon as footage started to emerge showing the gravity of Beirut's blast, it immediately drew comparisons online and in local media to the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki towards the end of World War II, not only due to the shape of the mushroom cloud it had created, but also in terms of the large scale of devastation it left.

There is really no comparison between the Beirut blast and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - which, coincidentally, marked the 75th anniversaries of the bombings in the same week - in terms of the lives lost or the devastation wrought in Japan that was and remains incalculable. But that doesn't negate or diminish the devastation in Beirut. And there are lessons Lebanon might draw from Japan's response to its earlier tragedy.

For many centuries, Japan was controlled by strong military dictators called 'shoguns' who ruled with an iron fist, and many parts of the nation were marred by civil wars and

conflict. Corruption and violence were prevalent in the Japanese society during the 'feudal Japan' era, and people close to the military government had power and influence in a strict class hierarchy. While imperial rule returned to Japan in the late 19th century following a rebellion against the centuries-old military rule, most of the same characteristics of the past remained. Japan's imperial expansion ambitions in World War II ended when two of its cities were devastated by nuclear weapons.

Facing destruction the likes of which humanity has never seen, the founders of modern Japan realized that the only way to overcome a tragedy of such magnitude was to change. And in order to achieve change, they realized they had to start from within and do away with their old system of power that had lasted for hundreds of years and led them to the point where they were at the time. They adopted a new democracy-based political system, focused all their attention on achieving an economic and industrial revolution, and developed the human capital as the catalyst and main resource to achieve that goal. Within a relatively short period of time, Japan became the strongest economy in the world despite being scarce on natural resources. The society was rebuilt while keeping the good values from the old traditions, creating an efficient system that harnessed the skills of the Japanese people to serve the common good.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from the Japanese experience is that real change and progress happens when there is leadership that truly loves its country, puts its faith in its people and fully believes in their ability to achieve the desired goals.

The Lebanese people who are currently protesting on a daily basis believe that this is the opposite of what they have faced for the majority of their country's existence. In their demands, they believe that the current confessionalist



BEIRUT: A woman with her boy contemplate the damaged grain silos at the port of Beirut following a huge explosion that disfigured the Lebanese capital, on August 12, 2020. — AFP

political system needs an overhaul and restructuring in a way that gives them a real chance to develop their country, as they believe in their ability to build a strong and stable society. The Lebanese people have placed the blame for the country's current situation squarely on the shoulders of dysfunctional governments lacking the basic qualities of leadership, led by those who prioritized personal gain and used sectarianism to fuel their ambitions even at the expense of leaving their cities in ruins.

There is a chance today for Lebanon to use the tragedy as a turning point to realize change and build a modern state led by its people. It is a chance worth taking; whatever the results might end up being, they can't be worse than what's already happened.