

Annus Horribilis

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In her Christmas speech of that year, Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth referred to 1992 as her *annus horribilis*. Members of the Royal Family suffered through separations and divorces, a suicide, and relentless gossipmongering in the media. The year culminated in the Queen's being pelted with eggs at a commemorative gathering¹ and experiencing a fire at Windsor Castle.²

The United States endured its own *annus horribilis* in 2020. Due in part to mismanagement of the health-care crisis, millions of people became infected with a novel coronavirus, and hundreds of thousands died. At the beginning of January 2021, hospitals continue to be overwhelmed, and overworked and overstressed healthcare personnel must wonder when life will return to "normal."

New York Times writer Elizabeth Dias points out that a "raw and unbridled winter has descended upon America."³ She alludes to the literal darkness of the winter solstice and the metaphorical darkness of the Covid-19 catastrophe and supports Centers for Disease Control Director Dr. Robert Redfield's assertion that the first few months of 2021 "could be the most difficult in the country's entire public health history."³ Dr. Michael Osterholm of President Joseph Biden's coronavirus task force is more optimistic, now that vaccines have been developed, "The darkness of the pandemic is very real to me... [but] the days of the pandemic are going to get brighter, as are the days of our world. It is ironic that they both hope to get brighter around the same time."³

The first weeks of inoculations, however, have been chaotic, as state and local health care facilities cope with slow delivery of vaccines and with

organizing effective inoculation schedules. People awaiting the vaccine are left wondering when vaccines will be available in their area, if any, and how they will be notified, if at all. It's a double whammy—worrying "Will I get Covid?" and "How and when can I get the vaccine?" University of California psychology professor Kate Sweeny asserts that people do not cope with ambiguity very well, "Our current situation is marked by two pandemics, the viral one [and] a psychological pandemic of uncertainty... Uncertainty leaves us scrambling to regain an element of control—by hoarding toilet paper, for example."⁴

Many of us compound the feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity by doomscrolling, or focusing inordinately on grim news. Similar to repeatedly touching a bad tooth to see if it still hurts, checking social media again and again for the latest governmental shenanigans and the most up-to-date counts of viral infections and deaths raises our blood pressure and heart rate. Psychologist Mary McNaughton-Cassill from the University of Texas at San Antonio maintains, "Our brains evolved to constantly seek threats... watching all the time in order to protect our families. That's why we seem predisposed to pay more attention to negative than positive things."⁵ Constant exposure to perceived injustice or to violence or to threatening health news can be overwhelming.

Unfortunately, social media algorithms "are designed to take and amplify whatever emotions will keep us watching, especially negative emotions," claims David Jay of the Center for Humane Technology. "And that can have a real negative impact on people's mental health."⁵ Search engines reinforce doomscrolling by presenting content similar to what people have just viewed. Jay is concerned that "bad actors" include misinformation along with authentic news, pointing out the bogus Covid cures and vaccine fearmongering touted on social media.

As the United States stumbles into 2021 after its *annus horribilis*, people may feel shell-shocked from

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DOI: 10.12746/swrccc.v9i37.807



George Tooker. *The Subway* 1950. Whitney Museum of American Art. New York.

prolonged negative experiences. Artist George Tooker (1920–2011) depicted this kind of psychological distress in his postwar paintings, including *The Subway* (1950).⁶ Tooker's characters display expressions of dread and anxiety, as if they were emerging not just from a mundane subway system but from the existential purgatory of pandemic-induced mental anguish. Although several figures occupy the same space, they seem set apart from one another, estranged in their isolation, perhaps reminding viewers of social distancing requirements in their communities. Some remain hidden in niches in the wall, fearful of interacting at all.

Tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity, on the other hand, can lead to enhanced survival value, according to psychologist Mark Freeson of Newcastle University in northeast England.⁴ Focusing on coping mechanisms can help, such as not dwelling on past behavior or what the future will bring. Kate Sweeny maintains that this kind of ruminating is exhausting and can lead to depression and further anxiety. She recommends mindfulness as a strategy to focus instead on the

present, "People who did brief mindfulness meditation every week or so seemed to fare better during a stressful waiting period."⁴

A lighthearted coping strategy is to indulge in nostalgia. Freeson advises searching for "signs of safety that help us cope with uncertainty," such as comfort food or favorite childhood television shows.⁴ The Disney+ streaming service couldn't have chosen a better time for its inauguration. People who cannot seem to concentrate enough to finish their novels can always turn to video games or to gardening or painting, some activity that is engaging but not too mentally taxing. One final suggestion is to establish a rhythm, a schedule that provides an anchor.⁴ Working from home, for example, initially upset many people's routines, but establishing new routines can provide some stability.

As we look ahead to the first few months of 2021, we can anticipate perhaps a calmer political arena but a darker stage of viral infections until the majority of the population is vaccinated. Moving through this

unsettling period, we can remember the symbolism of the eight-day Jewish Festival of Lights. On each day of Hanukkah, another candle of the Menorah is lit, leading gradually from darkness to faint light, to more light, to even brighter light. Brother Guy Consolmagno, director of the Vatican Observatory, offers a similar analogy, "It is an interesting metaphysical as well as astronomical truth, that it is only when you have good darkness that you can see the faint lights, whether it is faint stars, or the little points of light, the thousand points of light that bring us hope even in darkness."³

*Someday soon we all will be together
if the fates allow,
Until then we'll have to muddle through
somehow ...*⁷

Keywords: coronavirus, Covid-19, anxiety, uncertainty, vaccines

Article citation: Nugent C. *Annus Horribilis*. The Southwest Respiratory and Critical Care Chronicles 2021;9(37):84–86

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Submitted: 1/7/2021

Accepted: 1/9/2021

Reviewer: Gilbert Berdine MD

Conflicts of interest: none

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