

What 2020 taught us

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Scholars, our neighbors and others tell us what they've learned from this wretched year

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Adversity is a thief. This year it took our solace, our livelihoods and the people we love. Yet, 2020 also provided us with lessons about perseverance and compassion, among other things. (Illustration by JoAnne Walsh | Advance Local Media)

By [Robin Wilson-Glover](#) | [NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

There's no debate on this point: 2020 has been an exhausting, transformative, hellacious year.

The COVID-19 pandemic took loved ones from us, isolated us, confused us and, worse, made us fear death even more than we already did. And, as if that wasn't enough, the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black men by police, a massive civil rights movement and a highly contentious presidential election made us even angrier and tired and scared.

But if there's any truth to fortune cookie philosophy, the only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how you use them.

Even as we suffered through the final days of 2020, dozens of scholars, doctors, nurses, politicians, businessmen and women and our neighbors in New Jersey told us that 2020 actually taught us valuable lessons like resilience and humility.

“What I've learned,” says Montclair author Jennifer Anne Moses, is “even in the face of a pandemic, with the world that I always knew was falling apart around me, and a future with no sure answers or a way out of the mess we're all in, my interests and obsessions, my hopes and joys, my fears and griefs, my circle of concern are both the melody and the steady beat of the composition that unfolds every morning when I wake to a new day.”

So, from this dark winter, there is hope that next year will bring enlightenment.

Here's more of what we learned from 2020:

CAROLYN HAYES | *chief nursing officer at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey*



Carolyn Hayes, chief nursing officer at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey and RWJBarnabas Health Oncology Services, says the challenge post-pandemic will be to heal the healers. (Photo courtesy Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey)

It is standard practice for oncology nurses to teach ‘social distancing’ to our patients, but before 2020 we didn’t use that label. We teach them, given their compromised immune state, that even loved ones are potentially hazardous to their health and they need to be discerning about with whom they spend their time. We caution them to avoid crowds and public areas, consider masks and to always wash their hands. In 2020, we were all given the same instructions. This was a walk in our patients’ shoes and enlightening to the many ways social distancing is difficult — physically, emotionally and spiritually. The existential overhang of fear — fear of touch, fear of proximity, fear of physical harm from an invisible source — as a daily concern became the norm. As the fatigue of the vigilance required to stay safe grew, so too did our empathy.

As an optimist, I hold on to the belief that “It is an ill wind that doesn’t blow some good.” Did the vulnerability and fatigue of vigilance at long last open our eyes to the impact systemic racism has on our citizens of color? There were two epidemics lived through in 2020, the pandemic and the pain of racial disparities in our country. Have we learned?

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