

Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon, 2022

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Sarah Gregory] Hello, I'm Sarah Gregory, and today I'm talking with Dr. Ron Louie. He's a specialist in Pediatrics and Hematology-Oncology. We'll be discussing his poem, "Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon", which was inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Welcome, Dr. Louie.

[Ron Louie] Thank you.

[Sarah Gregory] EID published *Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon 2022* in the July issue of this year 2022. You published, "Isolation Cocoon, May 2020", in November of 2020. And I talked to you in May of 2021. That date sticks in my mind because at the end of our conversation you said, "May the 4th be with you." Has much changed between your two poems?

[Ron Louie] Well, you probably know the Star Wars franchise went to the small screen because of the pandemic. So I've been doing a lot of episode streaming, for one. But the second poem probably came about because the movies started opening again, along with ball games and nightclubs and other things. And there was a lot of pent-up demand, and it was amazing to see how many people flock together again.

[Sarah Gregory] There's a line from the first stanza that I personally can so relate to. It's "who would guess that the loosening would be so worrying?". I still find it worrying. I think in 2020 we all thought we would be throwing our masks in the air all at once in glee when it was over, and it certainly hasn't worked out that way, has it? How are you looking at the world now?

[Ron Louie] Well, this will date me, but I've been a clinician for several decades, I like to say, starting in the last century. And there's been nothing like this pandemic, aside from natural disasters and wars and political upheavals in other countries. I can't think of anything that has been so pervasive and invasive in our own lives and in lives of people around the world. And the medical community, I think, responded, and the learning curve has been very steep. And that has actually made it harder to let go.

These days, I do have a term for our current status. And that is, 'contagious insouciance' or maybe, "contagious nonchalance", which I think describes how people are going about their lives these days. I don't think it's enough for a third poem, so you can rest easy on that point. But we have little grandkids. One is too young for vaccination. So mindful of our responsibility to be protective, we basically stay more or less isolated. And that has become our comfort zone.

[Sarah Gregory] So no live Star Wars movie for you yet, eh?

[Ron Louie] Well, they haven't hit the big screen. I mean, there's lots of other things that I would like to see. I feel like a schoolboy with respect to my pop culture tastes, I guess. But yeah, there are a lot of selections on streaming services, so I'm stuck.

[Sarah Gregory] Well, speaking of schoolboy, are you still teaching at the University of Washington in Seattle?

[Ron Louie] Well, over the last few years, I've been in a program where I have mentored medical students. But it has been over zoom, and it's not the same kind of interaction. So I'm not sure where that's going. But otherwise, I'm not doing any major teaching or research.

[Sarah Gregory] Well, back to your poem. Obviously where we were in 2020 is different than now, as we were saying. What are you trying to convey in the newer poem?

[Ron Louie] Poets usually describe their own work pretty badly. But since you asked, the first notion was that I had to exploit that butterfly image again. I mean, it's such an amazing image of butterflies emerging from their cocoons. And then I found that elegant and funny quote from the comedian George Carlin about the butterfly getting all the glory while the caterpillar did all the work. So to put it in the context of the pandemic and how we've lived through the pandemic, and using the butterfly as a metaphor, it's about personal transformation in a way. And maybe it's more than that.

The third thing I wanted to mention was that there was a new medical term (at least, to me), and it's an epidemiological term—"the excess of losses"—which is how they estimated the number of deaths above and beyond the natural death rate in different countries. So that's kind of a euphemism, and it really kind of hides the pain and grief of millions of deaths worldwide. And I wanted to acknowledge that. I've actually heard from a fairly young researcher who lost her spouse to COVID before vaccinations were even available, and the impact of those kinds of losses is just hard to describe. And there's a bit about public health communication and how people responded (some negatively).

And then finally, I wanted to sneak in some ideas. You know, we're talking about if you follow the pandemic, people talk about the variants of the virus. And so, I wanted to talk about how humans can be variants, which some people might find funny, I hope. And then I wanted to include a little allusion to classical poetry. John Keats wrote about truth and beauty, and John Keats was a doctor. So not saying that meant he knew what he was talking about, but of course, he did. He is thought to be a...an icon of romantic poetry, anyway. So I wanted to cram a lot of stuff into this poem.

[Sarah Gregory] I have to confess my ignorance here. I never realized that Keats was a doctor.

Okay. Speaking of doctors, as a poet and a doctor, do you think you have a different perspective on life than, say, doctors who aren't poets?

[Ron Louie] I think doctors are just people with all sorts of different aesthetic sense. I can't believe that not all doctors are Star Wars fans, for example. And with respect to poems, I think my favorite poet was an American insurance executive, Wallace Stevens, an early 20th century poet. The short answer is, I just hope the doctors who aren't poets are good at what they do.

[Sarah Gregory] I believe you write two blogs and a weekly COVID-related email in addition to your poetry. What do you get out of writing?

[Ron Louie] I'm a person that prefers medical literature to the news. Of course, the news isn't that fun to read these days. And for me, writing is just communicating and sharing ideas. And it happens to be very nicely remote, so you don't have to be worried about spraying droplets on people. And with respect to medical literature, it kind of exploded in a way with the pandemic, with substantial insights into virology and molecular interactions with the human body and insights in how to take care of sick patients with COVID; how people access care, not only in this country but around the world; and then, various aspects of human biology and immunity and public health policy.

So that's part of the writing, of course, is the reading beforehand. So I've enjoyed the reading and trying to understand things from a medical perspective. And in a way, I've had the privilege of

having great teachers in my training who discussed how to evaluate medical literature, and how it may or may not reflect the situation at hand. And then, the writing part, most people I know are too busy with other things in their lives, and it has been fulfilling for me to try to fill in some backstory and provide what I call "factoids" and try to interpret at least what's verifiable from the medical literature, anyway. The pandemic, I think, lent itself to a lot of rumors and misunderstandings. So with my email about COVID to colleagues and family and friends, I try to do make it understandable. One of the things I learned back in school being a schoolboy journalist is you have to write at a certain grade level. So not that I was dumbing things down, but that I really tried to make things accessible, so I copy a lot of figures. And public health agencies were amazing in putting their data in the public domain. In other words, where I live in King County in the state of Washington, they have an excellent website that keeps track of cases and hospitalizations and deaths, and I would just copy some of their figures and not comment. I mean, people can make their own judgements about those kinds of factoids.

The two blogs cover another aspect of my life, which is home caregiving. And then, I also do some medical interpretation of medical literature in Alzheimer's therapeutic research—okay, not basic science research but clinical therapeutic research—knowing (and letting the reader know) that I have an oncologist's perspective. And cancer has been...well, it has been more successful, and I'm trying to figure out if there is a way to transfer some of that success over to our neurologist friends, as they deal with various dementias. That's my writing lately.

[Sarah Gregory] Getting back to poetry in particular, what do you think the function of poetry is in society? There's a lot of it and it's not paid well, but people keep writing it and some people keep reading it.

[Ron Louie] Yeah. Hard to know why it's not addictive. And you can the value of poetry in most societies by how much you pay for it, which is zero. So I think it's actually, in some ways, it's entertainment. It may be a little thought provoking sometimes. It's always wordy, so you have to enjoy words and wordplay. And if a person likes that kind of thing, it's cheap. The really weird thing to me is I can incorporate a one-liner from a comedian, but I've never seen a comedian incorporate a one-liner from a poet. So I don't know, it's a one-way street, I guess.

[Sarah Gregory] I don't know, they might be missing the boat.

These two poems aren't certainly not your only ones. Where else have you been published?

[Ron Louie] Well, I've been lucky enough to have several poems out there in the last few years. A haiku series of mine was just published in a fun way by a website called Origamipoems. So you print out one page and fold it up. It's not really complicated origami or anything, it's just a fold-up thing and you make yourself a little booklet of haiku. And that came out maybe a month or two ago. I had a prose poem that was published last year in *Philosophy and Literature*, which is an academic journal, and that poem is about astronomy and our perception of stars. I have a poem about a magician, because I like what I call, "pocket magic"...anyway, fun little magic tricks for kids. And then I have a poem about a specific breath, and it's on a website called Pangyrus.com. And then, just actually last week, I was notified I have something that was accepted in a psychiatry journal about dementia.

[Sarah Gregory] What do you hope people will take away from this poem?

[Ron Louie] Well, the *Emerging* poem I hope resonates with people from experiences of the pandemic. And then, maybe it will get people curious about George Carlin (the late George

Carlin, I should say). And he has an especially funny stand-up bit about baseball and football, if you haven't seen it.

[Sarah Gregory] Okay Dr. Louie, on that note, would you read *Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon 2022* to us now?

[Ron Louie] Okay, thanks.

"Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon, 2022"

"The caterpillar does all the work but the butterfly gets all the publicity.", which is a quote attributed to George Carlin.

The security layers started peeling away, seemingly too soon.
Once constricting, every movement and moment a struggle,
who would guess that the loosening would be so worrying?

Preposterous miracles had manifested themselves, albeit
imperfectly; so one emerges, reviving afresh in the sunlight, imbibing
the unmasked scents, even as the serial-killing fiend remains free.

A kaleidoscope of butterflies is what one calls a mass fluttering;
that term could well apply to humans here, self-identifying their
variants and varieties of existence, behaviors, and beliefs.

The excess of losses has been unthinkable, and not to be forgotten.
Preventive interventions were knowingly imprecise; but lacking
protections, from denials, was also hazardous for the republic's health.

Poets have long lyricized ideal truth, but the pandemic taught
how fragile truth can be, the fragile beauty of a glistening bubble,
buffeted almost to bursting by a cacophony of ravenous twittering.

Yet one can now stretch out shimmering wings, so to speak,
with the brash confidence befitting a monarch, fully expecting
to start a new cycle in life, despite the circling shadows overhead.

[Sarah Gregory] I think that's beautiful, and I'm glad we published it and there's a lot of really, really wonderful lines in there.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today, Dr. Louie.

[Ron Louie] Okay, hope I wasn't too raspy.

[Sarah Gregory] You were fine.

And thanks for joining me out there. You can read the July 2022 poem, *Emerging from an Isolation Cocoon, 2022*, online at [cdc.gov/eid](https://www.cdc.gov/eid).

I'm Sarah Gregory for Emerging Infectious Diseases.

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