

Family Development in a Pandemic Era

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The Pandemic Era brought changes to my family. Some changes were for the better, enhancing our family life, and others were challenging to navigate through. However, adapting to the challenges worked resilience into us, and showed us we can endure more than we believe.

The first challenge for me as a grandmother was that my third grandchild was born during the pandemic. Being a pandemic baby, I saw my granddaughter only briefly after the delivery. My daughter decided for the safety of her baby to go in lockdown with only her immediate family of four. My other granddaughter was in New York City with my son and his wife.

In the beginning of the pandemic, my husband and I decided to quarantine in our townhome in our hometown of Pittsburgh. It seemed safer being further from the epicenter of Covid than our house in New York. Our home in New York is only twenty minutes from New Rochelle where Covid began. When Governor Cuomo announced the lockdown of New York City, my son decided to move into our home in Westchester about an hour outside of the city. After a few months, we moved back to New York and became a lockdown family unit with my son, daughter-in-law, and grand-daughter. The time spent with family during the year that followed was rich. I had plenty of play time and baking practices with my granddaughter Raine. My husband and son discussed around the dinner table the new medicines for covid, politics, and the Bible. My daughter -in-law and I discussed around the table with them as well, but also expanded our recipe collections and shared make-up techniques from you-tube. We faced the fear of covid together. One person would be designated as the grocery buyer for the week. Normally, I love grocery shopping, but grocery shopping was turned into a frantic, hurried, and fearful experience. I remember we would all help in wiping down the canned goods and packaged food items, as per Dr. Fauci's instructions. My son and daughter-in-law are believers,

so we prayed our way through the lockdown asking God for protection and to decrease the curve.

After some time went by and we had received the vaccine, my daughter started coming over to the house. Fear was still dominant, so our interactions were kept outside in the backyard. I remember my grandson being a bit jealous that my granddaughter was able to live with us and play with the special toys. I remember so clearly my grandson looking longingly into the kitchen from the backdoor and saying, "I remember your house, Nana. I remember all the fun things we did, and the special Disney characters." It broke my heart that he couldn't come inside. I asked my daughter if it was ok to bring the Disney toys outside for him to play with on the deck, and she agreed.

My daughter and her husband and their two children had to move in with us as well, because they experienced a flood in heir house with black mold that needed to be remediated. So, now there were six adults and three grandchildren all living under one roof. I remember thanking God for his direction and provision to buy a large house with five bedrooms and four bathrooms. My daughter's renovations on her house were extensive and they ended up living with us for about nine months. The interactions were interesting. The experience was almost like living in a commune. Workloads, laundry, cooking, and cleaning were all shared among us. My daughter's husband, Dave, had dietary restrictions which made cooking a challenge. I had to tweak my recipes, or a separate meal had to be cooked for Dave. My husband and I, when we had had enough of family time, would retreat to our bedroom for privacy, tv, reading, and relaxation. Don't get me wrong, I love my grandkids more than my life. My husband and kids say being a grandma is my super power, yet having them 24/7 was a challenge even for me. The grandkids were like siblings instead of cousins and everything that goes with that: squabbling over what tv show to watch, what game to play next, and who got my attention the most. The discussions around the dinner table became more intense, because Dave had more liberal views than my husband. However, my son Jonathan and Dave were roommates at a Christian college in Pennsylvania, so they have a good friendship that was strengthened during this time. My daughter and daughter-in-law are also friends from church and first met on a mission trip together to the Dominican Republic. Honestly, am I crazy to wish we could all be under one roof

together again? We had opportunity to prefer one another, cry with one another, be fearful and brave with one another, get mad at one another, and make up with one another. We are family and we pulled together when we needed to, because that is what family does.

The pandemic also changed how we did birthday parties and holidays. We had Reece, Raine, and Kitt's birthday parties outside with coats on to protect against contagion. For the holidays through the pandemic, we kept the gathering just to immediate family for the same reasons. We ordered our gifts mostly on line, but ate the same meal that we usually do for Christmas and Thanksgiving to have a sense of some normalcy.

Weddings and graduations parties changed. My niece's wedding that was a destination wedding planned in near Tampa on a beautiful boat was cancelled. The boat canceled, citing too many people gathered in one place. My cousin Susan had a graduation party for her son Carter in a huge open-air pavilion to reduce contagion of Covid. They served hot dogs in a bun wrapped separately. Silverware wrapped separately in a napkin so we wouldn't have to use a community spoon for serving. Small individual bags of chips. Packets of salt and pepper on the table. Fruit salad was served in covered to go cups. Everything was served in a to-go fashion to eliminate the use of community utensils that everyone would have to touch. Everything was done to hinder the spread of Covid. It is a shame that Carter was the person to be honored but Covid took Center Stage. Not to mention he had no prom his graduating year, so he was robbed of that right of passage his Senior year. Carter was valedictorian of his class, but was denied the honor of saying his speech to a large crowd. Instead, he graduated on his back deck. School officials came to each house to deliver diplomas, and he gave his speech to immediate family and a few friends.

Our family had two funerals during the pandemic. My niece, my brother's daughter, lost her husband Greg, who was only 30 years old. And we lost my father the patriarch of the extended family in April of 2021 toward the end of the intense covid time. The changes that occurred for the funeral was that we had to limit how many people we could have at the funeral, and we could not have food brought in for the meal between the viewings. Everyone had to wear a mask, and we were still supposed to try and keep our distance from one another.

Besides the protocols for Covid being adhered to, I noticed a much more subtle, disturbing change. The change had to do with fear in the faces of loved ones I had known my whole life. It was like I was witnessing trauma on the faces of elderly relatives instead of a more peaceful visage that I had remembered. It was not only in the countenance of the people I love, but an air of fear that permeated the room. Traumatized by the pandemic, I realize now it was hard to face another loss of someone so young as Greg. Instead of faces of comfort bringing food to the home, I saw fear. No pot-luck gathering at someone's house with all my aunt's bringing their favorite comfort funeral casseroles. Pittsburgh is famous for casseroles, and I felt robbed of that comfort food time. I know it sounds silly, and I didn't realize it till writing this now, that I grieved the ritual of what is supposed to happen in my family when someone dies. Aunt Jean would bring her crock-pot cowboy beans, Aunt Dawn would bring the hashbrown casserole or funeral potatoes as some called the cheesy creamy sensation, my cousin Shannon always brought the green bean casserole, my cousin Susan would bring her Chinese noodle and seven- layer salad, someone always brought the pistachio whipped jello dessert that is mint green color, and I usually baked a ham with my au gratin cheesy potatoes. Food is a comfort, and a comfort ritual in my family. The familiarity of everyone's special dish prepared with love is also tradition that brought comfort. I don't know if it was the food itself, or the fact that everyone brought their dish with love and surrounded us supporting each other with love. Maybe both? The pandemic changed that.

In reflection, the pandemic had a negative impact with fear that has left its scar. As a family, we faced this fear together supporting each other as best we could. The pandemic taught us how fragile life is, and how quickly someone you love could be gone. It also taught us that the safe world we know could be turned upside down and shut down on all fronts. Any hardship has to be weathered, and then as a result you come through the storm with greater love for the One who holds you in the palm of his hand, and with a renewed appreciation of those you hold dear.

