

Editorial • Lessons Learned from “The Year of the Optometrist”

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For how many years have optometrists longed for the year 2020? We have heard all of the corny jokes and waited with bated breath for the “year of the optometrist.” Well, unless you are Rip Van Winkle and slept through this year, it is easy to see that 2020 did not go as planned for most people...me included. While it is so easy to dwell on what might have been, I feel that it is more important to focus (pun intended) on what was. This is the age-old battle between seeing the glass half full vs. half empty.

As an educator, I consider it my life’s goal to teach. Part of good teaching is a reflection about what was learned. We can then, hopefully, incorporate that new knowledge into new experiences. I do an exercise with my VT students at the end of the day that uses this principle. Several of them tell me about an experience or something interesting that happened that day or one thing they learned about VT, themselves, or their patients. This reflection, at that moment and hopefully longer, will impact their next experience not only in the VT room but in other aspects of patient care, and perhaps even life. I hope that by sharing my personal story and the lessons I have learned from 2020, it will help you reflect on what you have learned.

I have never hesitated to share personal stories, so I won’t stop now. This year was an important one for my family. My second child was to become a bar mitzvah, which is a pretty big deal in the Jewish religion. He studied for years and endured the many hours of agonizing Hebrew school with his friends. I am sure he would liken it to the torture prisoners receive when their captors are attempting to get them to spill the beans. We were planning a sizeable family-centered weekend to celebrate the occasion, followed by a family trip to Thailand.

At the same time that we were having a happy occasion, we were dealing with my father’s failing health. Having been diagnosed with lung cancer several years prior and staring at another round of chemotherapy, we knew that the end was closer than we wanted. When I last saw my father in December of 2019, I kissed him and told him that I would see him in Memphis for the bar mitzvah in April. Little did I know that the bar mitzvah would be slightly different than planned and that it would be the last time I would get to hug and kiss him.

As the world was getting upended in the early part of the year, my son Ari was practicing for the big day. The family had booked their plane tickets and had their hotel rooms reserved. Dad, unfortunately, had decided he had enough of chemo and stopped treatment. He still insisted that he was getting on the plane, though, and I had hopes that he could make it.

As we got closer to the April event, it became clear that the plans for the bar mitzvah would have to change. We went from a large service at the synagogue to a small service to just family. Then we got word that all synagogue events were canceled. Many families were postponing their own children’s big days. We never hesitated for a second and plowed forward.

Due to my father’s failing health, postponing was not a viable option, but there was another reason in our minds. In the Jewish religion, the child becomes a bar mitzvah and does not have one. In modern times, the bar mitzvah’s focus has become the party, which can be quite extravagant. We never wanted that to be the case for either of our children. We had the opportunity to make it all about the ceremony.

My wife turned on a dime and started planning the ceremony in our house. The luncheon was canceled, and the dinner planned for our home was changed to a family dinner at the restaurant of my son’s choice. That is a story all to itself. All the while, my dad insisted that he was getting on the plane to come, even though his health was failing. Yes, I do get my stubbornness from him, in case you were wondering.

With the help of our synagogue, we switched strategies and started preparing for a Facebook bar mitzvah. The ceremony would be in our house, and it would be broadcast all over the world. We moved the furniture in our home. The synagogue actually brought us a Torah to practice with and to use for the big day (that was surreal and super cool, by the way). We started practicing with the rabbi over Zoom.

Ari did not miss a beat. While he had to get over the disappointment that his family was not able to come, his friends would not be able to watch in person, and yes, the big trip was canceled...he was simply fantastic. He understood that there was a greater purpose in completing this ritual.

As we got closer to the day, my father’s health worsened, and it became apparent that he had only a few weeks left to live. Then...my mother-in-law, who

had a kidney transplant 3 months prior, had to enter the hospital due to an infection. Several days before that, my father-in-law needed emergency spinal surgery after flipping forward over his bicycle. Keep in mind that this was happening while the kids' school was going virtual, my office was closed, and my wife had to move her law office to the dining room table. Yeah...we were slightly stressed.

When the big day arrived, it was just our nuclear family (plus a photographer staying on the other side of the room) in the house. Despite an early hiccup with the connection on wi-fi, the ceremony went off without a hitch. Ari knocked it out of the park by leading the service, reading out of the Torah, and giving his speech. We celebrated that night with our fancy dinner...at home, of course.

Most importantly to us was that all of our family, including my father and my in-laws, watched the entire event. But...there was another silver lining that became apparent: not only did all of our family get to watch, but friends and family from all over the world also tuned in to celebrate the accomplishment. While we were inviting a good number of people to the in-person event, so many more watched online. Throughout the weekend, we received calls, emails, and texts showing people's love and appreciation for being able to watch.

This has all taught me a lesson: things happen as they were meant to be. Yes, the pandemic is awful, and we have all lost people close to us and sacrificed

in so many ways, but if the pandemic had not hit, my father and in-laws would have missed out on my son's big day. My father, unfortunately, passed away three weeks later, but my in-laws are healthy once again. None of them would have been able to travel, so having a completely virtual ceremony was a blessing in disguise. Another benefit was, of course, the ability to have so many friends and family participate online. Many of them wrote to applaud Ari, but many also relayed that it made them feel normal again. They missed doing those little and big things, which allowed them to take a deep breath and smile; it was matzoh ball soup for their souls.

While it is easy to dwell on what could have been, I prefer to focus on the glass being half full. All of the moving pieces in our life, none of which we could control, culminated in the day of a lifetime. This day was how it was meant to be...for Ari, my family, including my dad and in-laws, and everyone able to watch all over the globe.

While this was the lesson I learned during this strange year, there are many other lessons to learn. I asked several colleagues and friends to share their 2020 lessons, what have they learned this year. They can be seen below, but before we turn to those lessons, I want to wish you all good health and happiness in the coming year and beyond.

I look forward to seeing and hugging you all soon!



My dad and me at my bar mitzvah in 1987



Ari, my wife Elissa, and me at his bar mitzvah in April

Randy Schulman

The main lesson that I have learned from this difficult year is GRATITUDE. An attitude of gratitude can get you through some challenging times. The other thing is to take a wider view from a bigger perspective. This one year is just that. In the greater scheme of things, maybe it is a big reset of our priorities, our view of education, health, and our families and friends.

Jason Holtam

I would say that I have learned (and am still learning) to be happy with where I am. Dreams and plans have shifted for most of us. In the midst of that, I can trust that I am where I am supposed to be, doing what I am supposed to do, and blessed in it all. It has allowed me to spend more time with those important people in my life and ensure I breathe encouragement into others instead of focusing on myself.

Joe Miele

Attend to the task; your most important task is your family.

John Abbondanza

I have learned that I have limits. I am not as young as I used to be and do not have the energy I used to have. I am shortening my workdays as a result.

Jeff Kraskin

No matter how many chronological years one may live and enjoy their life at the time, do not let time and life's enjoyment pass you by. Do that which you love and enjoy to the fullest, even if that means making a change in what you do presently.

Aditya Goyal

2020 has taught us that 20/20 is not the end of everything...we must look beyond that. A lot more beckons us. As visionaries, we must understand life and vision beyond the surreal 2020!

Paul Harris

Everything you want to do is going to take longer... let it. Slow down and do it right, and don't sweat the small stuff.

Pam Schnell

The most important thing that I will take away from this crazy year is that the world will not end if I'm not working every minute (sorry, Marc). The tasks will still be there, and they will get done, but there are other aspects of life that are more important sometimes: family, friends, and time for self.

Don Lyon

I learned to be more flexible with my time and the time of others. Set schedules, but be willing to change quickly when something comes up.

I learned that online teaching does not mean less work for you or the student. Technology is not always your friend.

Being an introvert by nature, I learned that I do need social gatherings and to be able to talk to people in person and not through a Zoom meeting

Rob Lewis

The most important thing I was reminded of this year is the value of relationships we share and how those relationships are a transcendent aspect of our humanity. This is true at the personal level and is easy to see there, even though we, in our humanity, may make quite a mess of things from time to time.

Geoff Heddle

The main thing I am taking forward to improve myself is that my family is AWESOME, and I really need to make sure that I appreciate them for the treasure that they are EVERY single dang day!

Leonard Press

The most important thing I learned this year was a reminder about the importance of flexibility and adaptability. One of my favorite maxims comes from an old mentor, Don Getz, who was fond of this quote, which he attributed to Thoreau: "The flexibility of your adaptability is a measure of your intelligence." It is safe to say that as events have unfolded this year, ranging from the pandemic to social unrest, everyone's personal and professional life has been impacted to an extent greater than normal. Little if anything was predictable, and "going with the flow" became paramount.