

The upside of COVID-19's merciless pruning

To the Editor, I'm not a plant person. I have a few houseplants in my condo, but they're working plants that inhabit my domain to purify the air. Only the most hearty and tolerant plants (e.g., aloe, snake plant, succulents) have a long-term relationship with me. My father loved plants. He had a deep understanding of their needs. Several times he tried to pass along to me what gave him enormous pleasure, but I just did not connect with it. I did learn the obvious: plants must be watered, get enough sunlight, and be repotted once they've grown. I also learned that plants need to be pruned, which seems counter-intuitive. It doesn't strike me as logical to cut off a plant's branches to make it grow bigger and stronger, which is the reason to prune a plant. My father explained pruning involves cutting off certain branches (There's an art to knowing which branches to cut, but I never paid enough attention to learn.) so the plant can use its limited resources to make stronger branches. For example, a healthy rose bush will produce too many buds. This leads to overgrowth and creates a drain on the plant's resources.

Left unchecked, most of the flowers will survive but not thrive. Therefore, the gardener must make the difficult decision to prune the good buds to redirect the flow of nutrients to the best buds. (My father may have taught me more about plants than I thought.) Just as a rose bush needs to be pruned to produce beautiful roses, we too should occasionally prune our respective life.

Envision your life as a fruit tree, be it apple, peach, pear or orange. Each branch is an interest, activity, relationship, an accumulation for your future. Each branch requires energy to bear fruit. Some branches may be dying, diseased, broken beyond repair or tangled with other branches. Airflow and spaciousness between branches is essential. Think about it. Habits. Relationships. Jobs. Commitments. Health. Goals. If you pruned the bad and sometimes the good for the sake of the best, what would happen? We all have a finite amount of time and energy. Considering who you are and where you are now, are you spending the right amount of your resources where they're needed and need to be? Or are you holding onto situations and relationships that are extraneous, broken, frustrating or lifeless? Tough questions, I know.

Everyone has dead branches taking up space. When you have an over-full life or feel overwhelmed a lot of the time, it's usually a sign that you have too many branches. Your energy is too diffuse to sustain everything. If you prune back non-essential things, you provide more energy to the remaining activity branches. As a result, overwhelm decreases, and happiness grows. Cutting off the dead branches of our lives makes room for growth. There's more space for opportunities and people better suited to you, as well as you're freeing up time to pursue passions and look after yourself.

Early into the pandemic, COVID-19 (actually government restrictions) pruned branches from my life, as I'm sure it did from yours. At the time I didn't realize some of the branches being pruned were unhealthy. For instance, I have this need I can't shake to compare myself to others. As a result of lockdowns, social distancing, working from home, and staying within my "bubble," there were fewer people around me to compare myself to, thus envy and negative self-talk quickly dissipated.

Then there's COVID-19's most crucial lesson; it taught me more about getting unbusy than any number of seminars could. Things I thought I "had to do" that turned out I was just convincing myself I enjoyed "were simply shut down.

"Life pruning" can be painful, which is why we rarely, if ever, deliberately do it. For the most part we let life prune for us (e.g., death of a relative or friend, job termination, nature destroying our home.) Only when someone or something is gone do we finally realize how much it meant to us, or how much energy it was taking from us to maintain, or how harmful it was to our well-being. Often, when we look back after one of "life's pruning" we realize we benefited by the loss. There's truism in the adage, everything happens for a reason. COVID-19 happened for a reason, if for none other than to slow us down and prune our lives. The stoic philosopher Seneca said it best, "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." Over the past two years, COVID-19 has pruned many things from our lives. The two most significant: Relationships (family and friends)? Mindless consumerism There was also the pruning of jobs, resulting in millions re-evaluating their career choice and path and losing loved ones to COVID-19. Initially, you may only feel COVID-19's pruning pain. Sometimes it takes time before you can see that the branches COVID-19 cut off were unhealthy. When non-essential retailers and restaurants were ordered to close, I quickly realized how much of my money I was spending frivolously. In contrast, there were friends I missed at the beginning of the pandemic, but as time

passed, I realized how much easier it was without them. (If you feel better when someone's not around, that's a telltale sign.) COVID-19 gave me the gift of 'letting go,' which is pruning. COVID-19 gave each of us a once-in-a-lifetime chance to start over. Golf was a huge surprise for me! Prior to the pandemic, I was a religious Saturday morning golfer with a regular golfing buddy. Then my go-to golf course was mandated to close, and I found my Saturdays free. I filled this new-found time with writing I've been putting off.

However, here's the head kicker given my love for golf and how much it's part of my identity, when restrictions lifted and I could golf again, I didn't. COVID-19 had pruned golf from my life and gave me the gift of time to write and now I plan to keep the extra time to write. In 2021 my golf clubs never left my storage locker. I don't expect my golf clubs to see the light of day in 2022. By saying yes to one thing, which in my case was golf, I was saying no to another thing, writing. Thank you, COVID-19, for pruning golf from my life and giving me time to write, which I get more enjoyment from and find to be therapeutic.

In these last weeks and months, of the pandemic, before something resembling normality returns, you might want to ask yourself, 'What do I want 'normal' to look like?' Then start preparing for a new and better normal than your pre-pandemic life maybe even prune a few more things from your life. The more space you create in your life, the more things that you truly need, like time to write, will find their way to you.

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