

## ZOOMING OUR WAY THROUGH A CRISIS

By Diane Dowsing Robison

A worldwide virus no one understood, with no time to prepare. The oxymoron of *life put on hold*. COVID-19.

As with so many elements of this historical lockdown, there were moments, glorious moments, that saved the spirit from spiraling into destruction. This is one such time. The following is a tribute to the power of our communal moment in history.

This life experience was put in place just as the virus, still hidden from public view, started its journey — January 2020. Eleven disparate people, with a broad spectrum of life experience under their belts, are coming together willing to take a risk and share intimate stories.

It's the beginning of a new and highly anticipated year, and a 10-week workshop is starting. The Wallis Shared Stories Workshop at the Wallis Annenberg Theatre in Beverly Hills, California, is launching an experiment only for the second time. People who have a full life ... seniors by any other name ... are coming together each week, revealing personal mountains they've climbed, or slivers of life they've treasured, or people on their path that made them who they are. Together they will write, and discuss, and write, and share — often for the first time in their lives.

The end of the workshop will cumulate with a one-night performance in front of an audience of family, and friends, and strangers. With no previous training for most, each person will stand up for five life-affirming moments and reveal an intimate story they've carefully crafted from their many years on this Earth. Each participant will take their turn, standing at a podium in a dark theatre, a spotlight illuminating the paper from which they read, and reveal to the world something they've told no one else.

That was the plan. However, the reality of events that followed rivals that of a Hollywood

script. A twilight zone that is barely ebbing. Every human being who's reading this, lived it.

But here is our story.

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Great storytellers know “*there's a story in every life.*” Learning how to find it, nourish it through the written word, and verbally share was the reason we met every week under the guidance of Debra Pasquerette — Manager of Community Engagement for the Wallis Annenberg Center for Performing Arts. She created this program because she knows that there's untold worth in a life-well-lived. That experiences need to be shared, especially by those still living them.

We willingly turned ourselves over to Debra's creative excellence as a director, a writer, and a performer to nurture us out of our comfort zones. Each week brought us closer and closer to the professional level of discovering moments — those hidden gems in our lives reflecting the human condition on a very personal level — *and* readying them for performance. Two very separate arts in the world of theatre.

No matter what our professional backgrounds, this was an immersing creative endeavor like none other. With our instructor's compassionate but firm hand, collectively, we learned how to find experiences we might never have acknowledged. We diligently hone them with the written word — and we were actively preparing to translate our stories to an audience through performance.

After nine weeks, we “fellow storytellers” shared the bond of being in a room at the theatre complex and locking the rest of the world out for a few hours. We trusted each other, so we took risks. We went for the moments, then reviewed and applauded each other. Finalizing our stories, we were anticipating our “opening night.” But a new journey was ahead.

By the end of class on the ninth week, we knew the world was about to change — but no one could grasp how drastically. We're told to go home — our night is canceled, and the theatre will be closed for an indefinite time. Life is going to be put on hold “for a while.” The next day, The Wallis Annenberg Theatre locked its doors ... and each day thereafter, the rest of the country followed.

As this twilight zone progressed rapidly throughout the world, the word “pandemic” became part of our lexicon. Debra received wholehearted approval to continue holding our workshop “online.” That day, the term “zoom” — to travel very quickly — forever took on a new meaning. Who'd have thought such a simple word would represent a standard of living worldwide. Almost overnight.

So, the next week, on the day we would have had our performance (thus ending our workshop), we held our first creative session *face-to-face*. We would continue together through the darkest months of our lockdown — each week zooming our way through this crisis, gaining some small semblance of health; mentally, physically, spiritually. We found we could hold-on.

And now, we are all face-to-face, literally. Because of the marvel of technology and innovation, in a world where humans live isolated, with little control over anything, emotionally, we begin to become more invested in each other.

This online process immediately “churns-up” something very human inside us —and slowly, we feel ourselves awaking from a fog. United on screen — looking into each person's eyes as if physically one-on-one — we listen intently without distractions. In the few hours of unconditional trust and creative digging, we're away from the vibrations and atmosphere of a historic worldwide experience nobody wanted.

Adjusting ourselves to the continual droning updates regarding our family, our friends, our livelihood, our neighborhood, along with city, state, county, and world, has become

our addiction and the “new normal.” However, once a week online, we’re concerned only with each other. We share the process of writing about the moments in our lives that comprise the total of what we are, and what we’ve become.

Because we are so close visually, opportunities arise for additional comments; small moments of added insight flow easily. Observations that might not have been noticed at our usual conference table. Each speaker gets our focus and attention no matter what they’re saying. Facial expressions, and even the individual voices this close, enhance our communication.

Accelerated by the circumstances, the knowledge of one another is deepening. We take time to discuss and write about the experiences shaping our lives right now — but that doesn’t override everything else. And each week, the writing that emerges from within this confine is propelling us forward at a new level.

Debra has taught us to go for the smallest moments and build from there. Remarkably we’ve found that our “moment” may be the germ of a larger story — but yet, a story unto itself. Reaching for those moments and putting them to paper now seems more important. Maybe it’s for our legacy; perhaps it’s for a world gone silent.

We are protected here, but there is discipline:

We discuss so we can write; we write so we can physically communicate. We communicate so we can *live*.

By the end of the weekly “class,” we’ve listened, we’ve learned, we’ve talked, and we’ve written. We’ve physically done something that matters.

We end the class. A presence of accomplishment is felt as we sign-off and close the computer.

Our spirit renewed — we have the strength to go on with our day, in an indescribable

way *content*. We're now willing to face the next small challenge, in whatever way we can.

Millions of us *zoomed* through this crisis for every reason imaginable. We found the confluence of technology and intimacy empowered us to conduct the business of living — one silver lining in a year full of separation and heartbreak.

The lessons are not forgotten. Connection will not be lost. Hope is just around the corner.