

Dear Tacoma -- My grandmother was 10 in 1918, the youngest in her family of 5 kids and her mother and father. In the little Southern California town of Fillmore, so many people were sick that all the churches in town set up flu hospitals in their basements or Sunday school wings. Grammie's entire family got sick except her. Neighbors rescued her and her family from their farm where 10-year-old Evelyn was trying to care for everyone by herself. In town she slept in the sanctuary of the church where her family were being cared for, and she worked as a nurse alongside of the other townspeople who were not sick. My grandmother was a sun-shiny and tough woman. A shadow came over her the few times she talked to me about that time. All her family recovered, but she avoided parts of town, and especially the streets around the church where she and her neighbors cared for her family and so many others. Death from the flu cut a swath of absences across the community. School friends, teachers, shop keepers, policemen, so many died all at once that going back to regular life she said felt like trying to run with one leg or climb a ladder with only one arm.

When it was clear the pandemic was coming I remembered that shadow on my grandmother's face, and I felt afraid. We are a close-knit community here on Browns Point. I didn't want to think of what a swath of COVID-19 deaths would look and feel like here. I also felt reassured because it is the 21st century, and public health science, policy, communications, state and federal government structures and so on are so robust that we would be spared my grandmother's experience.

We passed 150,000 dead from COVID-related causes this week. I don't know anyone in Pierce County or Tacoma who have died directly from the pandemic. I hope I don't. What has happened in Browns Point is people who are very elderly and have been fighting cancer, Lou Gehrig's disease, dementia have given up their fight. One friend didn't want to take up a place in the hospital so chose to move to palliative care and enter hospice. Another just chose to stop eating. It has been very sad for these families to have their loved ones die now, because they are not able to have memorial services, and in the one case where there was an internment service in the St Matthew Episcopal Church's memorial garden the logistics were exhausting, with 17 family members being socially distanced with the help of traffic cones and rehearsed choreography so everyone could participate in the ritual without endangering one another, the priest or the sexton. Another is clinging to life in the face of worsening and very painful bladder cancer. He is confined to the basement mother-in-law suite in his home. His family leaves meals outside the door, talks to him through the closed door, and through the closed window into the yard. He says often the only company he has are the hummingbirds. He says he watches the dogs get petted and played with, and he hates to admit it, but he feels jealous seeing them get the physical attention. It's hard for him to breath, and he says it feels like he is being squeezed from the inside and the outside at the same time. He still has his sense of humor, and he is grateful for his family, but it is hard.

I call him once a week to check in, along with calling 7 other church households. I report how people are doing to our Priest. I sometimes don't want to take the time to reach out to

my group, especially as folks with my employer are being called back to work after long furloughs. Thinking of my Grandmother reminds me what is important.

I'm going to make my calls now to my church friends, then give my family hugs and kisses (they are both working from home, or I'd go interrupt them now). I hope the people you love are well, Tacoma.

Love, Andy

---

Andy

98422