



The Poem of the Swallowtail

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I want to provide some background on how COVID relates to me, my background, and its impact on a personal level. I am married with two children. One graduated this year, and the other is a senior and started his first year of college. There have been challenges with graduation and challenges being a freshman in college and having all that excitement pulled out from underneath you. My daughter is doing blended off-site learning. She's also a gymnast, and it has been difficult not knowing whether to send her to the gym.

It's been a challenge dealing with my emotions and my family's emotions, making decisions for them, and then having to really understand the gamut of emotions that were going to be coming from staff. We had everything from fear to anger to tears. We're a close-knit group, so it's my extended family. I've been a director for six years, I've been in leadership for eight, and it has been the most challenging experience of leadership that I've ever encountered. On a personal level, another difficulty I have is my father, a retired physician, who has cancer. So, he's calling asking me whether he should go into the hospital. And my children are asking, should I go do this or not? And, staff have many questions. Finding time to process my own feelings about the COVID situation has been very difficult.

On a side note, I was going to step down from my position pre-COVID, not because I don't enjoy what I do, but because I felt like I had offered a lot of years to leadership, and it was time to put some of my energy back into my family and things like that. However, literally the day I was supposed to have the meeting in person so I could tell everybody—because, like I said, we're a close-knit group—meetings got canceled and went virtual, and COVID restrictions came down. I decided to pull that decision back and wait until September. I thought by September we would be good to go, but that was clearly not the case. I have still moved forward with that decision, and now we have a new director in place. It was still a difficult decision because I didn't want to add to the stresses of our staff.

The absolute most difficult piece of the entire pandemic is the extra clothing required. I don't care if I must put on a mask, but I'd rather not be in ten layers when I'm working a 12-hour shift. Doing that for 12 hours to take care of people that come in for COVID symptoms and tell me they are frustrated to have to wear their mask, is challenging while I'm wearing a mask, a shield, AND a gown. I'm in that for 12 hours to care for them, so it is difficult that they are frustrated for wearing a mask for a short time. I consider myself a very empathetic provider, and it has been a real struggle for me to hold that empathy close when I'm also dealing with a sort of ever-growing anger. It just angers me when I see that some people don't have empathy for others. It's not all about us; it's about the other people and our way of protecting them. This is an interesting profession to be in when you have practiced that way, and that's why you're in it.

The biggest emotional challenge for me that affects my daily life is that balance of maintaining my empathy and trying to both rationalize and subdue some anger. As an example, you might walk out of a 12-hour shift and into a gas station, and you find that you're in the minority wearing a mask. That is hard, especially if you've had a day where some of the most challenging cases are married couples that come in who have been married for 40 or 50 years, and they both have COVID, but one might be sicker than the other. In my heart, I know that one person may not make it out of the hospital, and I may have to send the other home, which means they will not get to visit. Those are really challenging, especially if you have empathy. The combination of taking that with you

mentally when you walk out of your workplace and then seeing the lack of caring about other people. That has been the most difficult for me.

Because of COVID, I have removed myself from social media. I'm a news junkie, but I have limited that this year. It's been difficult to be a news junkie. I've had to not have those stations on in my car when I'm driving. It stirs that anger I feel, which is not healthy for me at this point. It's not healthy to feel that way and then go into work. I have literally had patients that are asking for my help asking me in the same breath if this is as bad as they say it is. And I just say yes. All we can do is educate, but it's difficult.

I can also describe moments of enlightenment and joy that come out of working in an ER during a respiratory pandemic. Number one, I have an amazing group of providers that I have had the honor to lead over the last six years who dedicate themselves to the care of their patients. This has never been as evident as when we got through the fear, the anger and all the emotions. I think everybody had to kind of figure things out for themselves in the beginning of this, and they just stepped up. I've been very proud to be part of that group. These are some of the most difficult times to communicate with your patients when both staff and patient are masked. It's hard to have an empathetic conversation when you can't see a person's expressions, yet I have probably had a record number of day-makers, when a patient sends in a comment to say thank you for your care and a wonderful job. In the last three weeks, we've had a record number of day-makers to staff from patients who have given gratitude for the care they received. Our communities recognize what we do.

We wear our own masks on the walk in from the car, and then we switch to a surgical mask. I must put specific tape on that mask, because I can't see with my glasses fogging if I don't do the seal. I put the tape on and then wear a shield over that. I also wear a hat. Some of our nurses have made fun ones. The hat protects my hair so I'm not bringing home viruses like COVID. I wear a gown on top of that to go in to see any patient that might be COVID positive. We just want to be careful.

My advice is to take time for yourself. Be good to yourself and try your best to understand other viewpoints. You don't have to agree, but you should accept that they aren't all going to be aligned with yours. I think part of my frustration comes from not understanding why someone could feel or do or think this way, which doesn't make sense to me. Looking out for others is just part of being a human being.

People that take care of our patients in the Emergency Department are amazing. They make sacrifices, because it is a risk to them and a risk to their families. Still, I have not had one single person say, I can't do this. They show up, and they do it with grace, and I'm personally—as a leader—incredibly proud of that and proud to be a part of it.

Artist Henry Loomis
Eau Claire, WI

Henry Loomis is a junior at Memorial High School in Eau Claire. He enjoys making art and learning about ancient cultures.

I was struck by the selflessness of the nurse in this story. She talked about not being able to take any time for herself to focus on her own mental health, because she had to juggle her team of nurses and her family. The painting depicts a nurse who, despite an overwhelming situation, keeps going and leads others to do the same.

View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).