

We've been in the pandemic for almost a year. It's time to shake off the sadness, pull ourselves together and appreciate what we have. In short, we must...

dispel despair with gratitude.

ELLEN FOX
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A couple of weeks ago, I was feeling really sorry for myself. There was about a two-week period where school, sports, work, extracurriculars, college and of course, the stress of a global pandemic, were all making demands on my time and were therefore taking a toll on my mental health. I know I'm not alone. This year feels like it's all work and no play: we don't get the socialization of a normal year, but we're still expected to complete our schoolwork and other responsibilities. We're all having to mourn the loss of a year of high school, a year of our youth. It's hard.

But here's the thing: we can't let that grief get in the way of the joy we still have in our lives.

During that stressful period, and secretly for months before then, I felt like my sadness, my sacrifice was the biggest in the world. Nobody else felt the emotions I

did as a senior, a busy senior at that. The way I expressed those emotions was a reflection of the "superior" grief I nurtured. I was a total pest to my family, secretly thinking that they all had it much easier than I did. I always complained, I neglected my chores, and I blew off my parents when they tried to help me feel better.

Finally, after around two weeks, my family was fed up with me.

It was right around 9:30 at night, and I had just gotten home from a late shift at work. I had some homework to finish, and I was not looking forward to doing the derivatives and analyses I had neglected. I made no secret of my displeasure, dramatically sighing and dragging my feet to my room. My dad came in and asked me what was wrong. Like I had been doing for two weeks, I huffed and made some short, sarcastic comment about losing my senior year or being overworked or whatever else I could say to elicit some pity. This time, however, my dad wasn't having it.

"Ellen Anne Fox," he started.

As soon as I heard my middle name, I regretted my sarcasm.

"You have been slamming doors, leaving your stuff everywhere and completely shutting your family out.

Something's gotta give. I know this is tough for

you, and if I could stop this I would, but you need to pull yourself together. This is hard for all of us, and your actions are inconsiderate. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and start taking charge of your life."

I was shocked. Then I felt embarrassed. He was right, I had been throwing myself a pity party, and the only thing that headspace did was make me feel worse about the situation. It's so much easier to spiral into despair and hopelessness when you're looking for things to complain about.

I have so much for which to be grateful. There's a roof over my head, I have food in my stomach, and at night I have a bed to sleep in. My friends and family have been lucky enough to all stay healthy. Even during COVID, there are bright spots. We are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel with the beginning of the vaccine distribution. When I look outside, the world is still there. Whether we like it or not, this pandemic is going to continue for at least another couple of months, so if you're like me and have struggled with frustration and despair for the past 10 months, ask yourself if you want those feelings to continue for the rest of the time we have to spend apart.

I convinced myself that my struggles were bigger than everyone else's when I really should have been counting my blessings. So many people have lost their jobs, their houses, their families. At some point, I needed to take a step back and appreciate all the good that still remains in my life. We cannot adequately support those we love if we are lost in our own feelings of sadness and loss.

I'm not saying that those feelings are easy or that they should be ignored. Accept your feelings, give yourself time to feel them, but don't let them become your reality. Eventually, we have to let them go.

Graphic by Bella Russo.

Even though we could all use a little human connection right now, somehow we still find ourselves in...

a pandemic of black boxes.

ALYSA SPIRO
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About once an hour, I feel my eyes roll to the back of my head.

In the span of 10 months, I have gone from seeing more than a hundred human faces a day to staring at a grid of black boxes for six hours. It's mind-numbing.

This daily disengagement is not for lack of my teachers' trying. The creative endeavors of Mac teachers during remote learning has been applause-worthy. I've had a teacher use sock puppets to explain prejudice. Another shot a "how to make a cake" video in French. I've even had a teacher give us tarot card readings via Zoom. It's all beyond impressive.

The numbness of my mind is not the result of a lack of interest either. I actually really find derivatives interesting. My newspaper class is a

never-ending cycle of making puns for headlines. School is (wait for it) fun.

So if my "lack of focus" isn't because of my teachers or because of the actual material, why do I constantly find myself staring into space for five-minute intervals? I blame it on the pandemic of black boxes.

At least once a day, I hear my teachers plead with their students to turn on their cameras. And I get it. Teaching an hour-long lesson to a sea of black boxes seems impossible. Teachers rely on their students' faces to control the pacing of their lessons and to gauge how well students are grasping a concept. Is it really preaching if you can't see the choir? I don't know.

I think students benefit from turning their cameras on. A good friend of mine recently wrote a column about how we need to stop pitying ourselves and consider other people (hint, hint: see above). Turning on your camera is an act of being present. It's a way you can stop the four brief years of high school from slipping between your fingers.

Here's the thing: getting students to turn on their cameras is not something that can or should be fixed by school or district policy. There are students who need to have their cameras off because of legitimate connectivity or device issues. There are students who have Zoom fatigue (which is a very, very real thing). These students should not be shamed in any way, shape or form. Any policy from the school or AISD requiring students to turn on their cameras would, without a doubt, have classist implications. Teachers or the district should not require students to turn on their camera. We shouldn't single out the students who need to have their cameras off. Black boxes should not become the new red flag.

Look, I'm not here to talk down to anyone. If you don't want (note: want) to turn on your camera, I won't say anything. It's not the end of the world. I'm just curious as to why we are in this predicament of black boxes. Is it because when nobody has their camera on, students are afraid to be the first one to take a step forward? Are we all scared to illuminate ourselves in a sea of darkness?

I mean, I know I am. There are times when I'm the only one with my camera on in my class and

despite the collected expression on my face, I am freaking out on the inside. So why do I keep doing it? Jewish guilt. Also my mom inflicted-guilt. But also, sometimes, more students begin to follow suit. And then it's all worth it. Seeing someone's face while they laugh at a joke or talking to people face-to-face in breakout rooms—it almost, just almost feels, like I'm back at real school.

So here's my plea: If you can, take the dive. Try it for a week and see how it feels. Nobody is expecting perfection or a 100 percent participation rate. There are days when I am in a foul mood (my mother can vouch), and I lie in my bed the entire class behind my black screen. That's life.

But the way to navigate this sea of black boxes and lack of connection, lies completely in the hands of students—not the schools, not the district. We all have the power to stand with our teachers, the power to not let the sands of time slip through our fingers any longer. Show up and be seen.

Because I can promise you: your hair doesn't look as bad as you think it does.