

## With or Without, Please Be Kind

by SHERALYN ROMAN

There is no doubt that the last two years have been contentious.

The reasons are many, but, of course, the primary one, as I'm sure you'd all agree, has arisen as a direct result of the pandemic. First there was fear, some hoarding of toilet paper, schools closing and then a rallying cry in support of our front line workers. We were told masks weren't necessary and then, that they were. Next we settled in to a period of concern but with a level of trust that the government had our backs. Sure some folks were questioning lockdowns and civil liberties being curtailed but no one was protesting in the streets. Now, with over two years under our collective belts, it's fair to say that instead those rallying cries have turned into a war of words.

On March 21, will you be ditching your mask? Whether you will continue to go out WITH a mask on, or you plan to ditch it and go WITHOUT, please be kind.

We have already seen over these past few months a great deal of vitriol directed by both anti-vaxxers and the vaccinated.

On the one side, we had people expressing disdain for masks, refusing to lock down their businesses and refusing to get vaccinated. On the other, there were the vaccinated. These were the people frustrated by the unvaccinated, who retreated behind closed doors as requested by the government and who consistently called anti-vaxxers selfish for refusing to get ?jabbed.?

Twitter, Tik Tok and Facebook have been filled with images of people with and without masks, both making spectacles of themselves as they berate each other in public. Each felt righteous indignation. For many months, science backed research and falling COVID numbers, supported the masked crusaders. More recently, as the deadline for COVID to magically disappear hurtles towards us, anti-maskers now herald their victory over ?sheeple,? secure in the knowledge the government and CMOH has their back by announcing masks are no longer required after March 21. Not just masks either, but vaccines and vaccine passports too. The government is basically telling us it's time to put COVID behind us and to ?move on.?

You may be surprised to read that for once, I agree with them ? just perhaps not for the same reasons.

I'd like to move on to a world where we're reminded fondly of the lessons learned early on in the pandemic; specifically that period between the fear and hoarding and before we moved on to conspiracy theories, lengthy vaccine line-ups and yelling AT, not FOR, health care workers.

Perhaps you've forgotten there was a time we collectively all learned how to sew and made masks when mass-produced ones were in short supply. When we dropped off food on our neighbours doorstep, did a senior citizen's groceries while we did our own to save them from having to venture out and when we ?met? with our friends on Zoom or in parking lots, visiting while collectively contributing to the general welfare of us all.

If we saw someone who had forgotten their mask, we politely motioned to remind them and stores sometimes provided them at the entrance. There was a level of civility, even in our disagreement and I fear that is gone now. Now we are once again drawing battle lines especially in places like schools where they have been mandated to ditch masks even though many teachers, parents and students vow to continue wearing them.

Some school boards including Hamilton are vowing to disobey provincial orders. Some private schools, like the alma mater of our MOE, Stephen Lecce, will continue to require masks be worn.

Premier Ford has told publicly funded education they cannot disobey but not a word to private schools. Meanwhile, earlier this

week, a woman featured prominently on social media for berating young girls on a playground for wearing masks and flipping the bird to the parent who tried to intervene.

Who picks on children? I fear we will see more of this pro- and anti-mask hatred over the coming weeks and it just makes me sad. I had truly hoped that ALL of us, having lived through the same ordeal of pandemic restrictions, would have learned a similar lesson about the basic values of human kindness, compassion and empathy.

I, like the government, would love to move on from COVID but I fear COVID is not ready to move on and so I fear the consequences ? physically (the virus spreads) emotionally, (bullying) and mentally (we're all so damn tired.) I don't think we've learned our lessons yet.

On March 15, Angus Reid released a poll detailing both local and national feelings on continued masking. Nationally, 73% of Canadians supported the continued wearing of masks and 64% said they would still support proof of vaccination at restaurants. Over half of all respondents also shared they would avoid large venues and large crowds for the time being. It would seem that while governments are done with COVID, the majority of Canadians are not. Does a classroom constitute a large venue? Could we not have waited at least a further two weeks post March Break to ensure that along with souvenirs, no one brings Covid back from their vacations? More than anything and no matter what side of the masking issue you support ? can we please, please just all be kind to one another?

Like a war with weapons is never really ?won? by either side, same too with a war of words. The war of words has largely been about autonomy. ?My body, my choice,? is the common refrain. Agreed. So let's all make a conscious effort to respect the choice others have made.