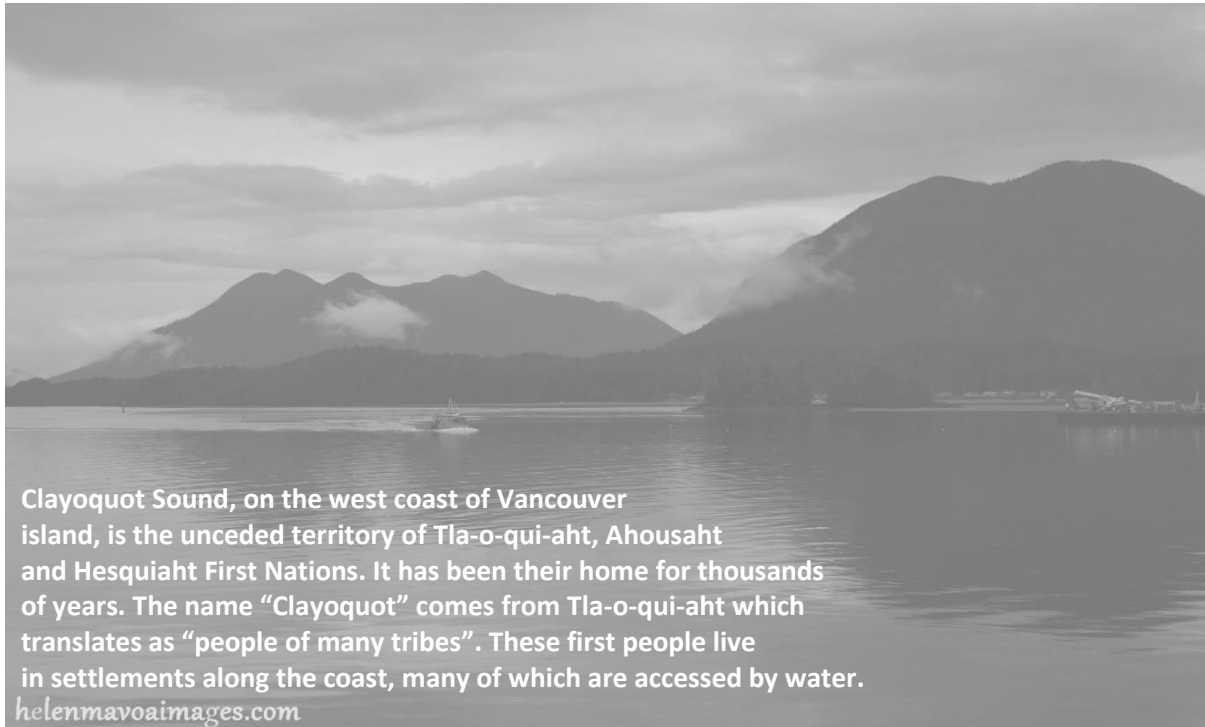


COVID-19: Learning Across the Ages in Clayoquot Sound

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Photo credit: Helen Mavoia

1. The Place and the People



Credit: Helen Mavoia

Road access to the west coast is difficult - this scenic and tortuous section of the Trans-Canada highway winds alongside Sproat Lake, weaving through "the Pass" into Tla-o-qui-aht territory. It follows the Kennedy River before skirting part of Kennedy Lake, then heading north along the Esowista peninsula. Here the road threads between the forest and the Pacific west coast, past Ty-Histanis and Esowista to end in Tofino, a settler community with a permanent year-round population of 1800. Tofino originated as a small fishing, timber and mining town, before becoming a tourist destination. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tofino serviced around 600,000 international and national visitors who came to play in Clayoquot Sound.



Credit: Helen Mavoia

2. The Pandemic

The very first reports of COVID-19 that I recall were from Wuhan in January 2000, the news broken by a courageous doctor who subsequently died from COVID-19. Wuhan seemed relatively remote. After all, I reasoned, it was in the People's Republic of China, and it wasn't a major travel destination – or place of departure. What's more, the "bird flu" hadn't impacted the rest of the world to any major extent, I figured. Why would this be different?

It wasn't until January 23rd 2020 that the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in the United States, and then in Canada two days later. Even the North American cases seemed remote from our relatively sequestered space on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Then came disturbing reports of a major outbreak that overwhelmed the health system in northern Italy, resulting in many deaths. Doctors had to triage those who received care and those who did not. **Now**, the Pandemic seemed real.

British Columbia (BC) implemented a number of public health orders relatively early in Canada's COVID-19 pandemic, restricting social contact within and between communities. We have limited resources on the coast – our ten-bed hospital has a single ventilator to service a population of 10, 000. Plus visitors. First Nations drew on their historical learnings, closing their communities to visitors early on. Local governments in Tofino and Ucluelet, along with public health leaders, worked alongside First Nations communities, requesting that visitors stayed away. Hotels closed their doors.

COVID-19

LOCKDOWN

COVID-19

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COVID-19

LOCKDOWN

Credit: shutterstock.com

3. The Storytellers

I had been due to fly back to Melbourne Australia on March 20, 2020 to spend time with my children and three grandchildren, with a plan to return to Clayoquot Sound in the Fall. In September 2021, I am still here, embraced by surrounding communities and even more in awe of the spirituality, beauty and resilience of this place than I was prior to COVID-19.

I have always been intrigued by the intergenerational wisdom that connects children, parents, grandparents, and often great grandparents as well. Then there are the influences of ancestors whom we have not met, as their values, beliefs and practices are passed down through generations. I've witnessed how learnings pass within and across generations, and in both directions. I am acutely aware of this as I have learned more from my three grandchildren than I will ever teach them. Children's observations are often overlooked, as are the experiences and thoughts of older adults in many western families. I wanted to draw on the COVID-related experiences of three generations of families who live in these small and diverse communities in Clayoquot Sound.

This photo essay is about the experiences and reflections of three families, who reside either on the Esowista Peninsula, or elsewhere in Clayoquot Sound, as well as some of my own learnings during times of reflection and while talking with friends.

Each of the three families who shared their experiences for this project nurture their relationships within and between generations. In the case of one family, all three generations live together, while the other two families have frequent contact with various

generations, all of whom live nearby. One woman, an elder from Ahousaht, has deep connections with the land and her people, past and present. She is a beloved teacher of Nuu-chah-nulth language and culture to all of our children in the area. Nuu-chah-nulth means people who live by the sea and the mountains. The grandparents of the second family settled here in their youth. While their children were born in Clayoquot Sound, their grandchildren were born on the other side of the island after the Tofino hospital ceased delivering babies. The third family moved from mainland BC eight years ago, with the paternal grandmother coming to help with the three young children while her son and daughter-in-law set up their respective businesses. She stayed for the duration of the Pandemic.

The storytellers range in age from four years to two women in their sixties and early seventies. I talked with most family members in March 2021, 12 months after the onset of COVID-19. This prompted reflections on the early stages of the Pandemic, as well as providing an opportunity to talk about their experiences during the first year of COVID.

4. The Early Realisations

I asked participants when COVID-19 really started to impact their lives.

M (mother): *when we went to Vancouver when J. was doing a course. I took the kids to see (their friends). They were really excited about going, but the night before I started to think it wasn't such a great idea. When we got to Vancouver, like at the airport, I wasn't happy and the ferries were starting to shut down. I said to J. "We're going home". By then it was real.*

L (mother): *It was coming back from Mexico and we were asked questions we hadn't been asked before. It was before all the finger pointing.*

When I asked what had changed for them with the onset of the Pandemic, the adults talked about their businesses shutting down.

M (mother): *We had to tell the staff we were shutting down. That wasn't easy.*

That involved more than one business shutting down for one family.

L(mother): *Our vacation rentals stopped. And then the gym shut down.*

It was when school didn't resume after the Spring break that the Pandemic impacted all generations of all three families:

M (mother): *Then spring break came and the kids didn't go back to school. **That** was real.*

Mi (14 yrs): *(It was real) when we didn't go back to school.*

L (mother): *Then it was when S. didn't go back to school that it was real. JJ (grandmother) has done all the home schooling. As well as care for the (two) younger ones. She's our lifeline.*

The reopening of schools in September 2020 did not mean a return to pre-COVID normal. Two of the younger participants explained:

S (6yrs): We wear masks and stay six feet away. We sit in circles. And school lunches are in bags (now).

Mi (14yrs): It's different now. You can't see your friends and you can't give them a hug. We have to wear masks. And stay in bubbles.

5. The Good Changes

Despite the shutdown of tourist-related businesses in Tofino in Spring 2020, and the very real economic concerns that engendered, the storytellers were quick to talk about the positive changes that arose during the Pandemic. Instead of lamenting the lack of business and income, parents with whom I spoke talked about the activities they could do because of this pandemic pause. The overwhelming benefits were being able to spend more time with family and in nature than prior to COVID-19.



Credit: Lindsay Whitefield

Everyone, without exception, talked about valuing family time, first by having more time to spend together during lockdowns when businesses were either shut or barely functioning in this town that relies heavily on tourists, and second by taking opportunities to do summer activities that they wouldn't have done any other year:

S (mother): For the first time in years, I was able to go camping with the boys. And fishing. Be a family.



Six-year-old Sadie's picture of her family encapsulated the importance of family to all of the storytellers.

One young person talked about her extended family going out in separate boats and enjoying water sports together. She explained how they had separate family fires on a remote shore line, and danced around their respective fires.

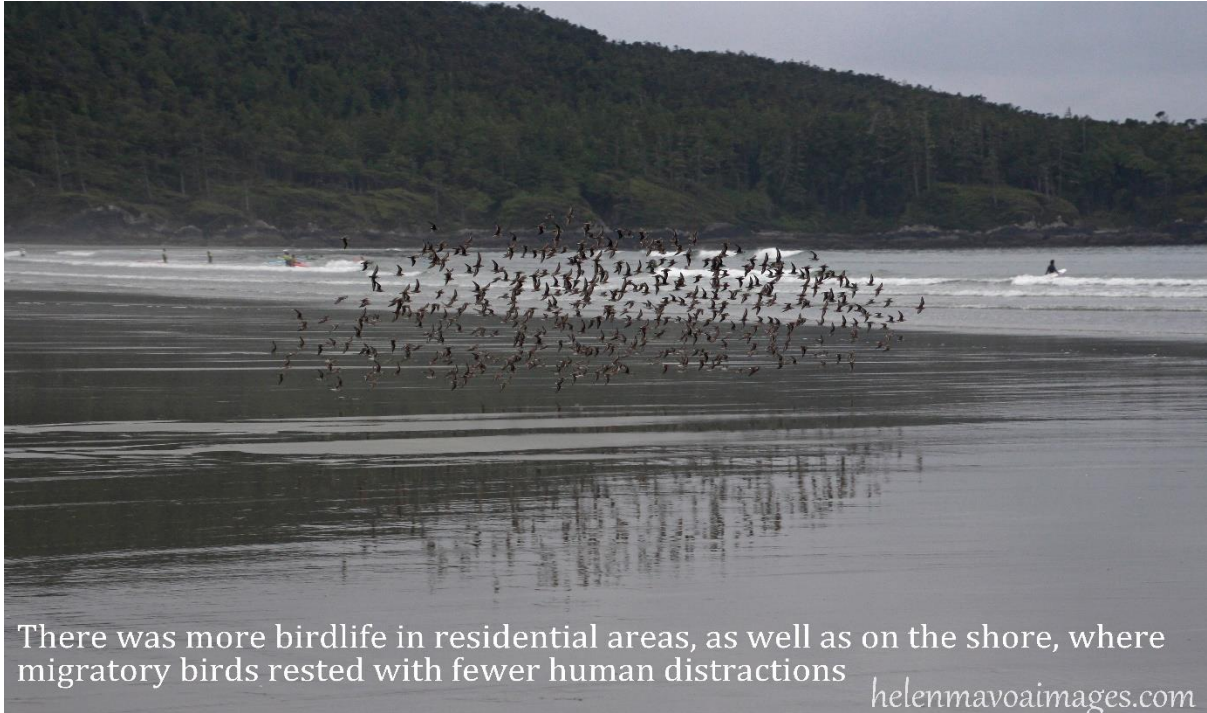


Credit: Norma Dryden

M (mother): For us, lockdown restrictions still allowed us to keep a safe distance and enjoy the shoreline, water and forests, with family and within our designated bubble

rather than a wider group of friends, though that (time with friends) came later in the summer.

It was only a short time before it was evident that there was more wild life than in previous springs and summers when Tofino was awash with tourists, some 600,000 in 2018.



There was more birdlife in residential areas, as well as on the shore, where migratory birds rested with fewer human distractions

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Credit: Helen Mavo



One morning, I paused during a forest walk, transfixed by this raven's song

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Credit: Helen Mavo

There were more *kakowin* (orcas) and *maa'ak* (grey whales) in the harbour during their migrations, due in large part to the stark reduction in boat traffic with the curtailment of whale- and bear-watching tours. I had close encounters with birds and whales during this

time of mandated isolation from most other humans.

On another morning, I had the neighbouring dock to myself:

There were no passengers checking their cameras as they awaited a float plane to carry them over the remote forest and rugged coastline, no whale-watching boats disgorging passengers onto the dock. Neither were there children disembarking from their school boat, chattering as they spilled up the ramp. In the stillness, there was that unmistakable primaeval sigh of a whale. A phoosh of lung-warmed air was expelled into the crispness of the morning. This time though, it was more than the sound. I felt a spray of breath on the back of my neck, like the almost-damp that creeps in with evening fog.

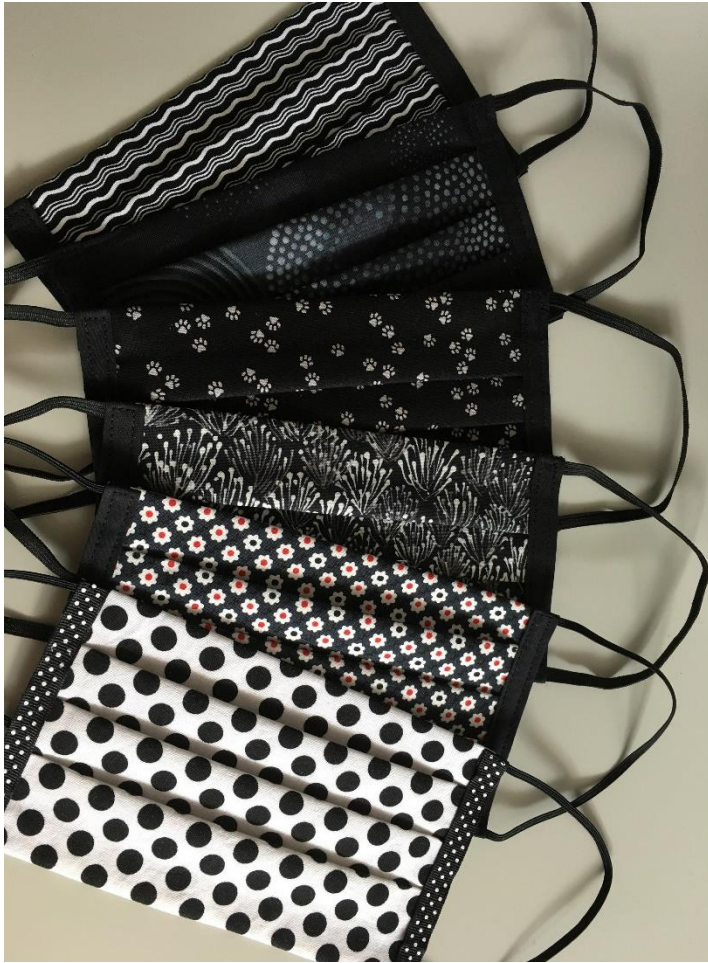
I had been waiting for this for weeks! In that moment, I knew why I had stayed to weather out the initial COVID phase. The *maa'ak's* path and mine had crossed because Clayoquot was a haven for both of us.

While I remained breathless, the maa'ak took another breath and slid back under the water. There was a pause before he surfaced for the next breath a little further away. I had taken three breaths to his one.

I became attuned to *maa'ak* and *kakowin* being in our home waters that Spring, and learned to sense when they might be on the sandbank off a nearby beach. One afternoon, I watched breathlessly as three of them breached again - and again.



Credit: shutterstock.com



Credit: Annie Simmons

A greater connection with nature wasn't the only positive change during the Pandemic. One grandmother talked about the positive impact of wearing masks:

J: I'm immunocompromised and this is the first year I haven't had antibiotics for anything.

She was not alone:

J: My doctor in Victoria is also immunocompromised and he said the same. He hasn't had antibiotics either.

This comment has been borne out by the statistics for influenza in BC during 2021 (Groves et al; 2022; Lu et al, 2022) where they attributed the reduction in influenza to both social distancing and the use of masks.

6. The Challenges

While everyone highlighted the good changes engendered by the Pandemic, there were also challenges.

A number of people talked about the anxiety they experienced during the Pandemic. A grandmother explained:

J: I sometimes get mild anxiety worrying about COVID, worrying about if my family would catch it.

L (mother): And seeing crowd scenes on TV make me quite anxious.

Avoiding crowds in Tofino was seen as key:

L (mother): It was terrible in the summer. We didn't go into town. We didn't go to the beach. And I'm in tourism and I know how important it is to have tourists. But it was terrible. And look what happened at XX (COVID outbreak in a local business). We didn't go anywhere because it felt so crowded.

J (grandmother): *We're a tourist family. We've always been in tourism and we know it's important. But last year was bad. I didn't go into town at all. Not to the Co-op even (<500 metres away). I'd get my coffee milk at GasnGo to save going into the big Co-op.*

A young girl talked about the social challenges for people her age:

Mi (14): *Some of my friends are finding it really lonely. They might have a bad time at home or have difficulties with their parents. And no-one to talk to. Or give them a hug. They mightn't have the freedom to go places like I do.*

These comments about anxiety are borne out by emerging work on the impact of COVID-19 on mental health; the number of young people displaying mental health symptoms like anxiety is reported to have more than doubled globally since the onset of COVID (Racine *et al.* 2021). Closer to home, a study of 2-18 year-olds in Canada found that 70 per cent of school-aged children and 66 per cent of preschool-aged children had a deterioration in mental health (Tombeau Cost *et al.* 2022). These studies are likely just the beginning of unravelling the extent to which COVID has impacted our lives.

One mother was concerned about the lack of social experiences for their four-year-old daughter:

L (mother): *A. has missed out on so many social experiences this year, not being able to have sleepovers, and do things with friends, and have community things...*



Birthday parties and celebrations of other life events became virtual, most often via Zoom. Indeed, one of the hashtags coined for this project was #partyonzoom.

I asked S. how her sixth birthday differed from earlier (pre-COVID) ones:

S: *I had a mermaid party. It was a surprise party and my other grandma (from Toronto) was there too. I went like this (put hands over her face in amazement).*

Her mother explained:

L: *That was September when we could mix more. It was at the Botanical Gardens and we were in groups. A.'s birthday was in January. That was different. We went to the mountain for her birthday.*

When we were able to expand our social gatherings again, there were still challenges. Two children commented on missing birthday parties once in-person celebrations were permitted, albeit with limited numbers. For example, S. recounted how she wasn't invited to a close friend's birthday party early in 2021:

S: *She could only have three and I was number four.*

Several people talked about selecting friends with whom they spent time, taking care to ensure they had similar practices that aimed to minimise the transmission of COVID-19:

L (mother): *Society has trust issues now on meeting or interacting with people. It's hard not to wonder if people are taking the same safe measures like we have. I really miss the days before COVID when we could hang out in groups without thinking we're doing something illegal.*

A father described the conversations they had with their children in relation to confining their activities to friends who took similar precautions to their family.

E: *We told them: "They are not bad people. They just have different ideas from us and we want to keep us all safe".*

A mother talked about the precautions her husband took to keep their family safe:

L: *B. has been very careful at work once they opened up again in June. He has great workers. He trusts they'll stay in their bubbles. They wear masks. He always wears a mask so he doesn't bring it home.*

People also restricted contact with others prior to meeting with vulnerable family members.



M (mother): *We've been very careful who we contact. We've been careful with family, and especially when we've wanted to see my mom. We make sure to cut our other contacts before. For how long? Maybe five days. Like at Christmas, we really wanted to see her and give her a hug.*

Most people commented on the extra demands that home schooling had placed on parents and/or caregivers. One of the challenges for both caregivers and students was to stay motivated without the social stimulus of school:

L (mother): *S (6 years) avoided doing English. She wasn't motivated to work on a screen. She's very social. Then there are the arguments about who can use the iPad.*

Mi (14): *We had home schooling. And I was unmotivated...and my grades went down – the lowest I've had in English. (pause) That was because I didn't do the work.*

A few people talked about the negative impact of the social media during the Pandemic:

L (mother): *The trolling on FB has been bad. It feels like people are always watching, ready to point their finger.*

7. The Resilience and Innovation

Resilience permeated all the conversations in terms of economic and social restrictions imposed by the Pandemic. There were no complaints, despite businesses being heavily impacted by the lack of visitors to Clayoquot during much of 2020 and early 2021, and despite many social activities being curtailed by public health directives.

S. (6) showed her resilience in terms of still missing out on in-person birthday parties once social restrictions eased a little, noting:

*They could only have three. I was number four. **But I can go next year.***

Resilience was all too evident in the case of an elder from Ahousaht First Nation, a mother, grandmother and beloved teacher of Nuuchahnulth language and culture.



During the first year of the Pandemic, n. completed her two and half year degree in Revitalization of the Indigenous Language through the University of Victoria. She achieved this despite health challenges of her own:

n: I had to finish it off March, April and May through virtual learning. Plus I was sick with my gout in my right hand and it took me twice as long to type as I had to work with my left hand. I successfully completed my written assignments for the four courses.

Credit: n'aaskiisiya

Participants used a range of coping tools. For n. it was grounding in her cultural roots: *n (elder and grandmother): ...it was my indigenous (nuuchahnulth) language that has really helped me through this Pandemic of COVID-19. The first few months I had to concentrate on getting my homework done, it gave me time to learn to sing new songs in my language, (Christian songs like Amazing Grace). Then I was off work for the summer, and I could concentrate on converting from English to Central Nuuchahnulth (my learning tools to teach to children)....I sometimes get mild anxiety...I would turn to my language and listen to recordings of elders and to my song Amazing Grace in our language.*



My language grounds me. I have also learned how to pray in my language for others and myself. It means more to me to do this for myself and others when I pray in my language. I can honestly say Nuu-chah-nulth language has gotten me through this past year...and teaching that to my grandchildren.

Credit: n'aaskiisiya

Avoiding stressful activities was another coping tool. The few people who commented on the negative impact of the social media said that they did not access the stressful components during the Pandemic:

L (mother): *I don't go there (to Facebook) any more.*

L (mother): *B. and I used to watch the news on TV every morning. We stopped. It was just too much overload.*



Credit: Adam Alexander

The people of Clayoquot conjured up innovative ways to have fun and still comply with public health orders. For example, the District of Tofino produced a video with visuals of how to measure two metres, for example, the length of a yoga mat, or the width of a cross walk, paced out by none other than the Mandalorian.



Credit: District of Tofino

As the first COVID-19 summer progressed, we were able to meet friends and family outside whilst keeping a safe distance. People recounted innovative ways they adapted activities in this spacious playground that is Clayoquot Sound and in compliance with public health orders.

Participants chose outdoor activities when meeting with others. Dock parties became common. Different groups remained on their boats moored alongside the docks while they spent time together. And those without boats used docks for outdoor gatherings where they could maintain the required distance when meeting with those in their social bubbles.



Credit: shutterstock.com

A mother recounted how she went stand-up paddleboarding with friends and family members, a way to spend time together whilst maintaining the requisite two-metre distance.

One mother found the perfect activity to ensure that her children aged two to six years, distanced from each other as well as from their friends:

L: Bikes were perfect. The kids have to keep their hands on the handle bars, and they need to keep 2 metres apart to avoid colliding with their friends.



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Credit: Helen Mavo



Credit: Helen Mavo



Credit: Helen Mavo

Birthday parties took on a new look, with Zoom parties featuring for much of the first 12 months of the Pandemic. L (mother) explained how celebrations had changed:

L: We've had lots of Zoom parties. And we went to the mountain for celebrations. Halloween was different too....they had special chutes for the treats. And the costumes were a bit different. We did all the COVID-safe things.



People found new ways to treat themselves:

L (mother): We got the hot tub this year. That was instead of a getaway. It has been great.

8. The Support

These Clayoquot communities showed their support for each other at a number of levels:

L (mother): I think that the community has been great, like the businesses were good and looked out for each other. And the community, trying to keep people safe. I wish there had been more coordination between the different communities, like First Nations and in town, so we spoke in the same voice. But generally, I think we've done well as a community. Everyone has cared for each other.

L (mother): Nora did this photo series (of families on their porches or elsewhere at home). That brought our friends close, even though we couldn't see them in person. I'm very social and so is B. We could see them in their homes and see they were happy and healthy. We were missing that connection. That was a good project for helping us feel connected (to community) and feel good.

Participants also talked about support provided within families, including earlier teachings from their parents.

n (grandmother): My late mother taught me a lot and I was raised in a traditional manner. Even though I lost my mother in 1976, I rely on her teachings. My late father was truly an inspiration as well.

A mother commented how she couldn't have managed childcare, home schooling and running her business without her mother-in-law taking responsibility for childcare and home schooling:

L: *And JJ (grandmother) did most of that, as well as care for the younger kids.*

Her mother-in-law, who had moved across the island to help out, commented:
I wouldn't miss this time with the kids for anything.

There was careful consideration for the most vulnerable family members:

M (mother): *We see my mom outside. I went and gardened with her yesterday. And like when we were going camping with my sister, we made sure to keep to ourselves for five days first, not see this lot of friends, then another and another.*

L (mother): *We were very careful at the beginning. Because of JJ (grandmother) you know. ...She's my best friend.*

It wasn't just about care of vulnerable family members - a fourteen-year-old said that she made sure her friends were ok.:

Mi: *I look out for my friends. Some of them aren't as lucky as me. They don't go to lots of (remote) places with their families. So, they find it hard.*

I certainly was the recipient of ongoing acts of kindness and care, not just from friends and neighbours, who shopped and sometimes cooked for me, lent me a garden plot and checked in on a regular basis, but also local professionals in town (shoutout to the teams at Epic Pharmacy, Tonquin Medical Clinic and the hospital laboratory). While hugs were on hold, these hugs of a different kind didn't waiver at any point in the Pandemic.

9. The Learnings

A number of participants talked about a heightened awareness of spending time with family and friends.

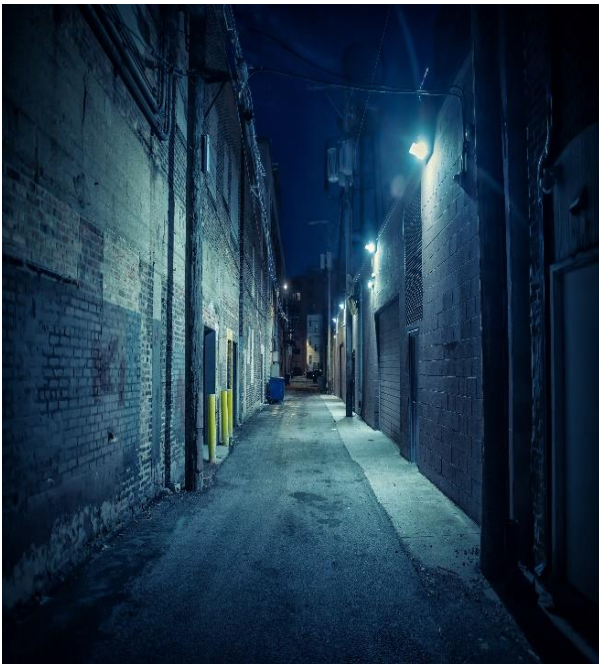
L (mother): *I realize now that I took a lot for granted and appreciate my time with my family and friends even more. Everything is a privilege now, and I will continue to remind my kids how lucky we are for living in Tofino during COVID. One day they'll understand what was really happening.*

The same mother talked about how she had become more aware of the needs of others:

L (mother): *I've learned that everyone has a different story. Like Bonnie Henry (BC Provincial Health Officer) says "Be calm, be kind". We don't know anyone else's story.*

10. The Memories

I asked participants what they would choose to put in a time capsule to represent their experiences during this first year of COVID-19.



Credit: shutterstock.com

JJ., a grandmother, didn't hesitate: *I don't want to be negative but the scale of the deaths and the illnesses around the world was huge. So many deaths. And the cities were empty. The whole world stopped on a scale we hadn't seen. That's what I'd put in a time capsule.*

So, what would you put there? A photo? Cities in the dark?

J: *And in the daytime. They were just empty. Everything stopped. Like New York. I know it's negative, but...the sadness at the number of deaths and the shock (at the speed and scale).*

There were also more fun images:

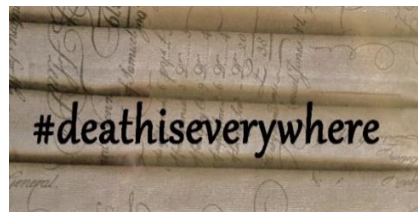
L (mother): *family times like sleeping in, biking and skiing. Baileys and coffee, and lots of zoom celebrating.*

Mi (14): *I remember one night we had separate campfires on the beach and we were all dancing in our groups, our bubbles. And we were dancing. Then someone took an aerial photo of us laying down 2 metres apart.*

Mi: *Anna's painting. It says everything.*

She was referring to a painting created to represent this Pandemic by a young artist who was also a recipient of a Tofino Arts Council award.

I also asked participants for a hashtag in order to get another sense of the images that had endured for them 12 months into the Pandemic. I've pasted these onto the image of a mask crafted and photographed by Annie Simmons.



11. The Summary

While the hashtags summarise some of the storytellers' lasting impressions of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, they do not do justice to the resilience and innovation that shone out in these small communities. Neither do they highlight the many opportunities this Pandemic has provided for greater interconnectedness across generations, within families and communities, as well as with nature. There is also a heightened awareness of things that we value. These learnings, rather than the tribulations, are in my view, the most important stories of all.

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13. The Acknowledgements

These conversations took part on the ancestral & unceded territories of the Tla-o-qui-aht & Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations.

I am grateful to each of the storytellers for their trust in sharing their thoughts and experiences, especially during a Pandemic. Thank you to each one of you.

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