

COVID's on the run, here's how to celebrate

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"I decided to rejoin the human race."

So says Dolly Levi — the matchmaker of Thornton Wilder's "The Matchmaker," the Dolly of "Hello, Dolly!"

For two years, she'd been a recluse. Then "suddenly I realized for that a long time I had not shed one tear. Nor had I been filled with the wonderful hope that something or other would turn out well." So now, she's celebrating her return to the world by arranging a little match...for herself.

How are *we* going to celebrate?

For 15 months, we've been shut-ins. COVID has made us so unsocial, for so long, that many of us have forgotten how to even be around other people. Now we have to learn again. Tentatively, awkwardly. Like someone getting on roller skates for the first time since middle school.

What we need is something to ease us back into the world of live human beings.

Some sort of Welcome Back to the World party. Something to break our fast. Something to mark the end of a sad chapter in all our lives, and the beginning of what will be — we hope — a better one.

We have a few suggestions.

Go up in a balloon

This is what we did. And it proved to be an ideal way to celebrate the end of lockdown. For several reasons.

First, balloons are, by their very nature, celebratory. They're enormous. They're colorful. They announce themselves like a 21-gun salute. You can't go

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up in a balloon without, by definition, doing something Big. They proclaim to the world in capital letters: "WE'RE HERE!!"

But balloons are something else — something well known within the ballooning fraternity, but not well understood elsewhere. They are social.

Not so much in the basket — though

three or four people, crammed into a tiny space, get friendly very quickly.

Balloons are social because of the interaction with the people below.

A hot air balloon is not an airplane. You're not 37,000 feet off the ground. You are just above the treetops—well within voice range of those beneath. People will shout up to you. They'll be glad to see you. As you would be — if a colorful bag of vapor, with a basketful of people attached, were to suddenly float over *your* house.

"Where are you heading?" they will call out. And you'll respond with something pleasant, rather than the reply that naturally comes to mind: "Seriously, dude?" Balloons, as any five-year-old knows, aren't steerable. That's their charm.

"They don't understand the concept of, we don't have to go to some particular place," said our pilot, Mary Beth Young, who with her husband, Dick, runs A Beautiful Balloon — the Parsippany outfit that was taking us for an hour's joyride over the Flemington area last month.

When you're ballooning, you see people at their best, their most friendly.

Most fun of all is the landing. Since balloons don't have a destination, they also don't have a landing strip. Balloons land...wherever. Usually, somebody's backyard.

Tradition decrees that you bring a bottle of champagne for the homeowners — a custom that goes back to 18th century France, when local peasants had to be convinced that the fantastic device that had landed in their fields contained Frenchmen and not aliens. And so: instant party.

"I was feeling a little joyful anyway, post-COVID, but this is a great thing," said Kelly Bowers, who with her husband, Dave, were there to greet us — and toast us — as we landed in their vicinity (actually a neighbor's yard, but they were away).

Celebrating with total strangers — friends in a jiffy — is as good a way as any to say goodbye to COVID.



Balloon travel isn't cheap: it takes money to pay the pilot, and the crew that inflates and deflates the balloon and occupies the "chase" vehicle. But after 15 months of doing nothing, you probably have some cash socked away. If not, you can always attend the New Jersey Lottery Festival of Ballooning (July 23-25) in Readington, where rides are available at (comparative) bargain rates.

Join a drum circle

It's been a while since we humans have interacted, en masse. Post-COVID, we need to get back in sync with each other. And that's what a drum circle is all about. Twenty or 30, or 80 people, all connecting.

Never been to one? They're fun. You bring a percussion instrument. Something. Anything. Drum, tambourine, maracas, old bucket. If don't have one, someone may lend you theirs. You sit on the perimeter of the circle. And you slap out a beat:

Bump, ba-DUNKA DUNKA, Bump, ba-DUNKA DUNKA.

Someone else will beat a counter-rhythm:

BUMPADA-dunk-a dunk, BUMPADA dunk-a-dunk.

Here is a form of socializing that doesn't require conversation. Small talk rusty, after all these months? No worries. The drums do the talking — with beats, not words. You're putting in your two cents. Other people are responding with theirs. Everybody is interacting with everybody else.

"When we bring people together to drum, we're asking everyone to leave their troubles behind and forget about the hassles of daily living," said Tommy "Purple" Hayes, a Saddle Brook resident who has been running drum circles for over 30 years. His group, Drums from Heaven, is going to be hosting one from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. July 3 at the Otto C. Pehle area, Saddle River County Park, Saddle Brook (rain date July 4).

"When you come to drum, you come to a community setting that is all about sharing," Hayes said. "Sharing our vibes, sharing our music, sharing our friendship. None of it is rehearsed, it is all done

off the cuff, and that's what makes it magical. We kind of groove together."

Drum circles are hypnotic, trancelike. Many participants find them calming. Hopefully we'll soon all feel like that, in all social situations.

There are established drum circles in a number of places, including the Asbury Park boardwalk, Free Culture Zone, on the border of Ocean Grove (6 to 8 p.m. Wednesdays and the first and third Saturday of the month; check Facebook page for details) and at Drummer's Grove, Prospect Park Brooklyn, Flatbush Avenue entrance. (Sundays 2 p.m. to dusk).

Or you could just go to a park with a drum, start beating — and wait for company.

Go fly a kite

Kite-flying, like ballooning, is colorful, celebratory. For extroverts.

Flying a kite, socially speaking, is a signal — like running a flag up a ship. It means you're ready to engage. It's hard to feel shy when you're flying a kite shaped like a butterfly, a jellyfish, a UFO, a dragon, a manta ray, or a pair of lip-sticked lips.

Kites are natural icebreakers.

There you are, on the beach, flying your kite shaped like an octopus. And there, 20 feet away, is someone flying *his* kite that's shaped like a potato chip. "Regular or barbecue?" you say. And before you know it, you're making plans for Saturday night.

"That social interaction I think is a great part of it," said Clare Bondi, a kite hobbyist and assistant at Kitty Hawk Kites in Barnegat Light (the company, based in North Carolina, has about 20 stores in the Eastern U.S.).

"There are so many different kinds of kite, and there are so many stunts and tricks you can do," she said. "There are lots of ways to interact, doing different tricks, teaching tricks to other people."

Get a camera

The rumor is true: Other people exist. Time to turn our gaze outward, and remember the human race.

For more than a year, we've all been masked figures, passing each other in the night. Now we have faces again. And one way to celebrate that is with a camera.

"This for me is a way to connect to people whom I would otherwise just put my head down and walk by," said Anne-Marie Caruso, a photographer from Bloomfield has been with The Record, NorthJersey.com and (201) magazine since 2006.

Sometimes, you can see others more clearly through a lens than with the naked eye. Get ahold of a simple camera — or just use your iPhone — and start reminding yourself what humanity is all about.

The sad eyes of that old woman. That

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small child confronted by an angry duck. The fellow in the park, blissfully asleep with a half-opened book on his chest. *Snap!*

If you are a shy person — and Caruso admits that she can be — a camera can also be your wingman, so to speak. It can be the thing that opens the way to a conversation with a stranger. Even if the gambit is as simple as, "That's such a cute labradoodle — mind if I get a picture?"

"For a lot of us, we've been so out of practice," said Caruso, whose work also has been exhibited in galleries.

"You go to a grocery store and everybody is running to the other sides of the aisle to avoid each other," she said. "It sometimes seems like it's extra difficult to approach someone you don't know, because it's been forbidden for a year. A camera is a tool — an excuse to talk to someone. You're using the camera as a prop, a way to connect. If you didn't have a camera, what would be your reason to talk to them?"

Sing around a campfire

Gathering around a fire is probably the oldest of all social rituals.

It's warm. It's dim. You can be with others without feeling self-conscious. It's an unstressful antidote to the solitude we all experienced, to varying degrees, since March, 2020.

But by the same token, sitting around a fire pit, and joining in a few choruses of "Scarborough Fair" as someone strums a guitar, is not overwhelming. It's not to be confused with that other kind of musical experience: being in a stadium with 70,000 other people cheering on a pop star. That kind of experience can be

lonely, too.

Simple music, in a warm, relaxed setting — that's what we need. Baby steps. And singing around a fire is participatory. It's also communal, social, in a way that an arena show could never be.

"With the advent of commercial music, it actually took the songs away from the general population," said John Dull, a folk performer and presenter from Rutherford. "Everybody became a listener."

A good sing-along is all about people. That's what we need to celebrate, now that our months in solitary confinement seem at long last — fingers crossed — be coming to an end.

"Instead of being a listener, you're a participator," Dull said. "Everyone has a voice, everyone can remember songs that would elicit other people to sing with them. It's so healing. Maybe COVID has taught us we need this."

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Tommy "Purple" Hayes from Drums From Heaven (left) during the Paterson Falls Festival Drum Circle in Paterson on August 31, 2019. ANNE-MARIE CARUSO/NORTHJERSEY.COM