

Today ends a long, hard summer.

As a school superintendent, I work year-round. But summers are different. Students, at the end of the final day of the school year, go home for a long break and most other school employees are not far behind. As a result, my days are filled with tasks pursued at a more relaxed pace.

Within the last decade, when people would return in the fall and ask me how my summer was, I would frequently answer their small-talk question with a rhetorical question: 'Is there such a thing as a bad summer?'

As it turns out, it's not entirely rhetorical.

Yeah, there is such a thing and 2020 had one.

A combination of the pandemic, the constantly changing research conclusions on how best to respond to it, and the disaster that school closures have visited upon so many young people left educators in a deep, dark funk.

In this, educators are not alone. Many Americans are anxious about the pandemic and, in fact, in many ways educators have less to complain about than others—those who have lost jobs, seen businesses collapse, or otherwise experienced catastrophic economic reversals. But the tensions in education are real. They are painful. Worst, perhaps, of all, they never seem to end.

School opens today but when will all the finagling and disruptions and invasive measures to protect health while schools struggle to open ever end? With enough time, this situation becomes a petri dish for anxiety, neuroses, and depression. How can educators, in all their roles in schools, respond to such difficulties without succumbing to this witch's brew?

The answer, I think, can come from a Vietnam war veteran, Vice-Admiral James Stockdale, the highest ranking naval officer to become a POW in that conflict. Held prisoner in Hanoi for 7 years, he was beaten, tortured, and told endlessly that he would never leave his confinement alive. Stockdale's ordeal makes our individual COVID-19 experiences pale in comparison but the lesson he offers us is incredibly valuable, nevertheless.

And that lesson is the Stockdale Paradox. Surviving long-term, seemingly unendurable experiences requires three things: the ability to confront the brutal facts of the situation, a profound hope or belief that you will prevail in the end, and the commitment to so prevail. In other words, you must understand and accept that this noxious situation might continue for a very long time, that you won't be home for Christmas, say, as failing such deadlines can truly be dead-lines. You must have genuine, deeply-felt hope. And you must be committed to surviving until that hope is realized, to doing whatever you need to do to realize that hope.

So from whence does that hope, no matter how long this nastiness continues, come? I can think of at least two sources. First, there is religious belief. I am a person of faith who genuinely

believes that the Almighty orders all things for the best. There is a light at the end of the tunnel even if that light, does seem to recede each time I think I'm nearing it.

If you're not a person of faith, there are other—to me, of course, less convincing--sources of the kind of hope Stockdale's paradox demands. In my once-upon-a-time pursuit of an academic career in philosophy (which ended in approximately the same way the zeppelin Hindenburg's career ended—oh, the humanities!), I studied the Greek philosophical school of Stoicism. Developed by such lights as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, stoicism demands an acceptance of the realities of life and a rejection that you should somehow be the exception to them. Suffering, heartache, and death come to us all and it is immaturity at its worst to expect these to spare you. Since you know it lies ahead, why grouse at its arrival? Stoicism is a perfectly legitimate, internally consistent (often the best one can say of any school of philosophy) system of belief. It can be a wellspring of hope. COVID-19 afflicts us all so why let it bring anxiety or depression? It is, as they say, what it is.

Someday, schools will open again with happy, unmasked, gregarious children in classrooms with their teachers and, perhaps, not a camera in sight. I made the mistake of believing this would happen by the start of school and it left me discouraged. I'd like to believe it will now be by Christmas but that might simply hearken back to the mistakes of World War I when Europe's leaders told their people that the troops would be home by Christmas. When Christmas came and found the troops still huddled in their trenches, those same leaders noted that they never indicated Christmas of which year. Convincing yourself it will be Christmas is to be too optimistic, a recipe for disappointment, discouragement, despair.

Convince yourself rather that it will end some day and you'll muddle through. You'll find at last the light at the end of the tunnel and at *the end* no matter how long a summer it proved to be.