

I'm so happy! Now I can see faces. Most people I know are not wearing masks anymore. It is so nice to see smiling faces; to see people's reactions; to know that they are happy to see me. I was so tired of just seeing other people's eyes, and eyebrows, and foreheads. Can you figure out what the rest of their face is doing under their masks from just those three? Sometime, I would see squinty eyes and the corners of their eyes making crow's feet. "Are they smiling now? Are they smiling at me?"

I couldn't tell before – but now – I'm seeing smiles and friendly faces again. It's wonderful that people are uncovering and showing their emotions, greeting others with a smile and a nod. We were hidden in 2020 and many of us have changed our approach to encountering other people. A year ago, I hid my face to keep safe. But eventually I think it changed how I reacted to newcomers. When I went to the grocery, I would turn away from others. When I turned into another aisle sometime I would just turn about because the aisle was crowded. When I did make it into an aisle, I did not look into the eyes of my fellow shoppers. I turned my head and averted my gaze.

This behavior turned habit. I stopped talking to strangers. And worse, I stopped flirty banter with my fellow shoppers. Openness with strangers is something I find endearing about living in America. We (used to) bare our souls to our fellow shoppers. For a while it was "cover up. Keep safe. Don't share your breath" (or your smile) with those around you. Today, I saw a ten-year old kid in a cool t-shirt. I said "Cool shirt." He replied "Thanks." That one-word reply did more to lift my spirits than a hug.

Hugs! That's a welcome return. I've received more hugs in June than I did all of last year. 2020 was a hugless barren. My spouse has been the only benefactor of my hugs for so long. Family, friends and relatives have been an affection-free wasteland, a place without hugs, a place with no shared affection. Now things seem much more open. Vaccinated people are hugging and more and more people are venturing out. We try to go out several times a week and we are seeing more and more people in restaurants and bars; parks and ball games. It like we all have been liberated by our vaccinations. I'm so happy that we had the chance and choice to get shots, to be liberated from the exposure to COVID-19.

To be safe, we should not abandon all precautions. That virus and all its mutations is still out there. If we go to a place where everyone is not vaccinated, we should still wear a mask. If you don't know, be safe. People who are not vaccinated should respect our faith in the maskless. If they are not inoculated, I'm going to trust that they will wear a mask to protect us from exposure.

There are two more things that should make a comeback – respect and trust. Those two virtues need to be elements of our brave new post COVID world.