

by Emily Pierskalla, RN

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What is it like being a nurse in a pandemic? Every day I bounce through the stages of grief like a pinball. The ricochet and whiplash leaves my soul tired and bruised.

Denial: I have spent less and less time in the denial stage. Still, I see many of my loved ones, politicians, and laypersons still stuck in this phase.

Anger: When our elders and immuno-suppressed folks are referred to as disposable members of society, when the pocketbooks of stockholders are considered more important than human lives, when we've known for decades this pandemic was coming, I burn with anger, anger at the system that prioritizes profits over health. It's the system that regularly runs out of "essential" and "critical" supplies seasonally. I have anger knowing the fragility of our supply chain has been exposed time and time again, especially after the earthquakes in Puerto Rico, and yet nothing was done to reinforce them.

Bargaining: The governing bodies bargaining with supply chain availability over scientific evidence. A paper bag is given magic powers to somehow preserve masks that are already expired and soiled. Droplet precautions are now satisfactory for airborne illnesses (but don't you dare leave scotch tape on the walls).

Depression: Heaviness in my heart knowing my co-workers and friends will become unwilling sacrifices so the system can continue in its self-destructive path. And there's grief for the many people I will not have the resources to care for and save.

Acceptance: I have accepted that I will be infected with COVID-19 at some point. I am not scared of getting sick. I am scared of infecting those who will not survive. I check every day on our state's available hospital beds and ventilators. I wonder, if my illness becomes severe, will there be resources left for me?

And then I'm tagged in another social media post praising me for being "a hero." And I'm instantly flung back into the pinball machine as my emotions ricochet through the stages.

If I die, I don't want to be remembered as a hero.

I want my death to make you angry too.

I want you to politicize my death. I want you to use it as fuel to demand change in this industry, to demand protection, living wages, and safe working conditions for nurses and ALL workers.

Use my death to mobilize others.

Use my name at the bargaining table.

Use my name to shame those who have profited or failed to act, leaving us to clean up the mess.

Don't say "heaven has gained an angel." Tell them negligence and greed has murdered a person for choosing a career dedicated to compassion and service.