

Losing our grip as a society

By Ernie Atencio

Taos is the kind of community that has always drawn counterculture refugees, and with that comes a justified skepticism of mainstream America and Western medicine.

That's part of what makes this such a funky and interesting community. But sometimes that skepticism turns into far-fetched conspiracy theories, like some of the crazy-reckless ideas I've been hearing about COVID-19.

Our society has slipped into a very scary netherworld of whacko conspiracy theories, from QAnon and Pizzagate to chemtrails, 9/11 was an inside job, the moon landing was faked and the Holocaust never happened. People seem to latch on to any wild idea that supports their belief and we are losing the ability to discriminate between legitimate information and the rabbit holes of all the other BS out there. We should know better.

These fringe ideas have become dangerous to the point of violence in some cases. Good, kind-hearted people I know would never imagine that they are part of the problem, but there is a very thin line between anti-establishment theories questioning the mainstream and unhinged conspiracies coming from the extreme far right. One feeds the other and we are losing our grip as a society.

Now we are hearing a variety of conspiracy theories about COVID—Dr. Anthony Fauci and basically every MD in the country is corrupt and in the pocket of big pharma; it's just an elaborate plot to profit from an unneeded vaccine; Centers for Disease Control has ulterior political motives and is not to be trusted; masks do not slow the spread; unproven medications and therapies can resist or treat COVID, so don't worry about it. On and on.

These are myths and the kind of intentional disinformation coming from our unstable president and some of his followers, but a lot of smart and liberal-minded people are buying it.

The most alarming notion I hear from a number of people is that we just need to reach herd immunity and we'll be fine. Herd immunity is a tidy concept that makes sense on a strictly biological level when we apply it to herd animals. The weak and the vulnerable are culled, leaving the strongest, healthiest and more resilient members to carry on. But I don't know that the people promoting this idea have thought through the real-world implications.

Doing some basic math about how many people would need to be infected to reach herd immunity, and the percentage of those infected who would die, in the U.S. alone we would see over 6 million COVID deaths. That probably means someone you know. Are the herd immunity proponents willing to sacrifice family members, friends, neighbors?

Some of us are in an age bracket that is considered high risk and likely to be culled, though we're healthy and hale in every other way and would likely live a long life without COVID. Blacks and Hispanics are twice as likely to test positive for COVID. And what about our tribal neighbors here and across the greater Southwest who have been hit harder than other populations? Who is expendable?

People I've heard touting this idea generally have access to good medical care and the means to eat well and take care of themselves. So it's easy to imagine you might survive COVID. But many of the vulnerable populations of color in our community and beyond do not have the access or the means, and often have underlying medical conditions through no fault of their own but as a result of systemic racial disenfranchisement.

Professional medical care on the Navajo Nation is appallingly scarce, for instance, and while we're supposed to be washing our hands often, about 30 percent of Navajo households don't even have running water.

If you care about racial justice and equity, give this all a little thought.

COVID is serious and it's deadly. It's not a biology experiment and humans are not a herd of wildlife. We all wish the situation were different and that we could find an easier way out of it. But this is a time to follow the guidance from experts who know what they are talking about, not wishful thinking. Before you decide to ignore masks or distancing or to infect the herd, think about the implications and who you might be putting at risk.

Ernie Atencio is an anthropologist and professional conservationist living in Arroyo Hondo. (This op-ed was published in the Oct. 15-21, 2020 edition of The Taos News.)