
The Midcoast Inquirer

Newsletter of Midcoast Senior College
December 2020, Volume 16, No 1



Teaching With Zoom

Robert C. Williams, editor of this newsletter, has taught history at Williams, Davidson and Bates colleges and Washington University in St. Louis. His biography of Klaus Fuchs, Atom Spy introduced him to the history of espionage and its wilderness of mirrors.

I've taught college students (including older adults) for 55 years and MSC students for another six years in my so-called retirement from Russian history and deaning, but never by remote learning on-line. So, my class this Fall on "Delilahs: Female Spies" was a learning experience both for me and the 40 students. Seeing all their faces in the "gallery view" gave me good feedback about their learning experiences as class proceeded. Everyone was in their own comfort zone at home. No one had to drive to class and then find a parking space. And we had good conversation without masks, now impossible in the real world.



My own lecture for an hour to start each class was supplemented by an ongoing slide show of Power Point on screen to accompany my own comments. My trusty student liaison, Judy Fiterman, is a professional videographer who intervened diplomatically when technology went awry. She was knowledgeable, helpful and responsive to student questions about Zoom, during the class and during the week. And she gave me good feedback after each class (we are next-door neighbors at The Highlands...).

After my lecture, we switched from "speaker view" to "gallery view" and unmuted everyone so they could make comments or raise questions. We normally stopped after an hour and a half, but conversation often continued—as it does in cloakrooms and hallways after an in-person class. Learning never ends.

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President's Letter

2020 has been an incredible academic year. After terminating our spring semester classes, we discovered Zoom- which surprisingly became a revelation for all of us. Delivering classes on Zoom was initially a challenge, but with the support of our Board, the steady guidance of Donna Marshall and the nearly omniscient Clare Durst, our software guru, we have succeeded spectacularly well so far! I am almost giddy with enthusiasm.

How are we doing? As of November 3, we have received 578 registrations for 27 fall classes, very close to last fall's results. We welcomed a substantial number of new members and we are attracting students from other senior colleges or other parts of the US and abroad. This is fantastic.

The Curriculum Committee and the Board has provided full support to developing a stimulating menu of classes despite wondering if our members were willing to Zoom with us. We have had a few glitches occasionally, but most problems have been solved. This is testimony to the level of interest in our senior college and continual support from you, our members. Thank you for encouraging us to achieve our goals.

There have been many meetings and discussions on Zoom. But our free classes in the spring and summer succeeded in learning how to teach and use Zoom for all of us.

While we would prefer to offer in-person classes, we are planning on Zoom classes for the balance of the academic year. Unexpectedly, we have attracted some new members who now prefer to attend classes in their pajamas at home. Others are grateful to be able to attend when they are not able, or prefer not to, drive and then park.

We are connected with the Maine Senior College Network which enables our members to take classes at other senior colleges of which there are seventeen in Maine. Go to maineseniorcollege.org for information. Stay safe and stay connected!

Doug Bates, President

The Midcoast Inquirer

is the newsletter of
 Midcoast Senior College
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Midcoast Senior College is one of seventeen Senior Colleges in the State of Maine. We serve the area from Freeport to Waldoboro and inland up to Augusta. Most of our classes are held at 29 Burbank Avenue, Suite 6, Brunswick, Maine. Class schedules and *The Midcoast Inquirer* are available on our web site for each semester. Students may also register on line at midcoastseniorcollege.org.

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Problems? Naturally we encountered them, mostly with people learning the ropes and adjusting to their own computer at home: Laptop? Desktop? iPhone? Cell phone? In the end we prevailed and parted convinced that online learning actually had some advantages and was with us, like it or not, for the long term. I look forward to my next Zoom class!

The following essays by MSC professors who had never taught with Zoom before are intended to help us all learn to improve our teaching and learning with Zoom technology in our home classrooms. Thanks to all who participated!

Zoom, Zoom, ZOOM



Barbara Snapp is an award-winning teacher of many courses at MSC. She concentrates on the multidimensional stories of science (biology, ecology, evolution) as they relate to broader cultural issues.

Who would have thought!--

That we'd be teaching online.

That so many of us would be learning online.

That we have begun to be (maybe) good at it.

March 2020 had storm clouds on the horizon and by autumn the storm was well under way. But as with many dark clouds, there is a silver lining. Adjusting to online learning has been a challenge for teachers and learners alike. There are still plenty of wrinkles, but there are also some unexpected plusses.

I have enjoyed the challenge of adapting to a different approach to teaching. I no longer can do the fun in-class activities that have been part of my courses. But my search for "home remedies" has been stimulating – and I think has given the people in my course some opportunities to interact and explore on their own. I miss seeing people's faces while I am presenting my PowerPoint slides. But I have learned how to schedule in "PAUSE" points at key times during each session. Hav-

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NOTE: Midcoast Senior College membership becomes effective upon payment and is for one fiscal year only, currently July 1 through June 30 of each year.

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ing a co-host available to watch for chat comments from participants was invaluable and allowed me to respond to questions that came up between pauses.

When we do discuss concepts or controversies, having everyone's face on the screen is essential. I can easily see raised hands. I can speak directly to the person asking a question or making a comment. Participants were very consistent in staying muted unless recognized – and that really keeps extraneous noise to a minimum. The benefits of seeing everyone at once argues for maintaining a class size that is smaller than has been true in the past. We are socially distanced enough as it is. Disembodied voices from people on a spill-over screen would only make our isolation more obvious.

I do miss the old 2-hour session length. The break in the middle was a good strategy to deal with sitting-and-thinking fatigue. The 90-minute virtual sessions seem jam-packed, and there really isn't time for a formal break. But a virtual experience brings about screen fatigue – even with a break – so I wouldn't argue for longer sessions. And the shorter session presents another opportunity to creatively evaluate my material and pare out information or activities that are interesting, but not essential.

I also see some advantages beyond the short-term solution to courses during the pandemic. Even if we revert to some in-person courses in the future, I think Midcoast Senior College has a likely audience of people who prefer to stay at home and would welcome online offerings. We can also draw in people who live at some distance from our home building. I even have a friend from Washington County who will be taking my Microbiome course in Fall Term II.

I do think the online course approach is a work in progress. I am part of the Online Teaching Committee that is troubleshooting and developing the behind-the-scenes technology and infrastructure that MSC will need to make online courses vibrant and viable for the long term. There are issues related to Zoom from both the teacher and the participant perspective, and we are looking at the most effective ways to train and support both teachers and participants. There are also challenges in developing support structures for exchanging information between course sessions. We are fortunate to have so many seniors who are tech savvy and willing to donate their time to bring MSC's mission to the online world. And fortunately, we have many seniors who are willing and able to explore this world with us – even if they are stepping outside their comfort zone to do so.

So here is my bottom line in poetic form:

*We Zoom to learn and Zoom to teach,
stretching our minds to broaden our reach.
Covid or not, we still connect.
Faces on screens can still collect
advice and views, knowledge and news
with many courses for us to choose.
Masking up and staying at home?
MSC is still a learning zone.*

Zooming With Chekhov

George Young attended Duke University and received his Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literature at Yale. He has taught Russian literature and intellectual history at Dartmouth and Grinnell colleges and lives in Brunswick.

In the spring of 2020, as it was becoming clear that senior college classes could no longer be conducted with twenty or more people in a room together, Zoom emerged as the best alternative. I was not initially convinced that an online classroom would work, since it featured small pictures of participants, all of us, learners of a certain age, struggling through a cutting-edge digital environment armed with annually diminishing digital speed, skill, and aptitude. But the choice had clearly boiled down to Zoom or nothing, on-line class or no class, little pictures of us, senior scholars, pushing buttons to talk about something we would all be interested in, versus more days, weeks, even months of non-stop televised political blather. The course I had proposed, long before Covid-19, was on Chekhov, not always the cheeriest of authors, but compared to what we would be reading and listening to otherwise, Chekhov would be sunshine and mild breezes. So, not knowing how it would work out, I decided to go ahead with the course, even if it had to be via Zoom. And I'm very glad I did.

Learning to use Zoom was not all that difficult. Hit this key to do this, that key to do that — not loaded down with bells and whistles. You don't need to be under twenty to attain reasonable competence after one or two training sessions. It turned out that my teaching method for Zoom could be essentially the same as in regular courses with people in a classroom: a combination of lecture, audio-visual, and discussion. With Donna Marshall's help, I recorded a lecture on the material to be covered each week, timing it so that the lecture could be posted a few days before class and accessed at any time thereafter as wanted or needed. Also, with Donna's help, we posted videos or links to videos of

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subtitled Russian or English film versions of a few of the stories and plays on our reading list.



Chekhov's Three Sisters

In the spring of 2020, before the changes necessitated by Covid-19, I had planned to offer the course in two sections, one on Friday for OLLI students in Portland, and one on Monday for MSC students in Brunswick. The only change in the plan under Covid-19 was that instead of driving between Brunswick and Portland, I could teach both sections from my dining room table at home. The two sections were roughly the same size, most days between thirty and forty students, and the discussions, whether on Monday or Friday, were equally lively and stimulating. Each section had its intellectual emphases, and both sections were a delight to teach. Whether in Portland or in Brunswick, OLLI or Midcoast, it was the intelligence, perceptivity, and enthusiasm of the students that made the course successful. As instructor, my role in the discussion sections about half the time was to pose the questions, then referee the responses. The other half of the time, I would invite questions and then grope and ramble toward an answer. Naturally, with fingers not always as agile as the technology we were operating, we all sometimes forgot to mute when a spouse was calling or dog was barking, or forgot to unmute when our lips were emphatically but silently moving, or perhaps forgot whatever point our hand had anxiously been raised to make. But overall people attained proficiency soon enough, and as the weeks passed discussion began to flow almost as well online as in a pre-pandemic classroom.

The main problem I encountered in teaching two sections of one course for two different programs was that the course calendars didn't jibe. OLLI and Midcoast started a week apart, and I wasn't clever enough to adjust my syllabi to the difference, so as a result I was already on week three of one program before getting to week two of the other. But in the end, it didn't seem to

matter. Thanks to Donna's encouragement and support, and to the good fortune of having Joseph Coté in the class, with his special theatrical talent and experience, both Monday and Friday classes were treated to a splendid finale, a rousing dramatic reading of one of Chekhov's best short comedies wonderfully performed by class volunteers. Too bad no Masterpiece Theater talent scouts were present!

Of course I'll be very happy if and when we can return to classrooms full of people instead of screens full of peoples' pictures, but until that time Zoom can serve as a reasonable substitute for risky personal contact, and Zoom classes can be a welcome break and step up from most other online fare. The collective hum and rapid current of intellectual energy that is sometimes felt in a room full of people eagerly discussing a topic of consuming interest— this does not happen with Zoom. But the slower pace of hold-up-your-hand-and push-your-button discussion sometime allows preparation of a more thoroughly considered comment or response than may flash out in a quick back-and-forth classroom exchange. And despite the shortcomings of Zoom, it is indeed pleasant not to have to drive to class, pleasant to have serious, enjoyable discussions of interesting matters with remote fellow senior scholars from the comfort of one's own favorite chair.

Teaching The Plague in a Time of Plague.

Bill VanderWolk taught French literature at Bowdoin College, emphasizing nineteenth and twentieth century novels. He received his Ph.D. degree in French language and literature from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

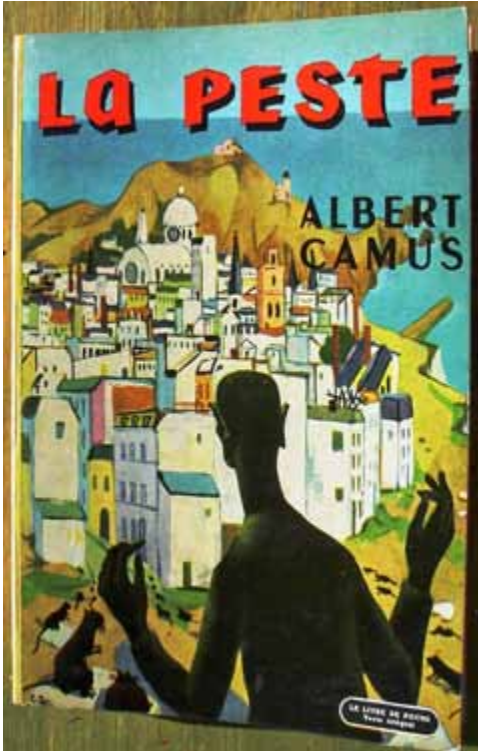
Who could have anticipated that *The Plague* (Albert Camus, 1947) would become such a timely text for us? Set in the Algerian port of Oran sometime in the 20th century, Camus' novel tells the story of a modern-day plague that brings the city to its knees for the better part of a year. The novel is at once a medical drama, an allegory of the German occupation of France during World War II, a philosophical examination of Camus' vision of the "absurd," and a sympathetic look at human nature. As such it presents a rich trove of ideas to discuss in this strange time we are living through.

Since I had just taught this novel at the MSC the year before, I decided to do a series of minilectures on the topic and post them on the MSC web site. Through the last week of March, I recorded five 15-minute talks on the novel: an introduction to Camus, an overview of the major characters, and three segments on the various

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themes of the novel. Once Donna Marshall had uploaded these presentations to the web site, it generated immediate interest in having some sort of discussion about the book.



Thanks to Donna, we organized a 90-minute discussion on Zoom and opened it up to those who wanted to participate. We had fourteen people sign up and launched ourselves into what for many of the group was our first Zoom experience. Using the Gallery View feature, we were able to have a discussion that in many ways harkened back to the French literature classes I taught at Bowdoin College. The participants were well-prepared to tackle the most complicated philosophical ideas and to bring them into the context of our current epidemic. No one talked over anyone else, with everyone raising a hand to speak. The hour and a half flew by, just as any good class does, and I was reminded once again of how lucky we are to have the Senior College and its vibrant community of life-long learners.

I subsequently took George Young's class on Turgenev and was equally pleased with how smoothly on-line learning can work when the classes are thoroughly prepared and everyone rows in the same direction. While we all look forward to returning to the in-class experience, it's nice to know we still have ways to exchange ideas and meet new friends.

"ZOOMING" At Midcoast Senior College



Joseph Cote is a long-time student of Shakespeare. His own acting experience often enlightens his MSC classes.

Hamlet, Titania, Falstaff and Lady Macbeth walk into a bar. Will's Tavern. Nowhere, Kansas. Pit stop on a cross-country road trip in a beat-up VW van headed from L.A. to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, Ontario.

Dusty hot July afternoon. Christmas lights over the bar. Too-loud country music on the jukebox. Three disheveled truckers flirting with the one pretty girl, Rosalind. All heads turn to the door as if on cue.

Over-dressed Titania orders a Fairy Drop Cosmo, Falstaff orders a pitcher of Bud Light, Lady Macbeth orders a Bloody Mary, indecisive Hamlet orders a shot of tequila with a worm in, switches to a glass of red wine, finally settles on a non-committal glass of water. At the bar an always-snarky Beatrice pauses her nightly tirade against men and asks the wired bartender, Mercutio, the question on the minds of everyone in the place...

"Who Are These People???"

Thus could well begin any one of the courses I have enjoyed teaching in the past seven months of the "new normal" on Zoom at Midcoast Senior College.

I am a Shakespeare "explorer" intent on igniting curiosity, appreciation and even enthusiasm among even the most reticent of my fellow elders over the writings of the Bard of Stratford-upon-Avon.

But capturing all that Shakespeare has to offer in any one of his comedies, tragedies, histories or romances is well beyond our collective abilities in two, ninety-minute classes regardless of how many informative study guides and film links I provide well in advance of the course.

So, we focus on the individual characters, the distinctly unique people who emerged from the creative genius of this "country writer made good" of more than 400 years ago. Together we meet and explore, among others, the Petruchios, the Juliets, the Malvolios, the Cleopstras, the Iagos and the Volumnias from the particular

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angles of revenge, tragic flaws, power, fated love, hidden identity, payback or even the challenging decisions and actions forged in the late years of life's journey.

"WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE???"

When I retired to mid-coast Maine two years ago, my "bucket list" included the entry "Expand the Mind" at the top of a wide variety of goals. In my early 70's I wanted to finally prove to myself that I still had the potential to be an even better student and learn more of what I had missed during my student days in both high school and college.

Midcoast Senior College appeared almost immediately on my radar screen and I dove in head-first, chalking up five exciting and informative classes in the first fourteen months. I recall my first class led by the forever-popular team of David and Annie Miller. In a full-house classroom of some thirty students I was gob-smacked by the educational and professional backgrounds of my elder peers, let alone by the enthusiasm, the concentration and the participation of all in every class that followed.

It was soon after when I joined the bandwagon as a faculty member....and oh what a ride it has been!

The classrooms have been alive with the sound of the music of LEARNING!

Then, suddenly last March, the world turned. The "normal" became topsy-turvy, and we all started on a journey of adapting to change. The new age of Zoom had dawned.

There is surely a dynamic vibe about an active classroom. And, an active classroom of fellow seniors is even more innervating. The nerves to the brain go snap, crackle, pop. The "yearning for learning" is ignited and the sense of accomplishment at the conclusion of each class resonates with a proud buzz of mission accomplished.

But, you may ask, what about the effectiveness of the Zoom "classroom"?

Much to the surprise of many, the Zoom classroom has proven to offer a whole new set of advantages. I have just completed teaching an eight-week Shakespeare course with twenty-eight enthusiastic and inquisitive students, and I am happy to report that any anxiety about communicating with faces in little boxes on a laptop, tablet or I-phone screen has vanished.

First and foremost, learning unfolds in the cozy comfort of your home -- any room, any attire (within reason), any hot cup of tea or cold glass of grog. All that,

plus "loo" breaks whenever you wish.



Lady Macbeth Zooming

Some people prefer to sit in front of a blank wall while class Zooming; others prefer changing locations for each class - living room, dining room, kitchen, sun porch. Whatever and wherever's comfortable is perfectly fine.

With Winter soon to unfold, imagine no need for bulky layers, scarves, mackinaws, gloves nor even LL Bean boots for the journey to the MSC Campus. Plus, imagine no windshield scraping, driving on icy roads, nor worries about parking, falls or foggy glasses. But, what is more important than all else? Believe it or not, there is a unique and refreshing kind of camaraderie that comes alive in a Zoom classroom that is surprisingly missing from even the most dynamic of traditional classroom settings.

Let me explain.

Imagine how much better it is to look at the "gallery view" faces of all of your classmates at once rather than the backs of their heads in a classroom! Seeing everyone on your screen actually improves communications rather than reduces it as we all feared would happen in the beginning of our Zoom days. Watching the facial expressions during discussions and seeing how class members react to readings of the text is a far richer experience than simply facing the front of the classroom and seeing only the instructor.

Furthermore, Instructors are able to speedily observe and judge interest levels, weigh over-all reactions to new topics and spot the raised hand of a class member with a question or comment. In this way we are able to fit more presentation as well as more discussion into

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a ninety-minute Zoom class than we were in our traditional two-hour classroom session with coffee-break intermission.

Even in these days of change and adaptation to the “new normal” you may rest assured that Midcoast Senior College is alive and well and kicking with peer enthusiasm for courses covering an amazing array of topics.

So, DO ignite your Winter and Spring energies. Plan to learn new things in new ways at Midcoast Senior College. Come “Zoom away” with us!!!

Shakespeare said it best in THE TAMING OF THE SHREW: “O this learning, what a thing it is!”

A thank you: MSC board member Susan Michael, who is also an academic editor, provided helpful editorial advice for this issue.

Annual Fund Reminder

Although the calendar is turning from ‘20 to ‘21, the annual fund drive at Midcoast Senior College is only at its half-way point. As an independently operated 501(C)3 senior college, MSC does not receive support from a college or university as do many other senior colleges. Our budget relies on community sponsorships, individual donations, and tuition and membership fees. Satisfied students are vital donors.

Please consider making a donation to Midcoast Senior College through a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). A QCD excludes the amount donated from taxable income and will count toward your required minimum distribution (you must be 70 ½ or older to be eligible). The money must be sent directly to the 501(C)3 by your investment firm. Since many are not itemizing because the standard deduction is more advantageous, this is a way to allow you to lower your tax bill and support the organization. Please contact your broker if you would like more information.

Thank you for your support of Midcoast Senior College!

Thanks to our MSC Sponsors for their Support!

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Volunteers

Despite the pandemic, a number of our volunteers continue to help us out in adapting to a new teaching and learning environment online. Helping us with Zoom and online classes are: Clare Durst, Jack Henderson, Harry Hopcroft, Sonia St. Pierre, Nora Bishop, Judy Fiterman, Deb Showalter and Betty Robinson. We are most grateful for their time and effort in helping us meet the challenges of a new form of education.

Winter Wisdom Schedule 2021

Sponsored by THE HIGHLANDS, 30 Governor’s Way, Topsham, ME 04086.

January 6. Jud Caswell, Music as a Form of Community in the Time of Covid.

This program presents local song writer and performer Jud Caswell and his journey from childhood in Morrill, Maine, to national acclaim as “one of the leading singer-songwriters on the current scene” by Sing Out! magazine. A multi-instrumentalist from an early age, he has performed with jazz bands, orchestras and medieval ensembles before finding his home on the acoustic guitar. He will discuss the various themes from contemporary life which have influenced his compositions as well as perform selections from his repertoire. Jud has a BA degree in Music from Dartmouth College and currently resides in Brunswick.

January 13. Michael Howard, Universal basic income (UBI) in a Post Pandemic World.

A number of proposals have been presented to grant an unconditional monthly payment to cover basic expenses arising because of high unemployment and businesses that have been forced to close. What can be said for or against a permanent UBI after the pandemic ends? Michael Howard is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maine, has authored and/or edited a number of books on this subject, and is national coordinator for the US Basic Income Guarantee Network.

January 20. Bob Williams, Remembering Topsham.

Our speaker will recount the history of Topsham, Maine, from 1720 to the present, on which he has published a book. From early conflict with the Abenaki to thriving activity in the timber, shipbuilding and feldspar industries and now as tourist destination and retirement community, the program covers the unique history of this early river town. Robert C. Williams is a retired Russian historian who received his education at Wesleyan and Harvard Universities, and has an extensive college and university teaching and publishing resume.

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the University of Minnesota, and an MA in Archaeology from Queen’s University Belfast.

January 27. **Jim Nelson**, *The Vikings Raids in Ireland, 790 – 1000.*

Arriving first to plunder but then to settle, these sea-borne raiders evolved from feared invaders to assimilated members of Irish society. Jim Nelson, a native of Lewiston, Maine, attended Amherst and UCLA, and has published 25 books in both fiction and non-fiction genres. He has received numerous literary awards for his works on American naval history.

February 3. **Christopher Timm**, *The “Great White Fleet”: Black Sailors, Unions, and Racism on the Palmer Schooners.*

The Palmer Fleet of massive coal carrying schooners formed a critical component of New England’s early energy infrastructure. Its owner, William F. Palmer was known for his relentless efforts to keep costs low, leaving the most marginalized sailors the most vulnerable. This talk examines the complex role of labor and racism in the early twentieth-century coal fleet. Christopher Timm is Chief Curator of Maine Maritime Museum. As an art historian, his research has focused on the social, cultural and global impact of Maine’s Maritime heritage. His education includes a BA in Ancient Mediterranean Studies and Archaeology from

News Of The Board Of Directors

The board of directors voted to terminate its lease of the building at 29 Burbank Avenue in Brunswick. Our facilities planning committee will continue to explore future options in a world of a global pandemic and online learning.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic struck this past spring, the MSC voted to have most of its activities (including classes and board meetings) conducted online using the Zoom technology for meetings and gatherings available through the University of Maine. Board meetings on the second Wednesday of each month have been remarkably effective. Most of us are now all too familiar with the technology and its good manners. Like dutiful children, we raise our hands to make comments, ask questions, or vote on motions of the day. While we miss each other’s company, we recognize the need to zoom together online in the face of larger public health issues of the moment. And we are grateful to live in Maine, one of the safest states in the nation.

HATS OFF! to the MSC board of directors, hard at work at a Zoom meeting:



From left to right: Row 1: Donna Marshall, executive director; Clare Durst; Doug Bates, president; Lynn Lockwood, secretary; Row 2: Karen Williams; Bill Hagggett; Steve Piker; Erv Snyder, treasurer; Row 3: Victor Papacosma; Mort Achter; Janet Kehl; Annie Miller; Row 4: Susan Michael; Kelly Matzen; Bob Williams; Reg Elwell, vice president.