

Stay for the whole show

Hannah du Plessis
Spring 2020

“How are you?” asks my neighbor.

“I am so, so, so many things,” I reply.

“Well,” he shrugs, “If you paid full price for the ticket,
you might as well stay for the whole show.”

In these writings I share moments of living through this COVID-19 show.

KINDNESS

My inner voice is in part that of my father — a military man from German descent who loves perfection more than sunshine. Being gentle with myself does not come naturally to me. After a week of way too much emergency chocolate to quell my sense of inadequacy, I wrote this.

It's okay

You are living through a pandemic.

It is okay if you have trouble sleeping, tossing, turning, your body burning.

It is okay if you want to scream at someone, your insides grated with frustration.

It's okay if you burst into tears when you meant to keep it all together.

It's okay if you binge on social media, a series, on chocolate bars or cereal.

It's okay if you feel isolated, your mood dipping down, mingling with despair.

It's also okay if you are too afraid or too numb to feel.

Be soft,

be gentle,

be compassionate

as you learn to live in

a pandemic.

PRESENCE

I notice how anxiety spreads. Someone reacts out of a sense of urgency, fear or frustration (someone like me), and then that act ripples into the social fabric. Where we come from shapes the world we live in. I needed to remind myself to come from a place of spaciousness, not react from a sense of fear.

Work from home

Work from the place inside you that is
Spacious like sky
Trusting like earth
Accepting like water

RESTING

I talk to trees. Please understand, I'm an immigrant; I came to the US all by myself. If I don't talk to trees, I risk of oversharing and alienating neighbors. So here is me letting you in on some of my tree talk.

"I am so tired, Black Walnut," my back rests on its trunk, my eyes trace one of their thigh-thick roots that snake through the grass.

The black walnut smiles. "It's in part because you humans despise the gift of winter—a season of non-doing: not producing, not consuming, just resting. Believing you only have value when you produce, you don't allow for seasons of barrenness and fallow."

"Yes, wise tree," I say. "But what might you say to me in this moment?"

The tree says nothing, just holds me as I sink my back deeper into their bark.

When I get up, I skip the meeting I am supposed to attend. I attend instead to my own sore body.

BEING STILL

I let the shower soothe my sore shoulders. My reaction to turmoil is to extend myself into it — to ask, “How can I be of service?” Since the pandemic hit I’ve been living this question. Reaching out, holding space, taking care, checking in, giving.

Too weary to lift my body out of the shower, I lower myself down. Shins on the floor, arms beside my body, my head turned to the side. I lie there folded up as the warm drops of water land on my back.

I think about spring. About the thousands of flowers blooming in our city. I think about how these flowers had been seeds buried in soil. Seeds, invisible, tucked away doing nothing but receiving the rain falling on them. Not pressuring themselves to be “useful,” because resting as they are is the best and only thing they can do.

And so I lie, resting. I take refuge, a seed tucked away from surface action, nourished by stillness.

JOY

Yesterday I lost my joy.

After puttering around in hope that chips or chocolate would bring it back, I realized that I needed something else to lift me out of this hole.

I texted my neighbors. "Meet me at the lawn. Bring a frisbee. I'll bring latex gloves so we can safely 'share surfaces.'"

The lawn was lined with long shadows cast by the trees and setting sun. We threw frisbee, yes, but mostly I watched the little girl. Her black leather boots dug into the bog, one pink sock, one blue sock. Her arms extended into the sky with anticipation, the too-big gloves glowing halos on both hands. The little bursts of laughter as she fumbles to catch the frisbee. The satisfying smile, showing two awkwardly large front teeth.

And this coaxed back my own joy.

ALONENESS

At night I was caught in the sharp-toothed mouth of a shark. Each bite of its teeth sends the painful belief into my body that I am utterly alone. In the moment between waking and sleeping I plummet into an abyss of abandonment. The feeling of forever-forgotten, of falling-away-like-the-outcast-I-am stains me in a dark red dread.

As the day breaks, the spell lessens. I exhale deeply to expel this fear from my body. I put on my walking shoes, draw my woolen cap over my ears and step into the yellow morning. The low sun shines into the scene like a flashlight, painting every surface with a tint of gold. Tiny spring leaves sparkle like illuminated gummy sweets around slender branches.

The world is alight with the glory of being alive. I wish I can package this feeling into a little vial to carry with me. This way, when the dark shark mouth closes around me, the experience of utter belonging can dispel the illusion of separation.

GUILT

“Dear tree, I envy your contentment, standing here on the side of the old-age home. Many of the folks inside are at risk of dying early. Many of the folks caring for them also. While this virus is a threat to all, it affects marginalized folks most. Today I am plagued by feeling insufficient in the face of this unfair loss. My white guilt weighs on me.”

“You see this branch?” the tree asks.

“The bare one without leaves?” I ask.

“Yes. I grow like that, giving energy to new branches and not feeding the old. Your guilt helps no one. Why not let it become dry, brittle, and then compost?”

HOLDING HEARBREAK & SUFFERING

“We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering we are being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. This separation becomes like a prison for us, a prison that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears and to caring only for the people nearest to us. Curiously enough, if we primarily try to shield ourselves from the discomfort, we suffer. Yet when we don’t close off and let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings.”

Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*, pp. 87-88

I feel guilty. Or maybe a notch up: implicated. COVID-19 sinks its teeth into the most neglected and devalued populations of our society. And here I sit in my house (about to go on Zoom), in my cis gender, able, well-educated, white body. A body that has been spared hardship and received benefits – unearned.

I feel disappointed. I feel an ache in my heart as well as a sense of futility when I ponder the overwhelming scale of this post-colonial mess we’re tangled into. I wonder if the arc does bend toward justice. I want to face away. I want to say, “Well, there is only so much I can do about this.” And carry on with my to-do’s, seemingly unaffected by this heartbreak and sense of hopelessness.

But I have lived like this, facing away from discomfort, for decades. To face away does not make me stronger or more useful, it makes me harder, more disconnected. My dull heart is less likely to be moved to action.

I sit under the Japanese cherry. The last blossoms, tender like sunburnt skin, are slowly shedding, floating sideways into the cemetery. In my heart are shards of broken crockery, piercing my chest and throat. I feel the heartbreak of this moment. There is also the vast earth under me, and a chipmunk on a fallen log washing his face. Instead of swallowing this discomfort, I open to it. I allow the hurt and pain to be felt. I cry softly. I breathe deeply. I think of all those who cannot breathe right now. I sense into the despair. Breath by breath I feel it, and then I give it away. I ask that which is bigger than me to take this sadness. When I feel emptied of this ache, the chipmunk has moved down the tree trunk and stares in my direction. I say, “Thank you for seeing me, brother.”

GRATITUDE

Immersed in the pandemic, most of my time is spoken for. After hosting an online practice space and before going into a neighborhood community call, I take a break. I walk to my neighbor Regis' garden. Two weeks ago his daughter came to get him. He stopped eating at age 94.

I've heard that many older people die during Spring, because they can't find the strength to face another season.

Last year's brown leaves crack under the weight of my body as I kneel to draw the unopened daffodils. They grow from the bulbs Regis planted but will not see in bloom this spring.

The sun is low and golden. I listen to music composed for birds soon to be forgotten, as their names no longer appear in children's dictionaries. I wear my reading glasses to see better and everything around me is large, crisp, bathed in sunlight. I want to live right now.

WONDER

Tired of pandemic talk, I turn to a friend and say, “Can you tell me about wonder?”

He describes the little blue dot of Earth as seen from outside our solar system. Then he paints the picture of our galaxy swirling, swirling, swirling. Then we zoom out once more to the outer edges of space. As we look back there are rivers of galaxies flowing. Goodness knows where to, but here we are, a tiny blue dot in space, in a river of galaxies, flowing.

And also, here I am hiking up a hill. I plan to watch the full moon rise — a sight hard to come by when living in one of the cloudiest cities on this continent. Slightly out of breath, my friend and I watch the dusk offer a perfectly round Lenten moon. The moon blushes slightly pink.

We shout at the moon, “Hello moon!” We shout at the city, “Hello Pittsburgh!” We smile at the absurdity of being alive, between the rising moon, the setting sun, between generations past and future. Between the thousands born into isolation and the thousands dying alone. We breathe into being here now — two little humans held by Earth as she orbits the sun, as our galaxy swirls, as all of celestial life flows.

FEAR

“Dear tree,” I say to the mulberry supporting my torso, “I am having a hard time. I feel so afraid. Sometimes I can’t concentrate. Some nights I can’t sleep. What might you say to me?”

“Sink,” says the mulberry. “Sink your weight deep, deep, deep into the stillness of the earth, into the center where the quiet can hold you. Rest there. Let go. We’ve got you.”

KINDNESS

The doorbell rings again. Who will come over now that Covid has sent us all home? When I open the door, E., one of the kids on my street, stands a few feet from me. His face shines as he pulls two magnolia blossoms from behind his back. The large flowers sit in his tiny brown hands like tired birds, their leaves a little bruised.

“This is for you, Hannah!” he says proudly. “I know you like flowers.”

Indoctrinated with all the orders of social distancing, part of me pulls away from him. I retract into a memory: me and my neighbor walking into the same small alley at the same time. I brighten at her presence, but she recoils, turns away. My voice sends a “Hello!” towards her back, she barks a brief “Hi” as she scurries away. I hope to find her out in the street, but she has disappeared into her house. I feel dirty as if I am the bearer of badness. I know we must see and treat ourselves and each other as carriers of Covid, but what about kindness?

I look at E’s expectant face and my less fearful self steps forward, my hands a plate onto which he places the limp magnolias. Our eyes meet and my smile tells him just how happy this gift make me.

He runs off without a word.

I close the door and lower the flowers on my sink. There is soap nearby to wash away any tiny virus tentacles. But how do we wash away the sting when, instead of seeing each other, we flinch away in fear?

LETTING GO

“We are in this profound energy and period of dying. The person we used to be is dying. All our old ways of coping are dying. All the ways we used to skip out of the moment is dying. We are being continually ushered back to the moment where we are having to be in relationship to our heartbreak. Mourning our broken hearts is the path to liberation and it is the door into a new world of being.”

Lama Rod Owens

“Don’t fear loss, don’t fear decay,” says the large magnolia on Melwood street. “Allow yourself to fall. Allow the beautiful things you’ve worked toward to peel away from your upright limbs. Let them tumble to the ground. Don’t freak out when your once precious petals lie trampled on the ground. Relinquish trying to understand why things are like this. Allow the sun and slow rain to compost the life now lying at your feet.”

QUESTIONING

“We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-Corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”

Sonya Renee Taylor

My friend tells me that ants keep aphid farms. They eat the wings off the aphids so they cannot fly away and then the ants milk them for honeydew.

I feel milked by the systems around me. I pay taxes, I pay my medical aid, I pay rent, yet I see no freedom in sight. Will I always be stuck in this cycle of giving away my resources to just get by? Most of what I earn benefits individuals and institutions who already have wealth. Little remains to create a life with more financial stability for myself.

It turns out that my friend’s story was not accurate. The aphids don’t have wings, nor are they imprisoned. The relationship between ant and aphid is symbiotic: the ant protects the aphids from predators, the aphids offer honeydew in return.

Toni Morrison says, “The function of freedom is to free someone else.” What if those with financial freedom use it to help others be free also? What do systems of generosity and mutual support look like?

GENEROSITY

This pandemic is tightening the financial flow around me. I feel it not only in a loss of income, but also in a lack of incoming client engagements. It brings up memories of times when I was too poor to pay rent, sleeping on other people's couches or in cars. This uncertainty pulls on old wounds. It tempts me to clam up in self-protection.

During an online meditation with rev. angel Kyodo williams, she guides the group to sense what matters most to them. People from all over the world reply in the Zoom chat. The reoccurring theme is, of course love. It matters most that we love and take care of each other.

When I move out of the abstract and into my current situation, I am cared for. My bike broke, so a friend lent me her bike. Another friend went shopping for me. I'm tight on cash, yet all kinds of care is offered to me—homemade bread, a handmade mask, pesto, cookies, a hot bowl of chili.

If what matters most is to live in caring relationship to each other I ask myself:

In a capitalist society trading on scarcity, how do I live generously?

In a society where money is often used to exploit, how might my money honor and uplift?

Benefitting from a history of colonialization, how might I participate in restitution?

I resist the impulse to close down, I reach out. I increase my monthly commitment to support others. I write my part of history through who I chose to be and how I live my life.

DREAM

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through, lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Arundhati Roy

Here is a conversation that could be from the future, between a mom and her ten-year-old.

“But mom, why did they put people in camps or cages?”

“Are you talking about the prisoners, immigrants or refugees?”

“About *all* of them, why would people *do* that to one another? So many of those people died during the pandemic – there was no room for them to stay safe.”

“Well, back then, the world was very different than it is now, sweetie. During the pandemic, people didn’t yet know how to see or treat each other as sacred. Maybe people felt so unsafe or greedy that they believed using their power to protect and enrich themselves was okay and could be sustainable. So they created borders to keep themselves safe, which created immigrants. And they invaded other countries to take what they wanted, which created refugees. They couldn’t see how broken and exploitative their own systems were, so instead of transforming them, they created prisons to contain those most harmed.”

Chris gives an audible sigh. “Do you know what I’m grateful for today?”

“No, but I’d love to hear.”

“I am grateful that we no longer have so many ways to harm each other. I like that I need to go to a museum to see a guillotine, machete, machine gun, or gas mask. That I can see a movie about environmental harm, not inhale bad air. That I can read about invasions, or see pictures of concentration and refugee camps, but I have little fear that we will turn against ourselves the way they used to.”

“That’s a good list.”

STAYING OPEN

How to read the newspaper without being overwhelmed

Inspired by an On Being Podcast between Krista Tippett and Devendra Banhart

Read the headline – more deaths, killings, hunger, deceit, injustice.

Feel your heart buckle, your gut curdle.

Notice the knitting needles in your neck.

Watch your jaw tighten.

Now, breathe in.

Breathe in

sorrow

fear

anger

breathe in everything you've witnessed.

Send your breath into all the tight places.

Feel the rage, the dread, the heartbreak in your body.

Now, breathe out. Not only air, not only pain,

but also, with your breath,

send us peace

send us solace

wish us well.

I SEE YOU, I LOVE YOU, KEEP GOING!

I teach at two universities. By the end of each semester I have fallen in love with my students (even through Zoom!). I wrote the following to read to our Spring 2020 CMU cohort at the end of our last class. This way I have words to steady me should the urge to cry muddles me up.

Dear Student,

And so, when this call ends, when this semester ends, you are stepping into the next chapter of your life. As you walk on, I would like for you to remember two things.

First, *you matter*.

You matter because you are here. Not because of anything you do, achieve, acquire. Your worth is intrinsic, even if you feel unable to claim it. You are not a mistake. You are not an outcast. You are not broken and you are by no means insignificant.

You belong here.

Secondly, *how you live matters*.

We live in transition times. A caring society is in the making.

As you learn to live into your own worth, you will continue to see that worth in others also.

May you find the wisdom and courage to challenge structures that devalue yourself or others. To say, "No, I shall not stand for this," when harm is being done.

May you participate in creating collectives, organizations, worldviews and systems that see and celebrate the sacred in us all.

You are part of becoming and bringing the better world into being.

You matter.

NOTICING

“You who want change to happen big, happen fast, come sit with me,” says the cherry tree as my pencil traces the outlines of her unopened buds.

“Come sit with me. All over the sleepy northern hemisphere buds are creeping out, imperceptibly slow. Individually negligible, but together an unstoppable shout of Spring. Live with me and see that a mighty flowering is coming.”

What if now is the time to open into the liberated world we long for?

Thank you

for staying for the whole show.

This writing is better because of Marc Rettig and Elisabeth Cargo's generous gifts of editing. Thank you both so very much!

Hannah du Plessis

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