

This is It - Searching for Beauty During Pandemic Times

Essays by Katie Huey

This is Not Ok

April 14, 2020

I remember standing at the high kitchen counter leaning against a worn wicker chair. My back faced the big sliding glass door as the sun started to set. My tear-streamed face turned down, as my eyes blurred staring at my fingers.

“It’s going to be ok,” I kept saying to no one in particular.

My dad died earlier that day and we gathered in the kitchen as family started to show up.

“It’s going to be ok.”

At the time, my brain spurted internal words of comfort while stuck in a spinning cycle of thoughts. I hadn’t gotten to the What-the-actual-heck part yet. Instead, I tried to soothe the immediate blow.

Social media is awash with millions of posts about the world right now. Memes swish in cyberspace. Broken hearts fill Facebook. With every ‘It’s-going-to-be-ok’ sentiment exists a person leaning against worn kitchen chairs now facing confusion and swirling thoughts.

If you’re paying attention, your brain and your body are trying to self-soothe these blows.

I don’t remember anyone responding to the five-word phrase I uttered back in the kitchen. No one acknowledged my need to make things ok.

But it was not ok. Someone I loved died.

Across the globe, overwhelming losses are broadcast on the news, turned into cautionary tales making others terrified. Shame creeps in as the media lurks and warns and flashes headlines as we silently pray, “Please not my people.”

In his book *Promise Me, Dad*, Joe Biden estimates for every person lost, six people intimately grieving that loss. The US lost over 20,000 people this month. Multiply that by six and realize the number of folks now plunged into grief. Add the ones who already lost someone and the number grows substantially. We're triggered, we're sad, we're wondering and, I'm hoping, staying the heck home.

This is not ok.

I've been at home for a month now. I know people who have gotten sick. My heart aches when I see posts of people who have died. No one is untouched by this experience.

I flashback to the kitchen and the white wicker bar stool and I whisper to my younger self, "No, this isn't ok."

I wish someone had said that to me.

This pandemic life is not ok. I learned, over the last four years, calling out the truth of our horrible experiences loosens the tight grips they have on our hearts and our worried brains.

There's no going back. I'm more compassionate to myself. I'm less tolerant of the things our world tells us are important. My molecules rearranged and my perspectives softened. I'm quicker to anger at injustice and ache for connection. Scars of loneliness get special attention. I type into the void with calm fingers wishing people could listen. All our not-ok-ness is valid. We deserve a place to put our not-ok stories.

This is not ok.

Let us weep and rest and extend grace to others as we make new choices from what remains. We will stand and move out of the rubble of the worlds we once knew. Donate money. Call out the not-ok-ness. These four words – this – is – not – ok - are beautiful things.

Real

April 26, 2020

I sent a pleading text today. Standing on the paint-chipped back porch, my thumbs typed angrily onto a glass screen with tears in my eyes.

“I already lost a parent, I don’t want to lose you too.”

My thumbs numbed slowly as emotion welled in my chest.

I didn’t have the courage to call and hid behind my phone’s turquoise case rather than making a call.

Grief slipped between my sentences as I transferred my anxiety from my gut to the pocket where his cell phone lingered.

I pushed send while crying in the kitchen, whimpering, “I just don’t want to lose anyone else.”

Grief experts share comfort, perspective, and expertise for those new to loss. Coping tools creep up in posts and in video chats. Healthy suggestions for channeling triggers zip in the spaces connecting us on the internet.

I’ve been wondering and waiting for epiphanies. Do I have any wisdom to share to help the newly bereaved? Which of my lessons learned apply to the panicked, the hurting, the newly unemployed? What responsibility do I have as an “influencer” who is using personal pain to guide others?

I’ve stayed quiet because I don’t have much. I return to the basics. I encourage myself and others to find comfort.

Soothe yourself with warm blankets and cups of tea. Splurge for the brand-name tissues for wiping your eyes. Light a candle. Nourish yourself. Take a slow walk around your neighborhood. Wear a mask.

My own imagined panic creeps in like fog moving over the mountains, I let the wave consume me. I feel the overflow of emotion leak up out from my chest and onto the laminate floor. My grief wounds drip fresh with the fear of loss not yet real.

I imagine thousands around the world are feeling the same.

Rather than whisper antidotes and remedies, tonight I give permission.

I finger my scars and I breathe deeply remembering I am prone to loss and intense experiences in an aching world.

I give myself permission to live in this uncomfortable, seemingly horrible space.

I give you permission to ask for a hug. To send pleading text messages and grace for the tears sure to fall. I welcome the beauty found in accepting a warm embrace, even if the arms wrapped around your shoulders are your own.

Pandemic life is scary and hard. The unknown licks our fingers and faces leaving a chill in our bones. Give yourself the beautiful permission to feel all of this. To weep in the kitchen. To send the texts, and express your love, and ask for what you need. At the end of the day, I only want to influence real. Real is beautiful.

We Aren't Doing Enough

May 9, 2020

I dreamt about him last night.

We were at an amusement park strapped into a large swing for adults. The yellow bucket seat felt cold on my legs and I feared the lacking, worn, nylon restraint. I could only see out and down over the rolling hills and green grass. He was sitting in the swing behind me.

After the ride, we sat on a bench with people from all stages of my life. He handed me a white McDonald's bag, the yellow arches pronounced on the front.

“Sorry I had to go” he said.

I woke with an adrenaline rush of sadness and a soft smile and said to myself, “I bet that bag was full of burgers.”

Dad doesn't often come to me in dreams. Waking is tortuous mix of comfort and despair. These glimpses of him spin into a storytelling of bizarre memories, recollections. They poke at the persistent reminders of the anxieties of where we are currently, living without him.

As a nation, as a globe, we aren't doing enough for new grieverers. Our president isn't saying sorry; no empathy drips from his lips. Online communities try. Grief groups touch on triggers and share reluctant welcomes to the clubs none of us wanted to be a part of in the first place. While people learn how to facilitate virtual funerals, few leaders acknowledge emotional pain. Few news outlets recount the painful goodbyes from screens, or share the connection between personalities and preferences of actual humans pushing the numbers to tick up, up, up.

Globally, thousands step into the first weeks and months of mourning. Milestones are met without their people in audiences. Loss walks with us daily, and very few say, “I'm so sorry

you're here. Our lack of response led to this painful unraveling and gaping whole you now live with."

We aren't doing enough to create space or to embrace dark feelings, questions, and unfathomable realities.

Instead, we fight on Twitter, and bicker about masks, and resist restriction and crave connection.

I pray, "Please not me", and desire to help. I lack profound wisdom and my dad did not communicate anything wise to me about our current situation in a dream-like state.

He just gave me a bag of burgers. None of us are sure what to do.

This week, I went to Starbucks for the first time in eight weeks. The drive-thru felt beautiful and as the signature green straw plunged into my plastic cup full of coveted vanilla latte, I sighed with gratitude. And then I washed my hands.

We are still here, in this pandemic, hoping, and wondering, and being ourselves.

Part of my journey, my searching, my purpose, is to help people in pain. I can point fingers and blame and say the grand "THEY" aren't doing enough. Or, I can turn to where I have control. From my kitchen table, I choose to use words as my tools to illuminate and accept the dark places in people's lives.

I'm so sorry we're here. People die by the thousands and our culture doesn't know how to talk about grief. You're here and hurting and this year will forever be one that changed your life.

Perhaps soon, your people will come to you in your dreams. Until then, I recommend the drive-thru. Starbucks or McDonalds. What gives you comfort in cups, in memories, in connection? You're feeling now and that's a beautiful thing.

This is It

May 23, 2020

I stood back from the people in front of me as my face mask slipped down under my nose. Efforts to create six-feet of distance seemed silly as others swarmed in the busy home-improvement store. Like a salmon unsure how to swim upstream, I tentatively wrapped my little fins around me wondering, “Is this big ol’ river safe?” I followed my husband through the aisles and I looked ahead, beyond the paint, and watched a man in my path pause.

He stood still. So as not to break my six-foot bubble, I did too, waiting to move forward.

This man removed his mask, sneezed, and put the face covering back on.

I gripped my wrists and dug my fingernails into my palms.

“You wear the mask to stop the sneeze!” I thought to myself “Ohhhhh my Gosh!”

I wanted to pull my hair, to yell at him, to shriek, “What the heck are you missing?!” My muscles tensed and my annoyance rose. I’ve never hated being around people more.

I stood still longer, thanking my own face mask and wondered how long it takes for germs to disperse before I could walk through his invisible cloud.

I continued forward uncomfortably. Get in, get our supplies, get out.

I know I can’t be the only one worried in public places. And by the looks of things, thousands of people are not nearly as worried as I am.

Our neighbors gather, stores are busy, and friends post pictures of time spent on the lake. I’m still sitting, writing from my couch, wondering what dials will have to turn for me to feel safe

again out in the world. I miss my mom, and want a hug, and wonder when my brother will be able to go back to work. This isn't fun.

We drove home and washed our hands. We wiped down the paint we purchased with off-brand, lemon-scented cleaner because Clorox wipes were nowhere to be found.

Later in the evening, I turned on an old favorite movie, *About Time*. The main character Tim travels back in time and relives any day he chooses. The re-dos have consequences but his gift allows him to live less anxiously, be more present, and delight in ordinary things around him.

What would I do differently if I knew now what I'll know in two weeks? The exercise is exhausting, isn't it? The things we worry about are easier to face if we know the outcomes don't cause us pain.

If I went back to today, two weeks from now, and stood in that same concrete box-store would I be kinder to the un-masked sneezer if I knew I wasn't infected? Would I would have gone down a different aisle? Would I have pulled my husband closer and slowed my breathing? Or would I have chosen to avoid the store all together?

Here's what I know now.

This is it.

We don't get a do over. I don't get to go back.

I may have to spend much of this year in my house wondering, waiting, and worrying.

When the virus slows, I'll wander again. I'll get emotional in public parks, and plan vacations, and toast champagne at weddings. Still, new anxieties will present themselves. The world will give me something else to fear.

Moving through things doesn't erase fears – the process of arriving on the other side means I'll place my anxious claws into something else. Worrying and wondering just wastes my time today.

This is it.

How can I live differently in these pandemic days while I wait?

I asked my friend to pray for me – may I have compassion for the people who aren't taking this as seriously as I am. Compassion for myself and my family. May I be at peace. May I use my creative energy to invest in the things I love to do, even while home. May I honor the outbursts and fits and tears coming from the stress of this global melt down.

Our world is changed and my little world, here on the big blue couch with the sun streaming in, still offers a chance for peace. I may be missing out, but this won't be forever.

The sun is up. The garden is being watered. The coffee is hot. Books beg to be read. I'm breathing. This is my life, here and now.

As Tim says, "We're all traveling through time together every day of our lives. All we can do is do our best to relish this remarkable ride."

What a beautiful thing.

The Two Least Helpful Things

June 1, 2020

In my experience with personal pain, the two things I found least helpful were this:

When people said, “There are no words.”

When people asked me, “How can I help?”

Taking sipping breaths, I’ve sat and watched my country erupt with emotions. With each horrific video, at each angry response or defensive, violent reaction, or attempt at peaceful protest, I’ve wondered.

How do we continue to hold space for the pain each of us carry?

I don’t know what to say, or how to help. I know my lack of trying adds force to the complex dominos falling around us.

I’m a writer. I coach people to put words to their experiences and find healing in putting words to my own. I am tongue-tied and paralyzed. My fear of saying the wrong thing does nothing for marginalized communities and people of color.

When I feel stuck or others stumble, I return to: start with one.

Start with one word.

See what flows from there.

Unjust. Angry. Desire. Frustration. Ally. Sick. Tired. Sad. Rage. Friend. Understandable.

We live in a complicated world with painful histories designed by humans to hurt some and benefit others. I benefit. I hurt. So, do you.

When fires burn and people seek to be seen or heard or simply touched, I whisper, ‘How can we be better?’

If you feel the same and choose to yell, please, yes, use your voice.

I use my words to say, “I’m sorry for what brought you here. I’ll never fully understand. I can only listen and seek and carve space for your pain to be seen. Searching for good and holy and beautiful things may help. But what the heck do I know?”

How can we care for our friends, the strangers, the people whose lives and whose pain never impacts ours?

I don’t have an answer. I may never know your experience just as you won’t fully know mine. But we have the beautiful opportunity to try.

I’m using my words to grapple and hold space, to ponder, to ask, and to try to see.

Sometimes, even the words need to stop. The listening needs to start. Creating collaborative solutions requires us to listen to stories not our own.

The match I light in the darkness is my choice to hold the good and the bad in cupped palms. An offering to the broken in all of us, in our country, in our world. Let’s say yes to the hurt and pain and marvel at the tears. Use your spark to turn towards the good.

Horrific things are happening. Behavior must change.

And still, people use their voices, hold hands, and stand. They stare down cops and link limbs with armed guards. Hurting people encourage outsiders to walk together in the streets. Allies and neighbors kneel for justice.

Use your words and fumble to make sense of what's next and right and what your roles can be in this moment. For every person reading, wondering, seeking, searching, and opening their eyes – there will be that many unique ways of moving forward.

Stop waiting for people to answer your cry of “How can I help?”

How do you want to help? Do that.

Use your words. Start with one.

And see what flows from there.

Counting by 7s

June 10, 2020

The sun woke me this morning. Cool air blew in through the blinds, pushed with a little help from the rotating blades of the plastic window fan working overtime. From my bedroom window, I first watched the three-year old neighbor helping her father pick up sticks in a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle costume. Mask secured, she bent repeatedly to clean the wreckage from the wind storm in their backyard. Her squeals and kicks and appreciation for a costume warmed my heart.

Our home has been quiet lately. It's an unsettling calm in a world disrupted by sickness, racism, hatred, and positive action mixed with a crying call to be better.

This introverted writer hasn't minded the pause – a time to be working from home and relying on comforts to make sense of things going on outside. Only this week has the silence rippled in uncomfortable patterns into our home. I miss seeing my friends. I balance wanting to interact with more than just my husband and my parents via FaceTime with uncertainty of a risky world.

I am amazed by the bravery, determination, and willingness of hundreds of thousands of people standing up against injustice. Black lives matter. The work you are doing to change opinions, open eyes, and demand action inspires.

Does writing into cyberspace still hold power when my anxiety prohibits me from protesting in the streets?

Typing cautiously, I hold the heavy weight of pain in one palm, and unfurl my gripping fingers of my other hand with a readiness to accept good and beautiful things.

How long until the open palm fills with the same weight of horrific behavior and heinous tweets?

I must believe it's not as crappy as CNN chooses to remind me each morning.

I heard recently a positive thought takes seven times the reinforcement to stick in our brain than a negative thought. Seven times more powerful are the fears, the shames, the things you must protect yourself from.

In my continued silent sanctuary of home, surrounded by privilege, I listen to dogs barking and a neighbor mowing the lawn.

“What beautiful things are here in all of this?”

For the world has always been messy – rarely are we all privy to the pain and suffering we carry on a global scale. A mirror has been raised. The pain in me sees and honors the pain in you.

What would happen to our world if we could whisper those words to one another?

Father’s Day is coming and with it the ads land in my inbox like little paint ball explosions of grief. No one has texted me to see how I’m doing with the approaching marker.

Thousands upon thousands miss their people. We’re out of work and afraid to go to the grocery store and wanting to hug our friends. I start counting and repeating to myself, seven times over.

Classical music plays and children pick up sticks. Protestors flood the streets with messages of peace and justice. Others ask to be able to breathe. What privilege it is to start with a fresh, full breath.

Classical music. Children picking up sticks. Cold brew coffee swirling with cream. Instagram messages of solidarity. Protests in the streets. Longing for connection. Feeling unsettled. Searching for someone to see your pain. All beautiful things.

You, too, can count and seek beauty. At seven times the rate of the negative we’ve been fed.

Was it Risky? Yes.

June 24, 2020

Anxiety is a best friend to me these days. I swat at my fears while sipping on homemade coffee. I'm still here. Working from home.

The glow of the computer screen fails to make up for missing companionship. I haven't seen friends in close to 100 days; almost a third of the year.

I don't know how long we'll be here, nor, do I have control over the comings and goings of others swallowing down cocktails on outdoor patios.

The anxious ones hurt in this pandemic space. I've felt heavy for months. Laying on the ground helps. So do fresh flowers, and sourdough cookies, and sticking my hands in the dirt. Perhaps a drive may lighten the weight I take on from the perceived pained energy of others.

Connection is necessary. Father's Day arrived and I woke with sadness in my chest. Blood needed to move in different ways. Variety is a great distractor. It was time to mix up the places we rest, the sidewalks walked upon, and the material for stagnant conversations.

My husband locked bikes to the roof of the car. The dog jumped in the back, panting heavily, as she always does when we transport her from here to there.

As we drove, I looked west to the mountains and counted the snowcapped peaks. Counted the cars in line for drive-up Covid tests. Counted the number of deep breaths I could take to let the grief and fear move through my tired body.

As the hour passed, we pulled up to the familiar intersection near my in-law's house, where a man in his late twenties sat resting at the stop light. His back arched as he held a sign reading, "Can't you just spare a dollar?"

This man was someone's loved one at some point. How long has he sat, ignored, unseen, and unsure?

I pulled out my wallet and counted again, removing crumpled bills from my neglected purse.

Handing the cash to my husband I said, "If you're willing to risk it, we should give this guy cash. You can wash your hands when we get there."

The window rolled down and he handed the man a few bucks. I didn't make eye contact. If I feel heavy, he may too.

We drove another block and scrubbed our hands clean, right after walking in the front door.

It's risky out there. Being human just is. One risk after the other.

Loving one another. Witnessing pain. Having hard conversations. Going grocery shopping. Driving in cars. Breathing in air of joggers may be unhealthy. Facing the truth.

It's all so risky.

I choose to show up with my aching back and light in my eyes and give a few dollars to alleviate my fears. I choose miniature efforts to step into the truth.

It's risky, yes. And beautiful too. We're washing hands and weeping and hoping and praying and pleading. And driving and counting and wondering how to apply balm to our wondering and waiting hearts. How can we find beauty in this risky space?

At the End of This Chapter

July 9, 2020

Perched in my home office, I rolled my shoulders back before clicking ‘join’ on yet another Zoom call. My posture suffers, as does my spirit.

As the conversation with a new colleague unfolded, we both smiled knowingly when I said, “Five months really isn’t that long in the great scheme of things.”

March. April. May. June. July.

This creeping passing of time feels long enough. I hope this season is but a chapter in our lives.

In my experience, some chapters shape us more than others.

I keep thinking of all the people dying. And all the people grieving. How will this chapter forever redirecting their trajectories?

What will my small family of two will remember? How long will we be apart from my mom and grandmother and brother? I jump ahead to December and begin drafts of our Christmas letter not yet formed. What anecdotes we will have to share as most of our time has been spent in our separate corners of our home?

What about small business owners living in uncertainty? And the servers and waiters and delivery drivers trying to stay afloat? How about the exhausted doctors and nurses and physicians working long hours?

How many thousands of stories and chapters are being written right now?

As information rolls in, I found out a relative's father passed away from Covid. Waves of my own grief wash over me and a deep ache comes right to my heart pocket. Another young woman my age has joined the Dead Dads Club.

Just because this is not affecting you personally, does not mean it's not impacting others profoundly.

I keep scrolling and see glimpses of families at gatherings, on road trips, and outdoor excursions I'm not sure enough to take myself.

Grief and frustration and envy mix into a mingling cloud of letters spelling, as if in sky writing in front of the mist I keep walking through, "I don't think that's a great idea."

Some stories are of fear right now. Others of realistic truth. Of science. Of bravery. Of just doing the best we can. Please don't let your story be of carelessness, of insensitivity, of 'Oh, I wish I hadn't.'

This chapter is heavy and combatting the doom takes extra care. It's up to all of us to help shorten its length. This pandemic is nowhere near over.

The world is dark and heavy. And beautiful and light. We get a say in how we want to interact with what we're given. I sigh again and adjust my shoulders once more, relying on a tired neck to lift my eyes up from the what-ifs and re-focus on what is.

Across the street, the neighbor boys set up an obstacle course through the sprinklers. My husband was outside in the driveway and waved hello.

"Want to join?" the young mother asked him. "You get a popsicle when you reach the end."

Always something to hope for at the end. What a beautiful thing.