

Writing in the Time of Coronavirus:
Selections from *Bursts of Brilliance for a Creative Life* Blog

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BURSTS OF
BRILLIANCE®

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Can Anything Good Come from the Coronavirus?

Been watching the e-mails roll in today: all events cancelled, Spring Break extended, colleges going to online learning, restaurants limiting the number of patrons they serve, retailers encouraging online purchases, grocery stores reporting empty shelves, churches stopping their Sunday services. There doesn't seem to be a single area of our lives that's not currently affected by this pandemic. It feels pretty scary right now, but I've always been one who seeks balance. I do not wish to downplay the seriousness of this situation or the suffering, but I keep my spirits up by wondering if any good might arise from this virus. Here's what I've come up with so far:

Human Connection Persists: I was speaking at a middle school yesterday and attended an event in the evening. Kids and adults alike had forgone our usual handshakes and hugs in favor of elbow and foot bumps. But these were administered with huge smiles and warm affection and even humor. See, we humans will always find a way to touch each other, to support each other, to show our love for one another. It was quite refreshing.

Good Habits Are Forming: I've been a germaphobe for years. I've always wiped down my airline tray table with antibacterial wipes, I've always kept a tissue in every pocket that I can sneeze into and discard, I've always pulled my sleeve over my hand to open a public door, etc. I haven't minded being teased for my thoroughness, and now these habits are catching on, which, if they stick, might slow the spread of other illnesses and diseases in the future.

The Environment May Benefit: Studies are already trickling in showing that our carbon footprint and environmental damage is decreasing as we are driving to fewer places, staying home and using our own utensils rather than plastic ones at fast food restaurants, creating less waste and less pollution as our industries slow down. Maybe there's a way we can look at the cutbacks we've made lately and continue to make them.

Generosity May Rise: We are becoming more aware of how linked our communities and economies are. Lately, rather than dropping a dollar in the tip jar for the barista, I'm dropping in a five, just to help make up for the lost income they are encountering. I bought a gift card for myself online today from my local bookstore to help tie them over. I'm not asking for refunds on my tickets to concerts that have had to be cancelled and may or may not be postponed. A friend of mine offered to take supplies to another friend who is in self-quarantine. Whether it's with our money, our resources, or our time, I think people are finding ways to give back to those affected by this crisis.

Creativity May Get a Boost: This blog, of course, is about encouraging people to reconnect with their creativity. Most people I know are staying in this weekend now that all events are cancelled. Maybe they'll dig out that knitting project they've ignored for months, or set up their easels and spend time painting, or finish that book they started weeks ago. Maybe they'll surf the internet looking for new recipes or try to catch up on their scrapbooks. Maybe they'll sleep in later and actually remember their dreams, and in those dreams, maybe their muses will visit. May we each uncover our own brilliance again.

Babies: They say we'll see a baby boom in nine months. Babies are a nice thing.

March 27, 2020

I Am Here

Today marks two weeks since life turned upside down thanks to this virus. Friday the 13th is when it became clear my husband and I would need to start isolating, although it had not yet sunk in how all-encompassing that would be.

Roger was recently channel surfing and landed on the movie *Guardians of the Galaxy*. If you've seen it, you know there's a character who looks like a tree and can only communicate by constantly asserting his identity, "I am Groot. I am Groot." Sometimes his statement sounds confident and strong. Other times it comes across weak and unsure. It can sound playful, or it can sound annoyed. Since this whole virus-thing started, I hear my own assertion, "I am here. I am here."

Sometimes it sounds strong. "I am here. You can bend me but you won't break me."

Other times it trails off in tears.

Sometimes it screams like a curse to humanity, "How did you let this happen again? Why do you keep making the same mistakes?"

Other times, it whispers like a plea to God, "You put us here. Can't you help us?"

Sometimes it erupts as laughter when a friend texts me a funny meme.

Other times, it reverberates like the echo of better days.

I am here, I say, as I gaze out the window at an empty street.

I am here, I say, as my far-flung children's faces appear on the screen as they join our family Zoom call.

At times, it sounds like a pep talk to myself. "I am here. I've got this. You hear me?"

At times, it's a reassurance for the people I love, "I am here if you need me."

One minute, it's a call to action. "I am here. Put me to work."

The next, it's a surrender to stillness. "I am here. Just let me be."

I am here brimming with creativity and new ideas.

I am here holding on to hope.

I am here for however long it takes to get through this.

I am here for whatever changes this brings.

I am here for the lessons I'll learn.

I am here to mourn the things I'll lose.

I am here to experience all the ways I am here.

I am here because you are here.

April 11, 2020

The Best Lessons are Often the Hardest Lessons

I've always been the type of person who responds to bad news with a "this-is-not-happening" reaction. I get that distressing phone call, hang up, and return immediately to my e-mail or to making dinner or to whatever task I was doing before my world came crashing down. If the call is distressing enough, my denial doesn't last for long. Five minutes, ten maybe, and then the weight of reality finally drops me to my knees.

When the bad news isn't all that bad or, worse yet, is confusing, my denial can go on for hours, even days. When this pandemic hit home on March 13, I watched in befuddled awe as my world came crashing down. I didn't stop to soak it in, I moved straight into action. If my talks and classes were cancelled, was there some other way I could provide instruction and support through my online coaching? If my school visits were called off, could I record a video and create some teaching tools to help the teachers and students? If book sales had halted, could I find some other way to bring income into the business so I could move forward with my current writing projects? I've always been a hard worker, but I think I worked even harder in those first two weeks after the lockdown started. I wanted to be of service, I wanted to concentrate on things I could control, I wanted to stay in motion.

While I was working harder, many of my artist and writer friends were finding it impossible to work at all. The doubt, fear, and sorrow weighed too heavily on them. They couldn't focus on creative expression. I got that. The day after the crisis began, a friend said, "You'll start creating all kinds of new content now. Maybe you'll blog every day or several times a week, instead of once a week only."

And I believed him. In my "must-work-so-as-not-to-panic" state, I was happy to think I might write more than usual. To my surprise, that hasn't happened. I've kept up this weekly blog, but that's it. There's so much to process as each day at home slides by, that I'm not even sure what to write about until my self-imposed deadline rolls around on Fridays.

How do you put into words the magnitude of this experience? What do you choose to write about when bad news arrives several times a day? When thousands of people are dying alone in hospitals, and millions are losing their jobs? One minute, I feel terrified. Then lost, then hopeful, then grateful.

How does a writer summarize all that "is" when all that "is" is changing by the hour? And all that "is" can only be defined by each person as they muddle through this?

Last night, the isolation really hit me. I've been coping pretty well, what with phone calls and Zoom meetings and chats from six feet away. But last night, I didn't think I could take one more minute in this house. I missed people. I wanted to go to a restaurant. I wanted to jump in the car and take a spontaneous road trip. I wanted to hug my grown kids. I wanted to know when this would end. Really end. Not just when they would lift stay-at-home orders, but when we would feel safe gathering again.

Then I had a stunning realization. Before this all went down, I'd actually been complaining to my husband about how routine our lives had become. "All we ever do for fun is go out to dinner with friends," I said. "And all anyone talks about is politics or work. No one is really listening to anyone anymore (myself included). No one is asking deep questions about what really matters. We don't laugh enough. We don't play together enough. We do that quick "nice-to-see-you" hug, but we're all too tired and stressed to invest too heavily in what someone really needs."

And now, here we are in the midst of this pandemic, checking in with friends and colleagues and acquaintances. Asking, "Are you healthy? How's your business? What's going on with your family? Is there anything you need?" We're closing our conversations with, "Stay safe. Stay well." We're saying, "I love you," more. We're putting stuffed animals in our windows to cheer the children, and dropping off groceries for the elderly, and placing painted rocks that read "be strong" beside our sidewalks. Our world has shrunk to the size of our neighborhoods, and our hearts have grown to cradle the whole world.

The best lessons are often the hardest lessons. Difficult as it is, I think we need to sit in this discomfort a bit longer until it really sinks in what needs to change. We need to sit here long enough for bad habits to morph into better habits. Long enough to acknowledge the impact we've had on our planet. Long enough to remember what and who truly matter. *I* need to sit here long enough that this doesn't just become a "this-isn't-happening" distraction and becomes a time of real change. At least that's how I feel in *this* moment.

From the bottom of my expanding heart, I hope you and yours stay safe and well.

April 25, 2020

Love Travels Any Distance – Even in a Pandemic

Today, I mailed a package to my daughter. She will soon be celebrating her first birthday since moving to New York City and she'll spend it in isolation in her apartment. I also drove across town and dropped off a present for a friend who turned 79 today. I put the gift bag on the bench outside his home, and we spoke for a few minutes at a safe distance. It was good to see him, but hard not to give him a birthday hug.

A friend recently wrote about how heartbreaking it is to mourn the passing of her favorite aunt when she can't come together with people to celebrate her aunt's life. Another told me she called off the trip she and her husband had planned for their 40th anniversary. My husband and I cancelled our trip to see our nephew graduate from high school, since the ceremony will no longer take place. All around us, people are giving up the rituals and traditions that mark the milestones in our lives.

I've been thinking a lot about the men and women of the World War II generation whom I've interviewed over the years. Many of them told me the same story with minor variations, how a woman would look up at the moon and wonder if her husband in a POW camp was looking at it too. Or how a soldier in a foxhole would imagine his wife standing under the same moon thinking of him. This shared memory never ceased to get to me. I think of all the soldiers and sailors who missed the births of their children, and all the women back home who marked their anniversaries by dancing alone in their living rooms. Maybe it sounds "corny" to some people, but to me, those stories went to the heart of separation, that need to have something that still ties us to each other.

Beyond all rituals and milestones and traditions there is love. That's what it always comes back to. For those long-ago sweethearts, it wasn't the moon that connected them. It was the love they imagined traveling to the moon and then shimmering down on their far-flung lovers. It was silly, of course, and overly romantic, but it was *necessary*. In a time when nothing felt certain, the moon was always there. Love was always there. In life, in death, in sacrifice, and in joy, love is always there.

Don't just let your milestone moments slip by during this pandemic. They still matter. You still matter. Stop and feel the love that is coming to you. Find your own way, no matter how silly or simple or romantic, to breathe in that love and breathe it out again. Find your own moon to stand under.

May 16, 2020

A New Twist on the Golden Rule

This year of 2020 has certainly opened my eyes in more ways than I ever expected, and deconstructed so many things I thought were unshakeable truths. Even before COVID-19 locked us all in our homes, I heard something that completely upset the one rule I thought would always hold up to any scrutiny, the Golden Rule.

Back in February, my husband listened to a guest speaker at his work who was there to talk about diversity in honor of Black History Month. I'm paraphrasing what she said: "The Golden Rule says, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' but if you think about it, that's a bit selfish. Just because *you* would like something done to you doesn't mean someone else would. It should really say, 'Do unto others as they would like things done to them.'"

I've been thinking about her comment for months now, but never more so than in the past few days. As the nation starts to emerge cautiously from strict quarantines, it feels like we're being called upon more and more to take note of how others want to be treated. Some people are still feeling very protective of their space and nervous about re-entering the world. Others are ready to throw caution to the wind. Since we can't be sure where anyone stands, it seems only right that we try to assess what makes them comfortable, as well as what makes us comfortable.

In the coming months or years, as the grip of the virus lessens, we're going to need to seek permission more often: "Is it okay if I give you a hug? Do you mind if I shake your hand?"

We're going to need to ask people how they want to be approached: "Should I drop off your gift on your porch, or do you want me to ring the doorbell and hand it to you? If we go for a walk together, are you okay with me not wearing a mask or would you rather I did?"

We're going to need to determine when and how people want to re-enter society. "I'm happy to keep picking up groceries for you, unless you miss going to the store and want to do it yourself again. Are you ready to go to a restaurant yet or would you rather I bring over take-out?"

It almost feels as if we need to develop a new, more honest way to communicate. A post-corona language with cues so that one person can truthfully express what they need to feel at ease and the other person can sincerely express if that's okay with them. Something that goes beyond our current:

"How are you feeling about meeting in person?"

"I don't know, how are *you* feeling?"

Whatever that new language is, I hope we keep this focus on others even after the virus is no longer a threat. Imagine if people continued to say, "I'm getting over a cold, is it okay if I come in, or would you rather we just talk on the stoop?" or "Tell me if you'd prefer to have our meeting in person or over zoom. Whatever is most convenient for you."

Maybe that speaker was right. Maybe we've reached an era in which even the Golden Rule could use an upgrade, a time when we truly understand what it means to treat the needs and feelings of others as equal to our own, and a time when we all develop the courage to speak genuinely about what we need so we can best serve each other. Some good has to come from this virus, right?

May 29, 2020

Actually, This Isn't Unprecedented

I confess that I, too, have been using the word “unprecedented” to describe our current condition during this COVID-19 pandemic. And in so many ways, the word seems to fit. But then I came across these lines in Bill Bryson’s book, *Shakespeare: The World as Stage*, “London’s theaters were officially ordered shut, and would remain so for just under two years, with only the briefest remissions.” He’s talking about the years 1592-1593, which were plague years. “For theatrical companies it meant banishment from the capital and a dispiritingly itinerant existence on tour.” In another passage he says that during plague years, “Public performances of all types—in fact public gatherings except for churchgoing—were also banned within seven miles of London each time the death toll in the city reached forty, and that happened a great deal.”

Sounds a lot like today, doesn't it? But this was all taking place more than 400 years ago!

Being a historian, I've always taken comfort in history, in the knowledge that deep within our DNA and collective memory is the ability to overcome almost any challenge. We really *have* been through this before.

So, what did the actors in Shakespeare's time do? Well, it sounds like they went grudgingly on the road. And what did the playwrights like Shakespeare and Ben Johnson do? They kept writing. And when the plague let up, they returned to their theaters. And because they kept writing, we have some of the greatest plays ever written.

I confess, I've succumbed a bit lately to a victim mentality when it comes to my own art. Is this really a good time to release a Spanish translation of my book *V for Victory*? With less income coming in, should I save that money? And what's the point of finishing the play version of *Wave Me Good-bye* when it's uncertain when the theaters will reopen and when they might be interested in new scripts. And why even consider other writing projects when the publishing industry is pulling back too?

It helped, at first, to hear stories of all the great works of art that had come out of difficult times in our history, but to do so again would require a certain amount of faith that I, or anyone else, could quiet the voices of worry inside our heads long enough to hear our muses. But this passage from Bill Bryson made me realize this is not the first setback I've endured in my lifetime, nor will it be the last. And it's not the first setback our arts industries have endured, nor will it be the last.

But in the darkest moments of history, art is always present. We're seeing it now in the creative masks that artists are designing, in the songs that are telling us how to live in this new normal, in the funny videos that are making us laugh, in the heartfelt poems that are making us cry, in the amazing photographs that are capturing our stories.

Come on, artists and art lovers, it's time to “go on the road,” even if it's not what we'd prefer to do. It's time to get creative and find new ways to reach our audiences, because technologies come and go, fortunes wax and wane, countries rise and fall, but art is here to stay.

June 6, 2020

When Ignorance and Wisdom Cannot Be Separated

I was flipping through a book called *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron and came across this line. “Wisdom and ignorance cannot be separated.” I cannot comment on that sentence within the context of what she is writing about, because I have not yet read the book, but I can comment on what that observation brought to heart and mind.

We are living through a time of tremendous pain, suffering, worry, fear, anger, frustration, and sorrow. I listen each morning to a podcast called *The Daily*, which is put out by the *New York Times*. As the stories unfold, I hear voices crack in sorrow and rise in anger and stall when the words just won’t come. Because I can’t see the images of the actual person waving through a window to their elderly father, or the worried mother rushing her very ill teenager to the hospital, or the heartbroken protester asking “Why are they doing this to us?”, or the devastated business owner who must close down their business for good, I’m forced to focus on the voices of the interviewees, on the words they say and the words they can’t bring themselves to say.

It’s the images that will likely remain with us long after this time has passed. Pictures of city streets that mirrored ghost towns one month and battle zones the next. Pictures of exhausted health care workers in masks and then Black Lives Matters protestors bleeding from their wounds. So many of us have been glued to our TVs or the internet fixated by the trauma we see playing out before us, but are we really listening? Are we hearing the words the person in the forefront is saying, or looking at what the people behind her are doing? Are we letting a snapshot lead us to judgement or are we digging deeper to understand what we see? When was the last time you paused to really listen to the words of someone with whom you thought you disagreed?

We are all guilty of ignorance, and we only become wise when we choose to confront it. We can only do better when we understand the hurt we’ve experienced and the hurt we cause. We can only grow wise when we educate ourselves about what’s not working and decide we’re not willing to live with that level of ignorance any longer, no matter how comfortable it has seemed to be.

We’ve been given tools, though, to access our wisdom. Compassion, empathy, curiosity, kindness, determination, strength, and creativity. This blog has always called upon the inner artist in all of us. It’s time to get creative. The old ways are no longer working. Bring your artist selves to the table, whether your art is advocacy, instruction, council, training, policy making, mindfulness, science, or storytelling. And remember, artists don’t just see what is shown to them, they look for what isn’t visible, they listen for what isn’t said.

There’s a reason wisdom is hard won. It’s tempting to say it’s time to do the difficult work within ourselves, our communities, and our nation so “we can heal.” But history has taught us that ignorance will always be with us. We will grow wise in some ways. We will improve, until the next thing arises to test us. But that’s the challenge and the joy of being human. Our ignorance will never leave us, but from that ignorance we *can* gain wisdom. If we so choose.

June 13, 2020

I'm Not Social, I'm Intimate

Several dear friends sent me e-mails a few weeks into the lockdown that said variations of, "Are you okay? I'm worried about my extroverted friends. I know this whole thing is harder for people like you." Then they'd say something like, "Well, at least you have Zoom, and now so many people are livestreaming their events. That might help you stay connected."

While I deeply and sincerely appreciated their concern for my well-being, there was something about the "people like you" comment that just didn't sit right. It took me quite a while to figure out why.

In the beginning, I did jump eagerly on every Zoom call to which I was invited, and I did try supporting my industry friends by watching their livestream meetings and events and posting my "thumbs up" or "heart" emojis. I even attended several networking groups where there would be twenty or more people on the call. At first, it was exciting to see so many dear faces, but very soon, I started to feel drained of energy after those sessions. And a bit sad.

"Well that's because you're so social," one friend said. "You miss being out and about. You miss seeing people in person. You miss being busy." And that was partly true. But it wasn't entirely correct, either. I'm not "social," I'm intimate. There's a very big difference.

For me, it's not just about seeing people or being part of a crowd or trying to achieve a new introduction that will advance my career. It's about those intimate moments that happen even *within* a large gathering. It's about noticing that one person who seems distracted or hurt and asking if she's okay. It's about meeting a stranger and discovering a shared passion. It's about running into someone you haven't seen in months and giving them a hug. It's about helping someone pick up their dropped plate of nachos and reassuring them it happens to everyone. It's about pulling someone aside to whisper a secret. It's about smiling at the baby in their arms or complimenting the shoes they're wearing. It's about feeling the whole room rock with laughter.

Many of my introvert friends have been telling me they are "not too affected" by the lockdown or even that they are thriving in all their quiet time, but science reveals something different. Science has shown us that even before the global shutdowns, populations were reporting higher levels of loneliness. Even for people who like being alone, there is still a need for intimacy. That's what makes us human.

In the past few weeks, I've participated in some heartfelt and important Zoom calls about racism, the pandemic, and the upcoming recession, and I'm glad I did. I've discovered that people *can* be intimate on Zoom if they give their fellow speakers the same attention and respect they'd give them in real life, which means focusing more on the voice and facial cues of the speaker than on checking your phone or switching your virtual backgrounds.

But it's still not the same. In person, I wouldn't worry about whether it was my turn to speak next, or whether I had unmuted my microphone, or how I should phrase my response in the chat box. In real life, I would look you in the eye, grab your hand, and speak from the heart. In real life, I would lean in and feel you breathe. *That's* what I miss.

June 20, 2020

All Kids Long to See Themselves in Art

When I was a little girl, my younger brother and I listened often to a beloved record of old cowboy songs. Growing up in Idaho, we had real live cowboys walking down the street and we were fascinated by them and by the outlaws of the Old West. My favorite song on the album was “El Paso” by Marty Robbins. I still find myself singing the opening lines all the time:

*Out in the West Texas town of El Paso
I fell in love with a Mexican girl*

My kids have asked me repeatedly why I sing just that snippet from a silly, old song. There’s a good reason, and I’ll tell you, but first I want you to know that as an adult, I have read the lyrics and realized, not surprisingly, that the song is full of what we now recognize as racist and sexist overtones. The girl’s name is Feleena, an Americanized spelling of the Latin name, Felina, which means “cat-like.” Cat-like, of course, means one who moves gracefully, but also stealthily.

The singer describes her eyes as:
*Blacker than night were the eyes of Feleena
Wicked and evil while casting a spell*

When he discovers Feleena cheating on him, he kills her lover and makes a run for it. Though he knows a posse will be lying in wait for him, he can’t help but return to her because, of course, she has bewitched him. As he dies, she kisses his cheek and cradles him in loving arms, but it’s too late. Wicked Feleena.

Of course, all of that went over my head as a child. All I heard in those opening lines was that he had fallen in love with a Mexican maiden. Beautiful, like my Mexican mother and grandmother. Beautiful like maybe I would be if I took after them. It was the *only* English song I knew of that featured a Mexican girl, like me.

Little kids instinctively look for themselves in art. My mom had hung on my wall a few of the famous Northern Girl paintings, and I loved the one of the chubby cheeked, dark-haired girl. She had blue eyes, and mine were brown, but she was the one who looked most like me.

In my industry in the past five years, we’ve seen a growth in movements like #ownvoices or #weneeddiversebooks. As writers and publishers, we’ve acknowledged we need more books featuring diverse characters, but especially those written by diverse authors. Kids need to see themselves in stories, but also in the author photo on the back of the book.

As artists of all kinds, we are learning, we are growing, we are improving. And I hope we continue to do so. I’m not sure how that song would have been different if Marty Robbins had written it today. But back then, I saw myself in that art, imperfect though it was, and to this little half-Mexican girl, that was a gift.

July 18, 2020

Your Creativity in Times of Transformation

I was talking to an intuitive friend and expressing to her how lost I've felt lately. The pandemic, the failing economy, the social unrest, the political turmoil, and my own business downturn are always on my mind and weigh heavily on my heart. I've thought of myself as a driver. Someone who jumps in and tries to "fix" things that have gone wrong. Other people seem to think of me that way, too. But lately, I can't summon the energy to do much more than just get through each day.

I've also always been a planner, but how do you plan when things are changing daily? I'm a service provider, but how do you serve when the needs are so high and so unpredictable? And, of course, I'm a creative, but how do you create when your energy has left you?

My friend said, "Something as deep and powerful as what you're going through now doesn't lend itself to action." That stopped me in my tracks. Up to this point, I thought the answer to everything was action. Now it seems the answer, for me anyway, is inaction. It's thinking, and feeling, and reading, and contemplating, and reimagining. It's that last part that excites me, though it still feels like I'm under water and reaching toward the light at the surface. But at least I can still see the light.

I know some of you are feeling busier and more overwhelmed than ever. And some are feeling adrift, like me. Some of you are working on new projects. Some are simply letting yourselves be. But all of us are transforming, like it or not. In fact, the whole planet is transforming, so it might be helpful to remember this:

We tend to think of creativity as something that "results" in a new product or method or program or work of art. But sometimes creativity just means opening space for new ideas to form or for the things that are already inside us to expand. "All your skills, talents, and insights are still with you," my friend said. "Trust that. They will be there when you need them."

Be your creative self, whatever that looks like now.

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