



February 5, 2023

The World Never Stops Turning
Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Pandemic Notes: Reading I Alicia Seegers Martinelli

Today's story - and our readings - are excerpts from "Pandemic Notes."

Pandemic Notes is an account of a family of four during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic.

Characters are Mom, Dad, and their children Sun and Star (ages 12 and 10 years old).

These reflections are told from the perspective of a white, cisgender, heterosexual, Unitarian Universalist.

The story is shared in three parts.

In February 2020 we expressed wants.

- Mom didn't want to be part of the middle school carpool anymore.
- Star wanted Mom to grow her hair longer.
- Sun didn't want to go on the family vacation for spring break.

These wishes came true, as the nightmare of the coronavirus blanketed our world. Friday, March 13, 2020: The news strikes that schools are canceled for at least six weeks. Star's teacher writes, "Congratulations!

You are now all

homeschooling your kids."

Dad doesn't think this is funny.

Monday, March 16. We call this day #1: First day of no school. Mom is off to the office. Dad is off to...homeschooling.

Day 5: Sun is sick of hearing about flattening the curve.

Day 6: We have a picnic with Nana and Papa in their yard. Mom breaks social distancing rules and gives Nana a hug.

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Day 8: The Governor implements a “stay safe, stay at home” order and says this is not a time for sleepovers.

Things get easier in a way.

The kids no longer ask for play dates—the Governor said no.

Day 10: The stay at home order goes into effect and Mom moves her office home.

Day 16: Today is Grandpa’s virtual retirement party. The family celebrates with a video get-together. On a similar note, Mom learns that Zoom-bombing is a thing.

Day 22: The Governor announces kids aren’t going back to school for the remainder of the year. What will we do?

Day 23: Tensions are high.

Day 24: Nana and Papa come by to pick up Sun and Star for a walk.

Since hugging is not allowed they’ve created a new greeting...

elbow, elbow, foot, foot, hip.

Nana has made masks for all. Washington’s curve is flattening.

Day 26: Star’s teacher said the front porch seems like a good place to go for spring break this year.

Day 34: 154,000 deaths worldwide; 610 deaths in Washington.

Major League Soccer suspends the season until June. If soccer can go on in June, surely Sun can have a 13th birthday party...but we’ll see.

Day 35: The Governor says we all must get used to a new normal. Things won’t return to the way they were until there’s an immunization or herd immunity. About 1000 people gather at the Capitol to protest the stay at home order.

Day 38: Dad logs into Zoom for his committee meeting. Sun has named the account “Psychopomp Reaper of Souls.” Being new to Zoom, Dad spends the entire meeting trying to figure out how to rename himself.

Day 44: We must be getting used to this. The days pass.

We have schedules and pretty good attitudes.

Mom and Dad take their daily walk.

Star builds a fort in the living room.

Sun plays D&D with OUUC friends.

Day 45: Mom and Dad tell Star they’re getting a dog. To which Star replies that they’re living a dream.

Star is so happy but also afraid they'll wake up and have really rude parents again who don't want a dog.

Day 46: It's May Day. The Governor extends the stay home order again, this time through the end of May. May 1st protests occur downtown. And protests against the Governor's COVID orders take place at the Capitol campus—people show up with automatic rifles.

Day 47: Confirmed U.S. cases of coronavirus now exceed 1.1 million, with more than 65,000 reported deaths. 30 million have applied for unemployment.

Day 48: Rev. Mary speaks of thresholds. No one goes through this time unchanged and we will need to learn again how to be together.

No one goes through this time unchanged, and we will need to learn again, how to be together.

Part I: Thresholds Rev. Mary Gear

When Alicia first shared her idea for this service with me, I was thrilled to be in collaboration to co-create a meaningful experience. Clearly, she and Jason had planned their auction bidding to purchase both a sermon and a song for the idea they had. Today that idea comes to fruition.

When I read these Pandemic Notes for the first time, I was instantly transported back to almost three years ago. My mind went to long days of Zoom meetings and some troubled nights wondering when and how this would end. Wondering how we'd get through it. Wondering what would happen. As I read the Pandemic Notes, I noticed my body tighten, my shoulders rise, my breathing shallow.

Where did your mind go when you heard Alicia read?

How is your body right now?

Let's all take a breath right now. Return here from wherever your mind went. Notice we are here now; some online, some onsite. Here. Now. Together.

My first pandemic service in March 2020 was "Sabbath Wisdom" about how the world had been turned upside down and how we were invited to slow down and rest. Some of us were invited to rest, anyway. We would soon learn that some of us just had to work harder.

The last Sunday of March, the service was titled "We've Been Changed." That was the service when I said that the world had been all shook up. I created this snow globe at home in a mason jar with water, hand sanitizer and glitter. It's been sitting on my bookshelf at home for almost 3 years, and every once in a while, I give it a shake, just in case I've forgotten how the world keeps turning.

In that service I spoke about pandemic times as liminal space, an in-between time, not what we were and not quite yet what we will become. We were clearly in liminal space, and in many ways continue to be. Not too long ago, Troy reminded me that back then I said we'd be at this for a while. None of us imagined how long we would be here, in the between time.

That Spring, I shared the wisdom of organizational consultant William Bridges, who makes a distinction between change and transition. He defines change as situational. It's those external events that make things different than they've been. Those events that bring something new, welcome or not—a birth, a death, a marriage, a divorce, a job change, retirement. A pandemic.

Transition, on the other hand, is psychological. It's an internal process in response to change. Transition includes reorientation to the world and redefinition of ourselves and our role in the world.

Bridges says that the irony of change and transition is that very little that we do to prepare for a change prepares us for the transition. We can plan for a change, like an expectant parent prepares for the arrival of a new baby; they get the basic stuff like a car seat and diapers. Yet none of these things prepares them for the internal shift from being a person without responsibility for a child to being a parent. That transition requires a whole different process.

Transitions can be hard for many reasons, not the least of which is that they require us to be psychologically vulnerable. That means open minds, open hearts, and open spirits. Even while psychological vulnerability is a source of creativity and joy, it is also a source of fear. Transition requires that we step into the place of grieving a loss, being uncertain and not knowing, not being in control. Being vulnerable requires that we step into the mystery, that we embrace the unknown, and that we risk opening ourselves emotionally. Crossing thresholds, being in-between requires courage and resilience.

The world never stops turning, offering us thresholds to cross.

None of us will go through this time unchanged.

Reading II Alicia

The reading from “Pandemic Notes” continues...

Day 61: Dad wakes to the smell of rosemary potatoes cooking in the kitchen. Having a sense of smell first thing in the morning makes him confident he does not have covid today. Deaths in Washington hit 1,000.

Day 66: Washington State Employment Security Department announces millions lost in fraudulent unemployment claims. After a trip to the mailbox, Dad discovers his account is hacked and a claim filed in his name.

Day 75: Protests erupt around the United States in the name of George Floyd.

Day 76: The kids' OUUC classes discuss race in the U.S.

We go to bed to sounds of protests downtown.

Day 77: It's a cool, clear day. Star practices gymnastics outside. Sun bikes around the Capitol campus. Mom and Dad go on their walk.

We don't do them with fear;

our white privileged life.

Day 80: We celebrate Sun's 13th birthday with Nana and Papa, and lots of sushi.

Day 81: Black Lives Matter protests continue and a litany of leaders

say white supremacy and

systemic racism is real.

Airplanes circle overhead.

Day 89: Black Lives Matter protesters march down Capitol Blvd.

Spectators are on the sidewalks cheering them on.

Tears flow from Mom's eyes.

Star makes a BLM sign for the window.

Day 92: Last day of school.

Day 112: A CNN headline reads, "Doctors say US is in a 'free fall' as 32 states struggle with higher rates of COVID infection."

Day 122: Grandpa has COVID-19.

He's had a fever for the past five days.

He is admitted to the hospital.

We are scared, and we hope.

Day 128: Grandpa is worse, then better, then worse; off oxygen, on oxygen.

BLM protests grow in cities throughout the country.

Day 135: Today, the U.S. surpasses 150,000 COVID-19 deaths.

Olympia School District announces no in-person classes in the fall.

Day 136: Grandpa has returned home from the hospital.

Dad speaks with him on the phone and although he will continue to rely on oxygen, he sounds chipper.

Mom thinks his good mood is odd,

to which Dad replies,

"Grandpa was on death's door only a few days earlier. He's gotta be happy."

Day 152: The Washington Post reports that during this pandemic, demand for dogs is so high that shelters and breeders are running out.

Day 158: Sun shares a fun fact when camping—

“if you try to blow the fire off a marshmallow, with a mask on,
it doesn’t work.”

Day 167: The school year is starting. OUUC does not hold the normal blessings of the backpack service.

Instead, it is blessings of the devices.

Day 168: On a walk with Mom,

Star points to a spray-painted BLM

on the road and says,

I hate Coronavirus but it has done some okay things like more dogs are adopted and BLM is making people talk about a really important issue and change.

...making people talk about a really important issue and change.

Part II: Transformation Rev. Mary

On May 25, 2020 George Floyd was murdered by police officers who suspected Floyd of using a counterfeit \$20 bill to purchase cigarettes. Floyd was a black man who had lost his job in a nightclub when the world shut down for Covid. He was selling cigarettes on the street to make some money. As a white police officer knelt on his neck, Floyd cried out “I can’t breathe.” That phrase became a rallying cry for justice all over the world.

In those early days of the pandemic, we learned that black, indigenous and people of color were disproportionately affected by Covid. People on the margins were more at risk of losing jobs and of being without financial reserves to draw on in hard times. BIPOC people were more likely to work service jobs that were high risk, so more likely to get sick with Covid, and to die of Covid. George Floyd was an icon for justice of all kinds. Those of us who are white learned that racism isn’t over and there is much work to be done in all areas of injustice.

In April of 2020, our monthly spiritual theme was liberation, which is our theme again this month. On Easter Sunday that April, the service was “Facing Fear, Finding Hope.” I said:

Many are asking questions like this: How is it that one of the world's richest countries doesn't have enough masks and gowns and gloves for our medical providers?

Why is it that people of color, indigenous peoples, and the poor are the most harmed by this virus? Again. Still. And what will we do to address that?

Why do some people have to worry about the cost of seeking medical help when so many of us need care?

How is a consumer lifestyle impacting the Earth and contributing to more disease, for people and animals?

This virus is shining a bright light on the injustice in all our systems—economic, educational, medical, legal, political, global.

How will we respond?

Well, now we know how we responded. Some with great bravery and courage. Some with greed and hate. We wrestled with individual freedoms and collective care. Masks or no masks. Distance or not. Stay at home or not. Later it would be: vaccines or not.

In September 2020, I led our water communion ritual streaming from my laptop in my home office. I began with water from our service the year before, a time when something like Covid was unimaginable. I added water from my kitchen faucet, from the OUUC kitchen, and from Budd Inlet. I invited you to pour water wherever you were.

I noted that Covid put us all in the same storm but not in the same boat. I said:

Some of us are sailing in luxury liners. Some of us are in yachts. Some of us are in houseboats or fishing boats or canoes or kayaks. Some of us are on rafts or holding on to planks, floating in the water. Some of us are treading water trying to keep our heads above the water line. And some of us are going under.

We are all in the same storm, on the same sea, looking to survive.

When we enter and leave liminal space, we cross a threshold, which brings us to the in-between, a place of emptiness and uncertainty. We don't tend to like that place very much, so we seek to return to what was or move quickly to what will be. Yet, the in-between is where transformation happens. It takes time, and intention. It takes sacred space. The kind of space we were given with Covid.

In his model of change and transition, Bridges teaches that every transition has three phases: a beginning, a middle and an end, but not quite in that order. The beginning of every transition is an ending, a goodbye. Once there is a change, the first thing that happens in transition is goodbye; disengagement from what was, dis-identification with how we used to be, and disorientation; things are not as they were. With every transition there is a sense of loss, even when change is welcome, and especially when it is not.

Part of the transition of Covid was to say goodbye to so much--the way we lived our lives, worked and played, worshiped and gathered, lived and died, celebrated and mourned. Some of us also said goodbye to a view of America that we cherished, an ideal that we held on to. The US government response to the pandemic was confusing at best, dangerous at worst. Public health communications became political weapons. The things that only government can do were ignored or actively thwarted by elected officials. Some of us said goodbye to a country that held liberty and justice for all as our aspiration.

Covid laid bare so much of what we assumed and took for granted. The irony is that Coronavirus also has done some OK things like making people talk about a really important issue and change.

Transformation is not easy. Ask any caterpillar. We step into the unknown, the outcome is not guaranteed. And we have to do it to survive.

Reading III Alicia

The “Pandemic Notes” continue for our third and final reading.

Day 170: Mom’s workplace extends remote work for another seven months.

Day 176: It’s the last day of summer vacation. It’s a school night.

Day 177: The kids walk outside

for school pictures, just like every year on the first day of school.

Snap!

Then they turn around and go back inside the house.

Day 179 (September 11): NPR reports on the 19th anniversary of 9/11.

Tragically, 3000 people died, and the reporter says

“The world came together in a grieving process.”

As of today, more than 190,000 have died from COVID-19 in the U.S alone.

Where is our collective grieving?

Day 180: Fires up and down the west coast rage and a smoke plume sets in over Puget Sound.

For those suffocating from Coronavirus, abuse of power, and

now this dangerous air, it seems

“I can’t breathe” has emerged as the year’s theme.

Day 183: Sun’s soccer has been canceled for the past week. The sky continues to be a thick gray, the sun is not visible.

Day 184: On Facebook, “The pandemic isn’t over just because you’re over it.”

Day 186: Last night the windows were opened for the first time in nearly two weeks. The rain came down, the smoke washed away.

Today, Sun plays their first soccer game, Mom will observe it with mask on,

Dad attends a socially distanced OUUC board meeting, and

Star and the dog go to Nana’s house.

It's almost like a normal Saturday.

Almost.

Day 188: Less than two weeks into the school year and Dad is sick of home schooling.

"Thank god it's football season," he says.

Day 191: Something Mom loves...

being so near Sun throughout the
school and workday

that she can hear them

read their script for drama class.

Day 194: Returning from a hike,

Nana tells the kids about her mother's years living through the Great Depression. She spoke of it often.

She was just a girl,

and it influenced the rest of her life.

Nana turns to the kids,

pauses and says,

"This is a moment that will mark your life forever."

This is a moment that will mark your life forever.

Part III: A New Normal Rev. Mary

Early on in Covid, I wrote new words for our services, which began with: "We are leading worship from several locations today...." Two more phrases came to be touchstones for our gatherings: "social distancing doesn't mean social isolation" and "it's about connection not perfection." Now I can confess that I wrote that last phrase mostly for me. My experience of Covid is that it brought to the forefront my own biggest struggles. Perfectionism and the related illusion of control are my life-long challenges. I understand perfectionism and control differently now, as symptoms of supremacy culture that keeps us busy trying to achieve the unachievable, so we won't notice the injustice of it.

Covid came in my first year of ministry with you and that Spring I thought I might be getting a handle on what my ministry here could be. Everything was normal until it wasn't. And then suddenly I didn't know anything. Like all of

us, I was thrust into learning new things and doing what I had no idea how to do. Online worship. Pastoral care over Zoom. Communication with my co-workers. Getting anything done. I didn't learn pandemic ministry in seminary.

So, I had to decide if I could do what was being asked of me. I quickly learned that answering my call to ministry would mean letting go of a sense of competency, of perfection, of control.

There are some regular phrases that I found myself saying then that are part of the new normal now.

What's our back-up plan, our Plan B?

We'll try something and if that doesn't work, we'll try something else.

Not everyone will be happy.

We'll do the best we can.

We don't say that phrase "it's about connection not perfection" in our services anymore, but it is still part of my preparation for Sunday mornings, my new normal.

In that first year of Covid, we recorded outside a bridging ritual for a graduating senior and the Coming-of-Age credos from middle schoolers were recorded. We held our Christmas Eve Candlelight service online--bring your own candle. We welcomed speakers from across the US and from Romania. We learned how to do online celebrations of life and had people from around the world join us to mourn together. Melanie Ransom started her talk show after the service. The book sale and the auction went online. Troy offered an online Covid Cabaret, the first of many musical events to follow. We acquired canopies and learned how to make use of our outdoor space for all kinds of things.

It's just what we do now, our new normal. We are learning again how to be together. We ask each other about our preferences for masks and hugs. We offer services and classes and gatherings online and onsite as much as possible in order to include everyone. We practice together the skills for calming our bodies and minds; body scanning, breathing, singing, howling like wolves.

And our new normal also includes the old injustices. Not long ago, Tyree Nichols was beaten to death by police. Black, brown and indigenous people are still more at risk for all kinds of harm, including the impact of climate chaos. Our democracy is still at risk. Injustice still calls us to action.

In the service on May 3, 2020, I invited us into a ritual of thresholds. Together we imagined standing in a doorway, waiting to emerge. We looked back to what we had left behind and looked forward to what was ahead.

I said this:

So, as we emerge, we have a choice. We can rush to return to the way things were or we can act in a way that grows our capacity to embody a just and liberated world. We can put this liminal time behind us and forge ahead, or we can learn the lessons we are being offered and make meaning from this experience. We can spin this time as one of division, greed and grasping for power, or a time of collective growth and building bridges.

We can't decide for everyone. We decide for ourselves. We don't control everything. We control our actions and reactions. We decide how we emerge, and that will shape the world we emerge into.

Next month we'll mark the three-year anniversary of Covid, and the virus isn't done with us yet. Every day we make choices that affect our lives and our world. We don't know the impact of the global pandemic on this generation of young people, and we won't know the overall impact for generations to come. Just like the Great Depression, this moment will mark our lives forever.

We don't know how this will unfold; None of us do. I gave up on predicting and pretending I have control a while ago. What I do know is that we need each other. We need each other and we need all of us. We need each other to be brave enough to cross thresholds, to have the courage to transform into what we can be. Our call to shared ministry, our ministry to each other, has never been stronger.

We need each other to return to the home of our soul. We need each other to return to who we are, what we are, where we are. Born and reborn again. Return. Here. Together.