



*Glimpses: Reflections from
the Second Year of a
Pandemic*

Katharina Manassis

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A Beaver Tale

My son and I were scrambling along our favorite trail. It followed a series of rolling hills along a wooded ridge that separated two steep river valleys. The beautiful vistas, the oxygen from the trees, and the lonely sound of only our hearts beating made it an exhilarating trip.

Then we spotted them: a large, multi-generational group of hikers just ahead of us, shattering the peace with raucous chatter in their native tongue. Their maximum speed was limited by a frail but obviously respected matriarch at the back, slowly being pulled up each rise by a grandson or two, then applauded as she crested the hill.

We were forced to halt, our exhilaration gone. It was impossible to pass the group on the narrow trail. I became increasingly irritated as we plodded behind them. My frustration was fueling adrenaline release, cancelling out any capacity for empathy. My thinking was clear and focused, making the group appear like nothing but an obstacle to my fitness-oriented mission. My attitudes sank into old, dark patterns. Eventually, I found myself muttering under my breath about how certain people are just as inconsiderate on the trails as they are on the roads—a nasty racial stereotype.

At last, the trail opened and descended into one of the valleys. I excused myself loudly as I jogged past the group, my son barely able to keep up.

Our usual water-break spot was on a rock that jutted out over the river. It was near an old broken dam which had created rapids. I enjoyed listening to the gurgling stream, and was glad we had left the chattering hikers behind.

I realized with a start that something from the old dam was looking at me. The creature was camouflaged, but the movement of its wiggling little snout was unmistakable. It was a baby beaver!

Gnawing on twigs, it seemed curious about the big mammals on shore. It obviously hadn't learned to fear humans yet.

I had never seen something so adorable. Pointing it out to my son didn't seem to be enough. I needed to share this delight. I motioned "come see" to the next person to approach the rock where I was perched. That person just happened to be the frail grandmother from the group of hikers we had recently passed. She smiled broadly, "Thank you, lady!" and invited her family to join us. I had completely forgotten my previous irritation. We bonded around our shared enjoyment of one of nature's wonders. It was a magical moment for us all.

Afterwards, I was surprised at how quickly my emotional state and my attitude toward my fellow hikers had changed. Maybe my unexpected joy reminded me that most of life is not a first-person shooter game: being in fight-or-flight mode with its attendant hyper-focused, pattern-based thinking allows for quick protective responses when you're in mortal danger. When you're not, it just makes you grumpy and raises your blood pressure.

Maybe shared wonder can be a short-cut to human empathy. After all, the tendency to find baby animals adorable (or sunsets breathtaking, or mountains majestic, etc.) is almost universal. These experiences immediately give us common ground with other people nearby, even when we appear to share few other traits. I've seen similar reactions when people from different backgrounds share a love of certain art or music, but nature-related wonder seems to be an even more profound social glue. The moment I saw that old woman's eyes light up at the sight of the baby beaver, she changed from an annoying obstacle in my path to a fellow traveler on the journey of life.

The next time I get annoyed with someone on my path, I hope I remember to ask myself: Is this situation truly threatening? If the answer is no, I will breathe, let the troubling thoughts pass, and look at the awesomeness in my surroundings.

Gavel Fall

Sometimes it's not until the gavel falls hard, sending a shock wave reverberating through your being, that you realize it's over. The wishful thinking, the illusion of invincibility, the secure and ever-improving life you thought you had, is over. You have been found guilty and there is no chance to appeal. You are banished from civilized society. You are mortified. Your only choice is whether to live with your ignoble truth or perish. Like Cain, you are marked in ways that all can see, no longer able to hide behind a curtain of lies. If you are to survive, you must reinvent yourself.

I seem to have an aptitude for remembering such gavel falls. A recent youth employment program where my son and I were both humiliated triggered the memories that follow.

When I was a depressed teen unable to converse with customers appropriately (a fact that became painfully obvious when the boss listened to my telephone responses), I was fired. The gavel fell hard. There were no more sleeves to cover my jagged emotional scars. She knew of my future dreams, and went out of her way to crush them. She convinced me I was so useless I would never work again. I would be stuck in soul-leaching poverty and mental dysfunction forever. I wanted to die. I almost did, but then the truth of how paltry my sins were compared to those of others dawned. I deserved another chance at life, but it couldn't be the life I had lived until then. I could not allow critical authority figures to drive me to the brink. I needed a new self-concept apart from my parents and those like them, apart from anyone who refused to believe that I was a valuable child of the Universe. This was my new direction, my second chance, and the start of my adult life.

When I failed my clinical medicine mid-term examination, trying to fake my way through a topic I was unaware I needed to study, all the other medical knowledge I possessed was dismissed as irrelevant. The gavel fell. I was judged incompetent and unprofessional based on misunderstanding the need to read about one topic. I was given no way forward, merely told to take up my failure with the

dean's office. When I did though, I was greeted with a yawn as my story was apparently not unique. Moreover, the remedial sessions required were my best learning experience in medical school. Still, I resolved never to work with people like the pompous, humiliating examiner I encountered. My desire to avoid such nasty internists prodded me to explore psychiatry, which became a wonderfully rewarding career.

Then there was the hospital visit where I arrived to find my husband dead, knowing it had been my choice to avoid further ventilation, but not knowing he would end his days neglected and shoved into a distant corner. The flustered nurse blamed me for not answering my home phone (he hadn't bothered to try the cell) and pointed to the Do Not Resuscitate order as if that would assuage my anguish. I felt like Lady Macbeth, responsible for a death that was never intended to be so horrible, and unable to wash away the guilt. My own gavel fell, until I recognized how lost I had been in that whirlwind of medical events, and how I yearned for a calm, stable centre. I would never be the same again, but I would find an enduring faith.

Some years, one humiliation wasn't enough to shake my complacency. After a prestigious promotion, I faced the wrath of my envious fellow team members who claimed I had denied them co-authorships. It was true, but only because I couldn't see past the university rules that required them to make intellectual contributions to be co-authors. My boss sided with the people rather than the rules, tearing a strip off my self-esteem and wiping away any authority I had to lead that team. I thought I could continue my research under another's leadership, but then the gavel literally fell in traffic court. The judge dismissed the photographs and other evidence I presented of *not* having failed to stop at an intersection, taking the police officer's word, and then decided to make an example of me to deter others from trying to argue such cases. By the end of his soul-destroying speech, I felt like a worthless social pariah. I realized later that it might have been a rolling stop, but only because I was distracted by thinking about a project deadline imposed by the same boss who had undermined my leadership. It was

a repeated sign I needed to leave that place of work for private practice. It was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Falling gavels can devastate you more than being hit by falling trees. They're not just damaging: they eviscerate your sense of self. Still, these harshest of life's lessons can push us in new directions, spawning new purposes and goals we might not have imagined without them.

I pray this is true for the most recent disaster, for my son's sake as well as my own. It's too raw for me to see how, or to write about it just yet.

Vinyl

I am crafting an email to the head of my son's employment program, lamenting the ignorance and abusiveness of the facilitators. I describe how their methods are ineffectual and destructive to someone with autism and a learning disability. I vehemently advocate for reform and better understanding of his condition. I am on the third page, and copying every relevant authority figure, all the way to the top. The facilitators blame my son, I blame their ignorance, and the outcome will probably not help anyone. Still, I feel compelled to write.

A memory distracts me. Like an old vinyl record pulled from a stack of raw rock albums in the darkest recesses of my brain, it finds its turntable and begins to play.

I hear the "splat, splat, splat" of my feet in the slush. I am rushing across dingy downtown streets in the wet, late-winter snow of 1993. I am panting, but late for a presentation at the hospital where I work. I've just left a Review Board Hearing at another facility concerning a strapping young teen who skips school and regularly puts his fist through the drywall at home. Deemed a danger to others after holding a knife to his mother's throat, he is contesting his detention.

His mother Dahlia, an articulate, detail-oriented woman, testifies on his behalf, arguing that he is a sweet boy whose frequent violent outbursts are due to being misdiagnosed and mistreated by the mental health system. She has obviously forgiven his recent attempt on her life and minimizes its importance. She has left several disparaging voicemail messages for me, as the failure to detect his Asperger's Syndrome was mine, although the condition didn't exist in the diagnostic manual when I first saw him. Her parting shot is a flippant "See you at your College hearing!" Evidently, she is lodging a complaint with my professional licencing body. This will result in six months of hellish interrogation, even if I am eventually cleared.

The College threat, my upcoming presentation, and the lateness of the hour all compete for space in my addled brain, but the College complaint scares me the most. My lungs hurt and my belly starts to cramp. I am nine weeks pregnant. I slow down to catch my breath and the cramping stops.

My eyes adjust to the dim foyer as I leave daylight behind. I apologize profusely, sloshing into the meeting room, and put on my professional mask. My introductory cartoon slide garners a laugh. My talk is off to a good start.

With the presentation done and discussed, I finally have a chance to use the bathroom. My pants are damp but I assume that's from the snow. Dropping them, I realize I'm bleeding. I go to the Emergency Department but it's too late. I have miscarried. Dahlia has cost me my firstborn child.

I lift the needle and try to shove the old album back to where it belongs, but am left with a nagging thought. I re-read my letter to the employment people. The phrasing sounds so familiar...but why? I hear those long-ago voicemails. I gasp. I am becoming Dahlia.

River-Mouth Lessons

The shape of the river delta changes every year, often in surprising ways. I'm always eager to see how it's been transformed.

This year, a sandspit has emerged, creating a narrow lagoon beyond the beach. The water is shallow and slow-moving there, untroubled by crashing waves.

Parents encourage their children to practice swimming in the lagoon, hoping it is safer there than beyond the spit. In fact, the near-stagnant channel collects pollutants and is a breeding ground for insects. The water becomes even more turbid from the silt kicked up by the children's feet. Sometimes the greatest danger lurks where we think we're protected.

Concerned by the wafting river-mouth smells, a few parents coax their children into the waves even though the water is colder there than in the river. The young quickly return to the lagoon's acrid warmth, leaving disgruntled paddlers to navigate an obstacle course of bobbing little heads. Experience always prevails over pretty words.

One inventive Dad pitches a tent on the sandspit. It is supposed to be a way-station between lagoon and lake, easing the transition. He feeds his child a hot dog there as a further incentive, but to no avail. The lifeguard mumbles something about not swimming after eating. She is ignored by the lagoon-bathing youngster. Kind, gradual approaches don't always work.

A frustrated Mom takes her preschooler's favorite toy away, placing it at the edge of the waves. "Come here if you want it!" she orders. He plops down in a murky puddle and wails at the top of his lungs for twenty minutes. She relents. Never underestimate the stamina of an upset child.

An older sibling chimes in, “Let him sit and eat mud. Tomorrow he’ll be sick as a dog. That’ll teach him a lesson!” His mother worries she can’t take another day off work to look after a sick child. There are limits to the law of natural consequences.

A bearded motorcyclist parks, hauling his boy from the sidecar. He strips off his jacket and lifts his son up to his broad, tattooed chest. “Surf’s up, little dude!” he announces, wading across the shallows between the beach and the end of the spit. The boy startles in the cold lake water, but holds on tight. They’re soon splashing and laughing in the waves.

Parenting is not a set of strategies. It’s all about being there.

Paddleboard

“Is this your first time out this year?” came the shout from the lookout at the top of the ravine.

“First time ever,” I shouted back from below.

“Wow! That’s adventurous,” my neighbor admired.

I grinned. “You have to try something new once in a while.” The ten-second exchange had broken my concentration and the board wobbled wildly under my feet. I regained my balance, thankfully, and pulled forward briskly. The device seemed more stable when in motion.

I was now fully focused on staying vertical, but relished the compliment nevertheless. If she’d spotted me a few minutes earlier, my performance would not have been nearly as impressive, as evidenced by the river water still dripping from my shorts. Still, the gathering dog-walkers at the top of the hill seemed to approve.

Ironically, I had made my inaugural voyage in the early morning in order to avoid social scrutiny. Even though my neighbors considered me adventuresome for trying a new sport without taking lessons, I knew the real reason. Lessons would involve demonstrating all my faltering, awkward, incorrect maneuvers in front of an expert, who would then tell me what I was doing wrong. As a recovering social phobic, I preferred painful dental work to such experiences. So what if I tumbled into the drink a few times? I had thought learning by trial and error would be infinitely less humiliating than being repeatedly reprimanded by an instructor.

Of course, I wasn’t foolhardy in my adventures. I had read all the fine print in the instruction manual for my new toy. The board was inflated to the correct PSI, had the fin properly attached, and had the strap adjusted to the size of my ankle. The paddle length was correct for my height. I had watched several you-tube videos on basic paddleboard techniques. I had practised securing the board

to the roof of my car, to drive the short distance from home to the river. I wore a personal flotation device and had inserted my keys into a closed pocket to avoid losing them in the murky water. I wore old sneakers as I carried the board down the hill, discarding them on the bank before launching it. It wouldn't matter much if they were stolen.

Nevertheless, I had always feared public embarrassment much more than any physical or financial risk. With my lack of exposure to public situations during the pandemic, I feared it even more than usual. Zoom exposure is so easily controlled by muting oneself or turning off the camera. The risk of getting caught passing gas, picking your nose, sitting in your underwear all day, or other social faux pas is minimal. It's completely different from floating down the middle of a river. Maybe this new hobby was just what I needed to kick my isolation-related anxieties to the curb!

Later, I posted a picture of myself on the board on Facebook. The comments were positive and, interestingly, mostly focused on how peaceful I looked. Meanwhile, I knew that at the time I was trying desperately to avoid the shallows which could catch the rudder resulting in disaster, dodge the otters and other wildlife that popped up on the river ahead, make sharp turns without ending up in the reeds, and attend every second to keeping myself stable. My serene exterior belied a constant vigilance inside. I smiled, realizing that in this sense, most of my life has been paddle boarding.

Part 2

A few days later, I summoned up the courage to paddle the lake, paralleling the shore for safety. The wavelets sent a shudder through the board, but by paddling perpendicular to them I rocked back and forth, rather than tilting to one side and falling. I soon grew used to the motions and relaxed.

Paddling into the rising sun was glorious, though its light was almost blinding. The sunrise seemed to draw me forward. I had always been goal-oriented, with eyes trained on a destination. I picked a rocky peninsula marking the end of the bay as my paddling goal for the day.

When I reached the peninsula, I turned around. My t-shirt billowed in the gentle breeze which had been pushing me eastward. I hadn't even felt it before. Now, I had to work a bit harder as I paddled into it heading west. I straightened the board to catch the waves at the correct angle again.

Heading away from the dawn, I had to adjust to the dimmer lighting too. Yet without the sun's splendor, I saw more features on shore. From baby goslings surrounded by adult geese to a crudely-built shack—it was hard to tell if it was a child's play-fort or a homeless person's drafty shelter. Beneath me, a whole watery world of sand and seaweed and moss-covered rocks cradled the board, and had been throughout my ride. No longer blinded by my goal, I was able to perceive the depths.

Attending to my surroundings rather than the destination has never been my strong suit. No doubt I have missed opportunities to engage with them, and lacked appreciation for how they support me. So much of my life so far has been spent looking ahead. Now that the limits of what I will achieve are becoming clearer, I'm taking a broader, deeper view. That's something I'm learning as I paddle.

Taking it a step further, I hope paddleboarding never becomes an Olympic sport. As soon as something becomes competitive, it's all about who can do it faster, farther, or more gracefully according to a panel of judges...it's all about WHO. The experience is obscured by the person. We do not cheer for the undulating bond between board and water surface, the sunbeam bouncing off wavelets like a stone, the respectful kneeling to the wind as it blows stronger, the cadence of the surf... the ride. The competitor gets in the way of the pursuit; the medals obscure magnificence.

Maybe being fully human isn't possible until the human disappears, and there is only being.

Choosing a Path

I had a choice to make in my walk through the conservation area at the top of the cliff. I could follow the paved path and deal with whoever I encountered there, or go off on a side-trail which provided better views of the lake. I chose the latter, even though there were signs warning of poisonous plants. I had suffered the intolerable itch of those plants a few days earlier, and treated the irritation with aloe all night so I could sleep. Still, I was willing to risk it.

The alternative was a howling band of children, many unmasked, who were attached to a day camp and yet jumped onto the walkway at every opportunity. In a pandemic where those under twelve are not vaccinated, I might as well have jumped into a cesspool. Then there were the fitness fanatics with headphones piping workouts into their ears, looking at an ordinary walker like me with condescension. Do I really need to be judged like that? And, of course, there were dog-walkers pretending their hundred-pound furry companion couldn't possibly be depositing giant turds on the grass. There were the cyclists too, who had no qualms about running you off the pavement as they sped by. A few middle-aged women in sweatpants cackling loudly rounded out the human irritants.

I ignored them in my lakefront bliss. I followed the sun-capped waves with my eyes, until each burst into a rhythmic rush of foam onshore. I heard the seagulls' call. A cool breeze tousled my hair, and I felt the sandy ground under my feet. The sun's warmth enveloped me. Leaning over the cliffside railing, I breathed.

Sure, there was a looming nuclear power plant across the bay. Sure, there were clouds approaching. It didn't matter. I had found a reprieve from so-called civilization. I had joined with what sustains life, with what inspires reverence and awe.

Nature may bite sometimes, but only humans can be a blight on the planet. I hope the blight and the wild can find peace, before it's too late.

That peace seems more attainable in places where humans are scarce. On a lake with only one other paddler, I shout a friendly "Good morning!", devoid of any irritation with my species. The lake could easily swallow one or both of us, but maybe that's part of our uneasy peace with the wild: where we must adapt to nature rather than completely controlling it, there is more mutual respect and therefore less destruction. Wild places entail some risk, but they give us an authentic sense of where we fit on the planet.

Labyrinth

I needed to walk to clear my mind of the worries and sorrows of the day. The sun beat down, making me welcome the enveloping shade of nearby trees. The furrows, newly-filled with mulch, provided an uneven but yielding path.

I began the opening arc. It swept around further than I expected, easing me into the walking process without the need to attend to changes in direction. I breathed deeply, and had the sensation of floating. It reminded me of those early days when I knew only what my parents and teachers presented, and had not yet developed the urge to question them or to ponder my place in the world. There were uneven bumps to be sure, but the overall path was predestined.

Then came the inevitable twists and turns. I had to pay attention to where I placed my feet, to avoid losing track of where I was going. Keeping my balance became more challenging, as I tried to improve my response to a path that was no longer predictable. It was the adolescence and young adulthood of my days.

The trail continued to wind, but it gradually became more purposeful. Its destination was now in sight. My stride was easier as I became more sure-footed and accustomed to the terrain. I remembered settling into my career and starting a family.

The centre was wider than I expected. It made me feel small and lost, even though I appeared to have arrived. To sit, I gravitated towards a short stump. It had a noticeable crack, but that seemed appropriate. I felt pretty cracked and lost when I was widowed in mid-life, even though I looked outwardly successful. That's OK...they say the cracks are how the light gets in.

Starting my journey back, I knew where I had to go but the going was tough. It took all my wits and energy to keep my balance on the path. I recalled juggling the academic ladder with single parenting, while still disoriented by traumatic grief.

I stumbled as I approached the final set of turns. A medical emergency came to mind. It hastened my retirement from work, though other challenges continued. Still, the easier pace that ensued took my mind off the course and allowed me to look around. A canopy of trees sheltered, a soft breeze dissipated heat, and a person or two appeared on my horizon. Life became more present-tense.

I can see the final sweeping arc that will ease me out of my wanderings, but I'm not ready to go there yet. It looks uncomplicated and peaceful, but there's more to experience first. I've gotten pretty good at taking the bumps in stride, I'm still strong enough to pivot, and I'm just starting to feel comfortable in my shoes. I'm getting better at trudging on without blaming myself for every stumble. I've come far enough to know that some are inevitable on an uneven path, and a good walker doesn't succumb to discouragement. She just puts one foot in front of the other.

Smoke

I love the curly wisps and belching plumes that rise from the campfire on a starlit night. Away from the city, the constellations puncture the sky, embroidering the blackness. They seem to wobble in the smoky haze, but are steadfast as ever when I turn my head to the side.

I love the steam from the warm, glowing stones in a sauna, defrosting my shivering body. The cold comes from plunging into a frigid lake in shorts after paddling out to view a shipwreck in the pristine waters. It is a result of splashing wildly with uncivilized glee.

I even love the thin, tortured trail of gray that leaves your dying cigarette. It reminds me of all we have overcome, and all that we still struggle to defy in order to find a place in this human world. Sometimes we sacrificed health in order to get by, and earn just enough freedom to return to the lake, the sun, and joy. How I wish we had left for freedom sooner.

Now you are gone, and I drive in circles, trying to find my way back to the lake. The one of our children who will still reluctantly travel with his mother is helping me navigate, but without much luck. A cloud engulfs the car, and he reminds me to turn on the low beams.

Is it fog? No. It's too late in the morning for that. I turn on the radio. The wildfires half a continent away are blowing ash in our direction. Our older child is probably driving right through them on her cross-country journey of learning. I say a prayer for her.

Our visibility is almost zero in the thick cushion of sooty air. It's high noon, but the sun is so obscured it seems like dusk. I slow down and grip the wheel tight.

Is this how our civilization ends? Will we choke ourselves to death in a climate akin to that blazing on Venus? The urgency of our plight hits home. I've read the statistics about ambient temperatures and melting glaciers and so on...but this impenetrable shroud is real.

Meanwhile, the newscaster goes on to talk about virus variants and pandemic vaccination rates...the headline-maker for the last year and a half. I feel like shouting "Wake up!"

I pull over onto the shoulder for safety. I change the station to one that plays oldies. The Platters start to croon "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes".

Stand on Guard

“Oh, Canada. We stand on guard for thee...”

That’s the closing line of our national anthem, and I used to hate it. For someone of German heritage, there is a very disturbing history associated with nationalism. Still, I sang the obligatory line whenever the anthem was required, like a good citizen does.

Now, I’m not sure that line is all bad. In fact, there may be some merit to it.

Lately there’s been a tendency to disparage national pride because of the discovery of some unsavory truths about how we’ve treated our indigenous population, and ongoing racial tensions around policing that seem to cross national borders. There have even been towns that have cancelled our national holiday in response to these concerns.

I think the disparagers are naïve though. There is no country that doesn’t have some atrocities in its past. At least we’re no longer sweeping ours under the rug. At least we’re acknowledging our genocide, and the intergenerational trauma it continues to inflict. Similarly, there is no police force that doesn’t attract some bullies. Once hired, it’s pretty tempting for bullies to abuse their power, especially when it comes to people they perceive as different from themselves. Still, the majority of officers are trying to make a positive difference in their communities.

There’s also been a tendency, in psychological circles, to glorify vulnerability: the ability to let down one’s guard. If that means letting go of one’s perfectionistic tendencies and saying “I’ve done enough for today” or allowing oneself to experience joy (a vulnerable emotion) rather than constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, then I wholeheartedly agree. Relationships with soulmates and best friends, built upon years of trust, are also deeper and more compassionate when one is open enough to reveal what’s imperfect and vulnerable inside.

But to dismiss a healthy appreciation for living in a uniquely blessed country and a healthy vigilance is foolish. I cherish my country's democratic freedoms, its vast and beautiful natural spaces, its diversity that keeps us benignly curious about one another, and its protections from extreme poverty and disease, in addition to the hockey games, maple syrup, and other stereotypical Canadianisms. I valued becoming a citizen once emancipated from my family of origin, who didn't encourage it. I embraced the country I was raised but not born in, warts and all, knowing its history and its flaws. If I choose to stand during the national anthem and celebrate the national holiday, it's the least I can do.

As for vigilance, it's important to distinguish it from both reckless vulnerability and from its extreme: the hypervigilance of the traumatized. The recklessly vulnerable let their guard down with everyone, whether they've been shown to be trustworthy or not, and fail to appreciate many risks. They're often hurt or duped. I go on vacation and come back blissfully relaxed, only to become the victim of an internet scam and be thrown into the lake by a rogue wave tipping my paddleboard. Before my vacation, I would have been more alert to these risks, I would have been "on guard."

The traumatized are in a perpetual state of "fight or flight", expecting danger lurking around every corner. They cannot attend to what's in front of them for fear of what might come, paradoxically rendering them just as vulnerable as those who deliberately let their guard down. It's easy to trip over your own shoelace when you're preoccupied with potential axe-murderers in the shadows.

A healthy vigilance is different. A healthy vigilance enjoys the moment but with an awareness of its fleeting nature and of the uncertainty of what will come next. Therefore, it is savored intensely without thinking about the future, but the future is not assumed to be benign. There's no panic, but rather a calm, alert awareness of everything that is happening. The mind is quick, and the senses sharp. There's always a slight tension in the abdominal wall which reminds you of the strength at your core, and the ability to strike in an instant when required, whether at natural or human foes. Meanwhile, you

attend to the people and places in front of you, giving them your full attention and care. You are “standing on guard” indeed.

Whether for Canada, for my family, for my community, or for my own self-preservation, I plan to continue standing on guard, and to stop apologizing for doing so.

Diver

My grandfather made his living diving for sponges. Tied to a heavy stone, he plunged into the depths with his knife, ready to harvest the ocean's bounty with a few swift strokes before being forced to resurface. When the crop became scarce, he moved on to other work, but he never lost his love of the depths. They gave his ashes to the sea, knowing that's where he felt most at home.

I watch my friends splashing and cavorting on the surface. They're having fun, unaware that they're scattering frightened fish. They laugh, pass a ball, and compete. They look out for rocks and flotsam as they play, but have no idea which way the current is moving. A video captures their noisy energy.

I submerge in silence. The water is clear enough that I can see my shadow on the sand below. Turning over, I glimpse dancing patterns of reflected and refracted sunbeams on the surface above the turquoise tide. There's a gentle push running westward. A camouflaged fish is hiding in the kelp further along. I slither by on my side to avoid disturbing it. The burn in my chest urges me up, and I gasp. It's my first time breaking the stillness. My lungs are filled, and I'm drawn into the silence again. I belong here.

There is danger below for a non-amphibious creature. The kelp could entangle, or hide a poisonous stingray. The current could become stronger and more seaward. Venturing further, I might lose my protective connections with human life altogether.

And yet it is strangely alluring. I dive until chilled to the bone. I never return without learning or observing something new. Over time, I start to feel more participant than observer: a single organism among many, in a vast chain of beings stretching back to the beginning of time.

I watch my colleagues quiz each other with diagnostic riddles. They're having fun, dissecting others' minds with their quick wits and problem-solving skills. They write scholarly papers and do well on the lecture circuit. TED talks capture their noisy energy.

I listen in silence. I tune in to the current of another's mind, and sometimes my own. I reflect on the patterns. I wonder. I know the risks of harm or disconnection, but am drawn back anyway. I belong here. Here too, I feel more participant than observer: a single mind among many, in a vast chain of minds stretching back to the beginning of time.

Robin Hood

When I was a child, I loved the story of Robin Hood. He was an outlaw, but always a rather handsome one in the movies, and he stole from the rich to give to the poor. He was respected by his followers, engaged in purposeful activity, and had a nice relationship with an aristocratic girl to boot. He was a thorn in the side of the local sheriff, who was depicted as a rather nasty buffoon. Clearly, we were supposed to see Robin as heroic, romantic, and definitely one of the “good guys”.

Decades later, most of the charm has worn off this fantasy hero, and not just because the actors who portrayed him have died or aged badly. Today’s poor but enterprising individuals who steal from the rich are, for the most part, computer hackers. Because we live in North America, they see us as “the rich” who deserve to be duped, threatened, and robbed.

Compared to the countries where they live, we may indeed be more affluent, though we don’t live in the lap of luxury. We spend most of our middle-class lives working hard and saving frugally to build up our meager resources for our children’s education and our own old age.

Then, just when we think our small “nest-egg” is safe, we get a loud, threatening call or online message claiming to be from the government or the computer manufacturer. In strident tones we are told we will be jailed, have our data destroyed, have our identity stolen, or worse if we do not comply. Unfortunately, if we do comply by providing some bit of personal information or computer access, that’s exactly what happens.

Even if little is stolen, we spend months afterwards monitoring our bank accounts and credit cards for fraudulent transactions. Peaceful sleep is no longer possible. Self-blame and the belief in one’s own stupidity know no end. Fear of financial ruin is constant. The hackers have pulled away our safety

net and left us feeling perpetually vulnerable. Life has changed from a serene pond to a stormy sea that nauseates even the most seasoned travelers.

Rather than raising up the poor, these criminals drag down the not-so-poor to their own level of misery. The “good guys”, by contrast, are the people writing programs and policies to protect us from this grief. These ‘sheriffs’ are the ones to be applauded! Still, every few months there is another scam that circumvents even the best protection. The hackers are clever. The hackers are inventive...but they are NOT romantic heroes.

I now despise the story of Robin Hood.

Summer's End

All things come to an end. My peaceful, solitary river of wading egrets and playful otters and intermittent fish-bubbles and logs is no more. It is a marshy, overgrown mess. I used to be able to paddle deep into the watershed. Now I can hardly get through the delta. The peace is gone too. The shores are clogged with fishermen, even before the multiple day camps and picnicking families arrive. The walkers converse loudly on the path.

I turn toward the lake, and can hear the surf long before I get there. The late-summer winds are churning up the water, tossing it clumsily to shore. It's too turbulent for a paddleboard, so the best I can hope for is a bit of canoeing out there. Crossing the bay is no longer feasible. I hug the shoreline.

Pandemic restrictions are easing too, ending our isolation but also our sense of navigating a shared storm. Shared storms help us recognize each other's humanity. Now that the storm is abating, people are returning to their usual bureaucratic ways. Rules are prioritized over individual needs and concerns. Moreover, the rules seem to have multiplied: online timed-entry bookings are the only way to access most events. If you're not good at those, or your means of transportation affects your timing, too bad. Talking to a person about a problem is more difficult too. Much has been automated forever, or delegated to home-based workers who don't have access to the resources needed to help.

Most places are crowded, as people relish escape from their cocoons. Waitlists are long, as tests and treatments and other tasks deferred by the pandemic come due. All of that crowding and waiting causes frayed tempers. People are rude and nasty again. The renewed social conscience of the pandemic seems to be ebbing away.

I can only hope that patience will prevail, that kindness will return, and that renewed opportunity will ease some people's frustrations. The crowds and lists should settle with time too, as people catch up on what's been delayed.

Still, there are aspects of the more restricted life that I will look back on fondly. The quiet, the empathy, and the working together toward a common goal were there to a greater degree than I ever experienced before. They're abating now, but I hope others value the memories of them too and keep them alive, at least to some degree.

Cemetery

“No shortage of dead people,” I think to myself as I pull in front of the ever-expanding “Garden of Memories” to visit my late husband’s niche. It is only an annual event now, eighteen years out, but one that still stirs my soul.

Last year it jolted me into the awareness that I had been widowed longer than I knew him. This year I find myself sighing with “what ifs”.

I recently met a high school friend of my son. My son commented “Boy, he’s really let himself go,” because the young man was a bit overweight. I only noticed his calm, confident demeanor, his appropriate eye contact, his independence, and his protective attitude toward my son. It was an impressive outcome for someone on the autistic spectrum.

After that meeting, the “what ifs” started, reaching a crescendo at the cemetery. What if my late husband had lived? He was on a first-name basis with every shop-keeper and restaurateur in the neighborhood. He probably would have been able to do what the father of my son’s friend did: get his son a menial but steady job straight out of high school, until he was independent and fed up enough to seek something better using his own abilities. Meanwhile, to keep the job, he would have learned to become a reliable worker, speak up when there was a problem, and behave as normally as possible when in contact with the public.

Instead, I foolishly relied on incompetent agencies and programs to help my son, and he floundered through five years of repeated job interviews, poorly led pre-employment courses, and unpredictable, temporary placements which ultimately caused him to regress. Only my support of his work towards his driver’s licence and first aid certificate were useful. My husband would have gotten

him working steadily much sooner and, even if my son hated the job, he would have grown up and adapted to the world's demands more readily.

Then there was the "what if" related to my more successful daughter. She probably would have been just as successful at becoming a veterinarian, whatever happened to my husband. Her tenacity, common sense, and intelligence are innate: she's kept them regardless of whether or not they were encouraged. With her father's influence, however, she might have been more confident in those abilities, less inclined to criticize herself, and less fearful of long-term relationships. She was the apple of her father's eye since birth, and his influence would have made all the difference in her mental health.

I look at the swans swimming on the pond beside the wall of niches. They have brownish grey hatchlings following behind them, one parent at the front and one at the back.

We would have always protected our children that way too. No matter how close or distant we felt to each other, we would have done our utmost for them. But would we have remained close, or continued to grow apart as we did in the last couple of years of our marriage? I have no idea.

A breeze tousles my hair, and I have another thought: my "what ifs" assume a vigorous, popular forty-seven-year-old, as my husband appeared just before his death. People change. I have no way of knowing how closely the forty-something husband of my memories would have resembled the aging sixty-something senior he would be now, had he lived. He might have seen his health crisis as a wake-up call and joined me in re-evaluating life's priorities. Alternatively, he might have become more entrenched in his politically conservative beliefs, come to resent me, and turned into a clone of his bigoted, misogynistic father. Or, he might have become someone different altogether.

"What ifs" assume a static personality and world view. That makes them inherently unreliable. My husband's memory continues to impact me, the family, his friends, and all he touched directly or indirectly in so many small and so many magnificent ways. The forty-seven-year-old I imagine solving my

current problems, however, lives no more. If he had lived, he would be different now. The result might be better or worse for me, for the children, and for others whose lives he touched. It's pointless to continue imagining that result. He is gone.

I touch the cold slab covering the urn with his ashes. It is engraved "Forever in Our Hearts". It means something new this year, as I have now lost my imaginary spouse in addition to the real one. I feel profoundly alone. I weep.

Chainsaws: A COVID Allegory

Once upon a time a juggling craze swept the land. Everywhere, it seemed, people were juggling various objects and crowds were stopping to watch. Eventually, chainsaw juggling became the dominant form of entertainment. Hospitalizations to treat chainsaw injuries climbed, with many dying of their wounds. Soon, intensive care units were overwhelmed.

Laws to ban crowds or at least limit their size were enacted to protect innocent bystanders from being maimed by chainsaws. Shields to protect onlookers were encouraged. Eventually, whole neighborhoods were blocked off and isolated to limit the damage. People were encouraged to stay indoors with their loved ones for safety. They worked from home or relied on government supports. They had to enjoy their juggling on television or by webcast. Some decided to take up baking instead.

However, knowing they could not eliminate the craze or its crowds entirely, physics majors and other scientists set out to devise a safer form of juggling. In record time, they invented juggling pins. Everyone was encouraged to trade in their chainsaws for pins. Most eagerly did so.

There was a collective sigh of relief as people assumed the crisis was over. Hospitals emptied. Health care became focused on rehabilitating the injured. Restrictions eased, and people started to move about more freely again. Businesses bounced back.

Unfortunately, some jugglers continued to prefer chainsaws. They refused to switch to pins, citing the lack of evidence of their safety, the rushed manner in which they were invented, and conspiracy theories about secret government involvement. They raised the possibility of tendonitis and other unknown long-term risks of habitual pin-juggling, even though the same or worse could exist for chainsaw-juggling. They pointed to rare instances of concussions resulting from falling pins, and minimized the risks of their own implements. Some even claimed that the whole idea that chainsaws

could cause harm was a media hoax. Educational campaigns on the safety and benefits of juggling pins had little effect.

Soon, the country was divided into those who favored juggling pins and those who continued to prefer chainsaws. Bigger, more spectacular chainsaws evolved and started to injure even those who were pin-fans or were standing at a distance. Still, almost all hospitalizations and deaths were among chainsaw jugglers. Once again, intensive care units were overwhelmed.

As a result, restrictions were re-introduced and people settled into another winter of webcasts, shielding, and baking. The costs of supporting closed businesses, unemployed workers, and extra health care were threatening to bankrupt the country.

Still, the chainsaw jugglers insisted that they were making a personal choice and had a right to do so. The only choice they allowed everyone else was how to respond to their destruction.

Don't be a chainsaw juggler. Get your COVID shots!

Simpleton

I watch her sipping her milky tea, half of it drooling off the side of her lip. She pulls a purple crochet cap over her balding scalp. It's always been her favorite color.

I ask where her birth certificate is, as I need it for the passport application, which she needs to submit to keep her German pension. She says she gave all the documents to her husband. He has no idea what she's talking about. I search the unsorted pile of five years' worth of hoarded paper in the corner. I persevere, and find it at last.

Relieved, I ask her what she plans to do the rest of the day. She reports she will work on laundry and other chores. He shakes his head. The house is filthy, and he's told me she only leaves her chair for meals in the kitchen now. He cooks the meals or has them delivered.

She thanks me for looking after the paperwork and asks if I am still in good health. It's a nice gesture, but very unlike her. When she was younger, she expected gratitude for her sacrifices for the family but never reciprocated it. She expected me, her daughter, to mirror and validate all of her opinions but ignored my distress if I had any needs. Independent thought was interpreted as dissent; adolescent angst as disrespect. I felt worthless and used.

Still, she was courageous. She took her children across the ocean when her husband's business failed, at a time when that was simply not done. She could be charming. She landed an office job despite her limited English and earned enough for a mink coat and opera tickets. She was determined. She insisted on books and music in her mother tongue, and no child could go to bed until they had read and played their part. She was involved. When I accomplished something at school, she didn't just talk to the teachers: she stole the spotlight. She was formidable. I had written several potential eulogies already about our lifelong love-hate relationship.

None of that seems to matter now. She is exhausted by our thirty minutes of bureaucracy. She asks if I'll bring the transport chair again when we go to the consulate. I remind her that we need to get a passport picture done first. I wonder if her small pension is worth all this effort. Her old self comes through for just a moment as she exclaims "Well, it's necessary!"

Then, her eyes close as she settles back into her chair. On my last visit, I had some trouble waking her and found myself checking for breathing. Now, she sighs deeply. She points to a melted chocolate bar I removed from the document pile and asks me to give it to my son as a gift from her. I agree, even though I doubt it is still edible.

Am I continuing to validate her, or is it just not worth an argument? Maybe a bit of both. She's so frail now, and so easily distressed. The formidable force has become a pitiful simpleton.

She startles and asks what documents I need for the passport application. I remind her they've already been found. She tells me again about how she will do the laundry later. He shakes his head again.

She still recognizes me, although she's forgotten some of her grandchildren's names. It is said the most tragic thing about dementia is when a parent loses the ability to recognize their own child. I beg to differ. I think it may be when the child loses the ability to recognize their parent.

Gremlins

I can't believe I romanticized our caring, introspective way of life under COVID restrictions just a few short weeks ago. Now...we're back there! It isn't nearly as warm and fuzzy this time around.

Like ugly little gremlins that have been multiplying in your closet, the COVID cases are sticking out their tongues at us again. They've become more virulent since last time too, infecting us through minimal contact. We can avoid their worst artillery with vaccines, but even small caliber illness can make us lethal to others, especially those who choose to remain unimmunized.

The summer reprieve was short, and now we're heading indoors again where the viruses thrive. It feels different than last year though. Last year, we were on pins and needles about impending lockdowns. This year, we seem to be heading for a kind of *détente* with the gremlins: living life in parallel with their mischief, and hoping they don't wreak too much havoc on our health care system.

With any luck, the schools will remain open, and if not then at least reopen in a few months when vaccines are approved for younger children. That gives me cautious optimism about my son's crossing guard job, and all the jobs that depend on a functioning education system. It would also be so much better for everyone's mental health than the alternative!

Still, I can hear the gremlins snickering, "Don't count on that concert subscription, or those travel plans. We're still here!" The things that enrich life but involve group interactions are still in jeopardy, especially if the government considers them "non-essential". They don't seem to realize that the arts and the opportunity to explore new places are only non-essential for so long. If they are banned for years, the human spirit starts to wither.

The little devils also seem to be following the strategy of "divide and conquer". The more stridently we denounce the anti-vaxxers, the more entrenched they become. We might as well find ways

to accommodate them safely. The more passionately we denounce politicians who call pandemic elections, the more they rally the masses. We might as well get out and vote for whoever is least likely to run either the economy or the marginalized into the ground. The more we are accused by those we lead of being either too lenient or too strict in interpreting the rules, the more we react defensively. We might as well absorb their insults to avoid escalating things, and doggedly do what we believe is best.

The gremlins have also left a trail of permanent destruction in their wake. So many small businesses have gone into bankruptcy, or been decimated to the point where they will never bounce back. So many graduations, weddings, funerals, and other life-defining events have been cancelled or limited to the point of losing most of their meaning. So many families will always have an empty chair at the dinner table. What started as a temporary crisis became an ongoing struggle and then became a horror movie.

When will it end, if ever? I don't think we can look toward endings any more, only hope that things will get modestly better over time.

Eye-Wall

It's September, the month when the proverbial excrement hits the fan. This year is no exception. It reminded me of an episode of a show I often watch. It shows graphic re-enactments of plane crashes, and then details the investigation that determines what caused the disaster. It's probably not a good choice for a naturally anxious person like me, but there is something fascinating about it.

This episode was about an airplane flying through a Category 5 hurricane. It was almost torn to pieces, but then the pilot miraculously found the eye at the centre of the storm. Now, he was flying in tight circles within that eye. He did not dare attempt to fly toward his destination, as that would mean trying to breach the eye-wall where the winds were fiercest before flying through the second half of the storm. Help arrived in the form of another plane, whose experienced crew were able to find a "soft spot" in the eye-wall where flying was possible without risking imminent doom.

I feel like the pilot of that airplane flying through a Category 5 hurricane. I am just trying to keep my commitments and do what I have agreed to do, but keep getting caught in the storm. The scammers are trying to access my systems and steal from me, and the people who claim to be protecting me from the scammers are blocking my access to those systems and creating security features no ordinary mortal could master. The tax-man is trying to drain my meager savings to pay for expensive elections and splashy programs that help few except the politicians who design them, and the people trying to protect me from the tax-man's cruelest excesses get into battles that result in me paying more, with interest to boot. The church that is supposed to be a source of peace is divided into factions fighting over vaccination rules and priority access to our safe outdoor spaces, and I get caught defending the majority at the price of my night-time sleep.

Everyone is battling each other, and I am caught in the middle, circling and trying to not get dizzy from all the problems. I'm trying to keep my equanimity, but it's hard. I'm torn, I'm worn, and I'm terrified much of the time as more and more problems pile on.

Oh, how I wish I had an experienced crew to find me a soft-spot!

Half-Way Down the Mountain

I've been reading a book on spirituality and the benefits of surrendering to life's experiences rather than trying to control them. Like a hollow tube, you are supposed to allow whatever energy approaches to flow through you, not resisting it or clinging to it. This openness to momentary experience is supposed to create distance from egotistical concerns. Cultivating gratitude and curiosity are also encouraged. Ultimately, this way of living is said to foster greater enthusiasm and engagement in life, and allow one to identify more with universal rather than personal concerns.

As someone who has dabbled in mindfulness meditation intermittently, my first reaction to the book was to become more motivated in my practice. It gave me a more compelling reason to meditate than the traditional "emptying the mind and focusing on the breath to relax." The poetic language appealed to me too, and the emphasis on lovingkindness: the wish that all in the web of life be well and become what they were meant to be, as the Creator intended.

By the end of the book, some of the passivity the author encouraged seemed a bit extreme though. If your only goal is to revel in life's experiences, as the author seemed to suggest, then where does making a positive difference fit in? What about taking care of your family and your neighbor? What about resisting injustice? Sure, getting into a mindful state before dealing with problems can help avoid rash behavior, but eventually you do need to deal with them. Do nothing, and decisions are made for you, often with disastrous results.

I put the book aside for a few days.

One night, I had a vivid dream. In the dream, I was Moses on Mount Sinai. My head was emerging from the clouds, filled with divine inspiration. I was carrying heavy stone tablets bearing the commandments. Below was a beautiful landscape stretching to the horizon. I wanted to stay in this

place forever, but knew I had to fulfill my sacred mission. The downhill gradient was steep. I placed my feet carefully but purposefully from stone to stone. My concentration was intense, yet I felt perfectly at peace.

Then I saw them: the Israelites. They were crowded around a golden idol, pushing and shoving to get closer. They clanged various instruments to celebrate the sculpture. They were clearly proud of their accomplishment, though it glorified their handiwork rather than God. I was horrified.

You know the rest of the story, but at this point I woke up.

The horror was gone. All I could feel was the peaceful yet purpose-filled state I experienced half-way down the mountain. I wasn't caught in the egotistical need to impress an idol (and there are many of those in our world), nor was I stuck with my head in the clouds, experiencing ecstasy but doing nothing useful.

Rather, I was quietly concentrating on a mission that was larger than myself, one step at a time. I concluded that this is what life is at its best. I will still meditate regularly so I don't forget the mountaintop. I just won't live there.

Mirrors and Windows

When I think about my greatest professional failures, I think about mirrors and windows. Mirrors show you a reflection of yourself; windows are clear panes of glass that show you the person on the other side. My greatest professional failures happened when I confused the two.

A young woman presented with depression with psychotic features, but appeared to be improving and talked about plans and hopes. I saw myself in my last year of high school, floundering in the depths until I won a scholarship to university. At that point, my mood lifted as I could see a way out of my misery. I thought she was doing the same and cheered her on.

I had convinced myself I was looking in the mirror. I was not. The young woman's plans with her family were a fiction, and her hopes evaporated as she was being transferred to another hospital, losing her familiar care team. I thought she could see a way out as I did. She could not. She was found on the subway tracks a few hours after I wrote her an overnight pass.

A young man presented with an ever-changing constellation of symptoms. I thought I was looking through a window at a disturbed individual very different from myself. I found him somewhat annoying. First, I treated him for depression. Sure enough, it resolved but was replaced with obsessive compulsive disorder. I treated him for this condition. It resolved but was replaced with a chronic pain syndrome. I offered to treat that, but he moved on to a neurologist's care. He died a year later by his own hand.

I realized too late that I had been looking in the mirror. The young man was afraid of growing up because that implied entering situations where he was not in control. His various disorders were debilitating enough to prevent graduation from high school, ensuring he would never have to face such

situations. My need for control is equally strong, even if it manifests differently. If I had recognized that similarity sooner, I might have been able to provide better care.

Sure, one can say that I learned from these cases. The young woman taught me to better recognize psychological boundaries; the young man to realize that the uncontrolled is not always disastrous, and one can learn to live with it.

It's a shame, however, that they had to pay the price for my delayed emotional development. I hope they can forgive me. I hope I can become a better judge of mirrors and windows, and a wiser, kinder friend as a result.

The Tunnel

This pandemic has reminded me of being stuck with other passengers in a subway train tunnel between stations. It has been a revealing experience.

As in a tunnel, we never knew in the pandemic if the light ahead was an oncoming train, the headlamp of a rescuer, or brilliant sunshine. Our eyes were accustomed to the darkness, so we couldn't tell until we were almost there. The ongoing uncertainty was maddening

Some people, like me, initially welcomed the lack of distraction as it allowed us to turn inward and reflect...until that became too much of a good thing and we became impatient to move on.

Others looked at each other more closely, having nothing else to look at, and discovered a shared humanity. They lent cellphones to those who needed to contact loved ones or gave candy to hypoglycemic diabetics, regardless of their backgrounds.

Others become myopic in the dim lighting, unaware how their action or inaction would affect others. On the train, they refused to push the emergency alarm. During the pandemic, they refused vaccination. It made me wonder if the situation brought out the worst in them, or if they were always that way.

Still others took advantage of those who struggled to adapt to tunnel life, helping them only after they paid a hefty fee. In the pandemic, they charged exorbitant prices for protective equipment, hacked the computers upon which we depended, or exercised their newly-acquired administrative powers to bully the unwitting.

Then, there were a few who jumped out impulsively, risking a lethal encounter with the electrified third rail. In the pandemic, these were the people who partied in communities where the

virus raged and often paid deadly consequences. It was sad when they encouraged their friends and family to do the same.

Most of us just tried to adapt our work and play to the new reality, even if they were mere shadows of their former selves, grumbled about the latest government pivot, figured out yet again how to reorganize life accordingly, and tried not to sink into despair despite a pervasive sense of helplessness. We took up simple indoor hobbies like baking or sewing or scrapbooking, not for the value they might add to our lives, but just to experience some modicum of personal control for a day, not knowing what the morrow would bring.

After almost two years of intermittent isolation, I am daring to look forward again, to think about traveling and skiing again, and to talk to my friends face to face even if still masked. I recognize that those who are thirstiest or whose medical conditions have been exacerbated by the tunnel must emerge first. I see where the need is greatest, and help move them forward even if it means waiting a while longer in the darkness myself.

I mourn the fact that some debris will remain in the tunnel, never to resurface: the handshake, the many businesses which floundered, the plans which were permanently altered because they couldn't be postponed for two years, the big celebrations which were reduced to small private gatherings or are no longer meaningful a year or more after the fact.

Will I ever travel this way again, and risk being stuck in another tunnel? I've already booked my next trip. Life must go on.

Advent Calendar

We're heading into Advent: a time of waiting and anticipation. Waiting can provoke anxiety when we're anticipating an uncertain test result. Waiting can be exhausting when we're waiting for a break from work, or waiting for a pandemic to end. Even when the event we're anticipating is as positive and hopeful as Christmas, waiting can be hard.

Young children find it more difficult than most of us to wait for something positive, to delay gratification. That may be a reason for the holiday tradition of the chocolate Advent Calendar, which seems designed to sweeten the wait. I have fond memories of opening the small numbered portals of the calendar to find the chocolate surprises. I had a younger brother with whom I was expected to share, so each of us got a treat every other day. By the time I was seven I had figured out the best Advent calendar strategy: I let him go first. That way, he would get all the treats on the odd-numbered days and I would get all the treats on the even-numbered days, and everyone knows that the biggest chocolate is always behind the door for December 24. On top of scoring an extra-large chocolate, I would also get some rare praise from my mother for being mature and kind because I had let my little brother go first. What could be better? I was obviously a rather competitive child.

In hindsight, I'm not sure the Advent calendar is such a good idea though, and not just because of nutritional concerns about having chocolate for breakfast. Rather, the calendar encourages us to focus on counting down the days when it is so much more meaningful to focus on making the days count. Waiting times need not be wasted times. Some of the best conversations happen in the check-out line at the supermarket. Some of the kindest gestures occur among people stuck on a delayed train together. Waiting gives us a break from our hectic schedules, and therefore an opportunity to make the most of each moment.

Let's not merely plan for December 24 and December 25. Let's plan for December 5 and 10 and 13 and all the other days in Advent. In some traditions, waiting times are considered a special gift which allows reconnection with the Sacred. Whether you pray, breathe, walk in nature, or walk a labyrinth, pencil in some time for your soul. Waiting times can also reconnect us with each other. Try cooking or decorating *with* your family rather than *for* your family. You might be surprised what you learn about each other when you're not having "serious" conversations. Find a way to reconnect with your community too, whether by participating in a toy drive, volunteering at a soup kitchen, or just picking up the phone to reach out to someone who may be isolated.

Waiting is never easy, but with practice we can learn to wait well.