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1455

Movable Type

Finding Community
During COVID-19

A BI-MONTHLY
PUBLICATION
**CREATED FOR
WRITERS**

ISSUE NO.

2

*In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.*

—Bertolt Brecht

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DIRECTOR’S NOTE

We know this much to be true: writers write. No matter if it's during periods of prosperity or peace, eras of scarcity or conflict, our authors will be there, attempting to make art (some even manage to make sense) out of the mess we consistently make of things.

Here’s the thing: even within the mostly quiet and industrious demographic of those who pick up pens instead of swords, and despite the necessary isolation and disconnection from day-to-day drama, these writers require the sustenance community provides. For many, there’s seldom enough solidarity to go around; for some, whatever they manage to find is everything. During a global crisis, one thing we share is the impulse to protect ourselves and our loved ones. In extraordinary times, our vulnerabilities, if bravely and honestly faced, can be what unite us; they can be what save us.

Productive writing is seldom easy or painless (unless you’re Stephen King), and in 2020, as Nathan Leslie describes, it’s easy for paralysis to become the default setting. Gwydion Suilebhan and Bethanne Patrick found solace—and inspiration—by rekindling ties with old friends. For Ed Aymar, finding community was only half the battle; he took it upon himself to *create* a community that, before this year, would have been less necessary, even unimaginable. And how do we manage the communities we’ve already created? As Jeff Coker and Leigh Tivol illustrate, in some cases we need to recreate what exists, adapting and improving by whatever means necessary. In all of these instances we see ingenuity, urgency, empathy.

1455 is honored to share exclusive excerpts from an important and timely new anthology, *ALONE TOGETHER: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of COVID-19*, with an introduction from its editor, Jennifer Haupt. This collection, inspired by feelings of disconnection and despair, became not only a clarion call for unity and creativity, it was a purposeful statement of conviction; a rallying cry for engagement and compassion.

The stated mission of 1455 is celebrating creativity and building community. These aspirations have only assumed urgency during the last year, as our world confronts the most significant pandemic in a century. For this issue of *Movable Type*, we’re sharing the stories of individuals who are inspired to sing during dark times. Despite facing the setbacks and disruption familiar to us all, they continue to do the work. The work of connecting people, sharing resources, and inspiring hope instead of despair.

About this darkness. It’s important we understand there are forces in our world encouraging confusion and exacerbating anxiety. These forces want nothing more than fear, lack of connection, and violence (the kind we inflict on one another and the kind inaction inflicts on everyone), and—above all—apathy. The writing here rejects indifference and asks for accountability, from ourselves and for each other. These writers, through their words and works, glow with purpose, revealing how we define, build, and find community. They prove that during the darkest times there will be some amongst us shining their light, in defiance of the darkness.



Shine on!

Sean Murphy
Executive Director, 1455

Alone Together

An Introduction from the Editor

Jennifer Haupt

Excerpt from *ALONE TOGETHER: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of COVID-19*



Purchase this title from bookshop.org



I'm an introvert, like many writers, considering the solitude my attic office a luxury. But I also need balance: coffee dates with friends, exchanging a smile of solidarity with the woman lifting weights next to me at the gym, and asking my local bookseller's for their must-reads of the month. I depend on these daily interactions to energize me. All of these people are threads in my safety net, most without realizing it, helping to keep me buoyed above chronic, sometimes debilitating, depression. I know from experience that, too easily, staying home can turn from a luxury to a state of paralysis.

When the stay-at-home order was enacted, my connections with the outside world were frayed, as I was reduced to watching on screens as the killer virus swept through our country. Our president held press conferences declaring confidently: It will go away. I so wanted to believe him.

By the third week of quarantine, it was clear this was not going away anytime soon. Driving home this point, I received a devastating blow: the contract for my second novel was cancelled due to the plummeting economy. Of course, I wasn't the only one who lost their livelihood. Unemployment claims surpassed 15 million and lines at understocked food banks stretched toward the horizon. Small businesses were going

bankrupt by the scores, forced to shut down for a few weeks, then months. No one was really sure how long it would be before they could re-open, assuming they were still solvent.

This uncertainty, no end in sight, launched our entire country into a fugue-like state of shock.

Taking some kind of positive action, moving outward into the world again, became a necessity for my survival. I wondered, what could I do? I didn't have money or powerful influence, but one thing I did have was my community of writers, some of whom had launched their own fundraising and awareness campaigns against social injustice. Jessica Keener had sent me and dozens of other authors an email the past summer, asking us to donate manuscript consultation services



to raise money for organizations working to stop border and detention camp abuses. The action one person, reaching out to her community, and then those people widening the circle until it included hundreds stuck with me. (#authorsAgainstBorderabuse raised \$17,000 in just three months.)

The tipping point was when I saw Roxane Gay on “The Daily Show,” explaining why she tweeted an offer to give ten people \$100 each, no questions asked. She said, “In a better world, the government would handle this, but we don’t live in a better world.”

I wanted to live in a better world.

An idea began forming, a gut-feeling that energized me for the first time in weeks. Maybe I could rally authors to support the booksellers who had placed so many of our books into the hands of readers, and now needed our help. Long before the



pandemic hit, independent bookstores were the pillars of a worldwide literary community and the mainstays of neighborhoods across the country, providing inviting spaces to connect over ideas and coffee. My local bookstores have been a big part of my personal safety net, as well as “must visit” cultural hubs when I travel. Perhaps most important, these business owners and their employees are also pillars of a democratic society, spotlighting books you might not find elsewhere and giving marginalized people a voice through author readings and other events.

I started by putting out feelers, posting on Facebook and sending emails to authors I knew through my work as a journalist and novelist. I made a concrete, to-the-point ask: Could they contribute an essay or poem about their COVID-19 experiences to a fundraising anthology for struggling indie booksellers? Within twenty-four hours, dozens of authors were onboard, and I became bolder, reaching out to a diverse range of writers I admired. During the next month, I jumped out of bed each morning, excited to see what would land in my email that day. Every poem and essay submittal was a potential fragment of the soul of what I called my Lovely Monster, not knowing exactly what I was creating.

Part of the tremendous unease during the pandemic has been recognizing we are in the midst of transformation, no clear sense

of where it will lead and little reassuring guidance along the way. From the beginning, the missives arriving daily nourished me. There were stories of love triumphing over social distancing: The joy of a Zoom wedding, pandemic date night via steamy and funny texts, a mother and daughter growing closer through phone-in cooking lessons. There were also surprising, moving images of love intertwined with grief and comfort: a woman trying hard to connect with her estranged sister while social distancing, and failing. A man contemplating the comforting role of lavender in his ailing father’s life, his own life, and the tumultuous history of their Latino culture. A woman professing her devotion to aloneness, and realizing that her deep attractions are to nature, not humans.

The poems were mostly constructed of possibilities: images of something new cracking open, of a glittering road, of shedding our hatred and fear like a virus.

As the pandemic stretched into May, the stories and poetry reflected the rising anxiety and anger permeating our country. One woman worried about how her husband was handling quarantine and the inequity of how their Black community was being handled. Another woman drove to the grocery store daily, mostly to escape from her house, coming home exhausted from



the anxiety of being in the world, and falling asleep dreaming of the sumptuous meal she’d make. A Black man contemplated the mask he has been forced to wear all his life.

And then George Floyd’s murder united so many of us in a grief that certainly was not new. His final words, “I can’t breathe,” sparked a connection that took us out of our dark COVID-19 fugue state. It had us asking a vast, overwhelming question that became the pumping heart of this book: **What Now?**

Uniting for a common good with 75 authors (55 in the print book and another 22 in the e-book edition) from diverse cultures and backgrounds was both a privilege and reward of putting together this Lovely Monster. She has developed a soul thanks to every one of them. She is our collective pain and our dreams. I hope she offers you what she has given me: possibilities. In telling our stories, we hope to enable you to tell your story. That’s the sweet spot of connections, where the healing happens. ■

Apex Gazing

A Record of March 2020

Lena Khalaf Tuffaha

Excerpt from *ALONE*

*TOGETHER: Love, Grief,
and Comfort in the Time
of COVID-19*

It was the time of late empire,
science and song
were all the rage. Chart after nightly chart
were rushed to the screen. Hieroglyphs
better left undeciphered. The news reports
forecast the magnitude of impending losses,
how late we were
in our arrival.

It was the time of loud lies
and we baked until the stores ran out of flour;
our cookies delectable with a dusting of cinnamon
to warm the tongue, our butter browned, our sugar
raw, indelicate.

It was the time of virtual gatherings
and together we named the flowering street trees
beyond our windows. *Prunus spinosa* that erupted
in flowers like globes of snow,
prunus serrulata that canopied
our cautious strolls.

Our distant loved ones were closer
and more unreachable as the largest birds
of our era lay dormant in our airports.
They sent photographs of their trees, too.
Tilia cordata
of childhood memory, *jacaranda mimosifolia*
not yet bloomed, a symphony on the verge.

It was the time of best case scenarios
and we tracked and catalogued, each of us
drafting a field guide for the terra nullius
that awaited us. Stay home Stay home
Melospiza melodia chirped
with singular clarity. *Cyanocitta stelleri*
rustled through evergreens in azulene flashes,
a choir, discordant,
in the silence of cities ailing
and freeways shorn of their gridlock.

It was the time of paltry metaphors,
and even the believers among us
soured at the prospect of April miracles.
Our grief gusted and down-poured, vernal
restlessness swelling each day beneath our roofs.

It was the time of superlatives,
and we languished. Postponements cluttered
our calendars. Between fears and stretching
we alternated, child and parent, bewildered.
We wiped down every surface, renewed every frailty. ■



Lena Khalaf Tuffaha's first
book, *Water & Salt*, won
the 2018 Washington State
Book Award for Poetry. Her
forthcoming chapbook, *Letters
from the Interior*, will be
published in fall 2020.

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In the Bath

Jenna Blum

Excerpt from *ALONE TOGETHER: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of COVID-19*



The worst day I had during the pandemic took me by surprise. It was 5 PM at the end of a workday & I was looking forward to a socially distanced walk with my friend Kirsten—who then texted me: Don’t go out—there’s a shooter on the Common.

Kirsten lived on one side of the Boston Common and I the other, and we met for socially distanced strolls, each other’s in-person connection. Missing one walk wasn’t

a big deal, but when I got that text I slammed my iPad closed. I was done. I wanted to go outside. I needed that one excursion into open air. I wanted exercise. I wanted nature. The magnolias were blooming on Commonwealth Avenue, heavier and more lustrous than I could remember. The previous day I’d lifted my face to the blossoms and inhaled—but I could barely catch the scent through my mask.

Now I was done. Done having to enjoy flowers through a filter. Done not being able to walk. Done with the Blaze—I wanted to go back to writing. I wanted the gym. I wanted my friends. I wanted my dog, who’d a few months before. I wanted my mom, who’d died a year before that. I wanted there not to be a shooter. OR a pandemic.

My friend Stephen called at that particular moment to see how I was doing.

“Checking in, my dear,” he said. “How are you?”

“Honestly? I’m bad,” I said.

“How so?”

I told him. “I’m done with Covid. I’m done with the whole thing.”

“Have you eaten today?” he asked.

“NO,” I said. I went to the refrigerator and opened it, then slammed it closed. “I don’t WANT to eat.”

“Have you showered?”

“Of COURSE not,” I said.



“All right, here’s what I want you to do,” Stephen said. “Go run a bath. I’ll even try hard not to imagine you naked.”

I was in such bad shape I didn’t even banter back—our friendship was flirtatious. “FINE,” I said, once I’d stripped and the water was running. “I’m in the tub.”

“Good,” he said. “Now I’m going to read you some poetry.”

“I DON’T WANT ANY FUCKING POETRY,” I said. “I just want my LIFE BACK!”

“I understand,” Stephen said. “Now: listen.”

I sat in the tub with Stephen on speaker, scowling as he read me poem after poem. I couldn’t concentrate. The words slid off me. They meant nothing. But I didn’t hang up. I let Stephen’s voice wash over me. I lay back and shut my eyes.

“Better?” asked Stephen. I grunted.

“Not yet, apparently,” he said. “Let’s try this one.”

For an hour he read as I lay with the water cooling. Eventually, I was able to bite down on what he was reading, my brain starting to make sense of the words. It was like a picture coming into focus, only the picture was myself. I sighed.

“Better?” Stephen asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Thank you.”

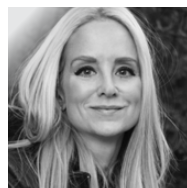
“It’s my privilege,” he said. “Will you be all right?”

“Now I will,” I said. “Stephen?”

“Yes?”

“That last one was yours, wasn’t it,” I said.

“Good ear, my dear,” he said. I smiled. The last poem was the first one I’d been truly able to hear.



Jenna Blum is the bestselling author of novels *Those Who Save Us*, *The Stormchasers*, and *The Lost Family*.

jennablum.com

These Nights of Candles

Stephen P. Kiernan

*The old man raises his cane
and fences with the swords of gladiolus.
He’s frenzied in the garden. The sun inches west
and on its last red edge
matches are being struck, lighters thumbed,
the candles begin*

*though some people are already asleep:
the postman, his fingers inked by commerce
and wordy romance, not one promise or plea
written to him; the early rising baker,
a bachelor till his last baguette;
the fisherman, whose wife stands at the window
staring at a sea that contains nothing
but her vague reflection on the glass.
And the butcher’s wife, reluctantly, lies down
for her heavy husband, and after a time
feels like meat pounded on the gristle.
The preacher sips red before a blank page
certain the sermon will appear whole
once he finds the first word,
while the silence of the house presses down.
Nearby the drunkard prepares his singing voice
and wonders who did this to his hands.
The old man is led to his room and left there.*

*These nights of candles,
these heartbreaks burned low,
are not the only kind. Somewhere, someone
is making a toast to ten friends, some man
is kissing a woman’s belly and she’s laughing.
A baby under blankets breathes
like the moon’s phases, like falling snow.
Some candles light a page or a window
or a church or a birth
or a friend’s or a lover’s face.*

*But tonight, like most nights,
when I cup my hand
behind the flame, when it highlights
every whorl and ridge and fortune teller’s line
and I breathe in,
I know I am about to lose you forever
again, and no kind of light can save me,
and I cannot help breathing out.*

*There’s a brief glow in the wick’s tip,
but then the smoke. The old man
sits a hard chair and remembers.
Down in the street a moonbright hound
howls and howls and howls. ■*



Stephen P. Kiernan is a journalist, as well as fiction and nonfiction author. His newest novel is *Universe of Two*.

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Quarantine

Susan Henderson

Excerpt from *ALONE TOGETHER: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of COVID-19*



Masks

My mom and I sit six feet apart in the living room of my childhood home, both of us in masks and gloves. My father died last night, and I drove from New York to northern Virginia to be with her. While she cries, I sit here on the other side of the room, feeling my own breath against my face. It's an awful way to grieve. For fourteen days I can't hug her. Worse is knowing, since my father died, no one has hugged her.

Shiver

He'd been healthy until only recently. We traveled together last summer. He'd buzz my hotel room at five in the morning to see if I was up for a walk. A month ago, my mom called to say, "He's stopped eating. He doesn't want you to come, but I think you should."

When I arrived, I found him in the recliner, shivering under a blanket and heating pad. She didn't tell him I was coming. He hadn't shaved or combed his hair.

Papers

I came here to grieve with my mother, but we haven't had time. There are policy numbers to find, military discharge papers to send, passwords to guess. I'm cranky, reading forms I don't understand.

Swallow

I wanted my dad to have an appetite again. I thought if he ate more protein, more fat, he might rally. I didn't know his belly was full of cancer. I made a list of what I planned to

feed him, aiming for two thousand calories a day. Next to that list, I wrote the foods that actually went into his mouth: one bite of pear, two sips of Ensure, one spoonful of scrambled eggs. I tallied the day's calories as we watched the world collapse each night on the news. On the day a cluster of COVID-19 cases appeared in my beloved New York, my father ate 120 calories. When Italy went on lockdown, he ate 310. The day the stock market hit a record low, he ate close to a thousand calories but I had to subtract for vomit and diarrhea.

Obituary

This is one of my favorite memories of my dad. My kids, eight and ten at the time, talked him into digging a moat in our yard. They spent the whole day shoveling and making a drawbridge, none of us remembering that the cesspool was buried in that same spot. I'm trying to write my dad's obituary, and this is one of many stories I cut to stay within our budget.

Listen

From my childhood bedroom, I listened for something awful to happen. One night he woke up sweating and confused. Another, he didn't make it to the bathroom in time. I scrubbed the floor and walls at 3 a.m., sorry he could hear me cleaning up after him.

“What if I miss my dad’s last days?”

“What if they lock down New York and you can’t get home?”

Flag

I drive my dad’s car to the funeral home to pick up his ashes and the folded flag they give to military servicemen. It’s raining, and I can’t find the switch for the wipers. At the funeral home, I stand, dripping on the carpet. All of us wear masks. They set a bag on the table. My father. When they step away, I’m allowed to approach.

I’m surprised by the sense of relief that he’s with me again, that I’m taking him home.

Rain thumps the roof as I pull off the highway. I stop for a long time in the Pentagon parking lot, where he taught me to drive. Sometimes I’m fine. Sometimes I weep with no sound.

Next sunny day, the boy across the street stands at the end of our walkway and plays a Bach sonata on his violin. My mom sits on the steps in her mask, with only the flag to hug.

Dare

One day, he did not get up at all. He lay on his back, looking at the ceiling. He declined my offers to turn on a radio, to read him the newspaper. He took only three sips of water, never used the bathroom. At night, his room dark again, I took a chance at something new. “I love you, Dad.” He said it back to me, his first time too. In my room, I wondered if he’d die in the night, if my mom was holding him or if he would die alone.

Cans

The neighbors wheel their recycling cans to the curb and point the handles toward the road. Our can is filled with bottles of Ensure and unread newspapers. I assume the virus is on the trash cans, the mail, the door handle. I wash my hands, but have I been careful enough?

Turn

The virus spread through New York and the homes of my friends and neighbors. It looked as if my state might follow Italy and go on lockdown. I told my father as I helped him sit up in bed. He was too weak to move his blanket aside. His legs were stained from diarrhea. “Here, eat something,” I begged him. I’d mixed ice cream with Ensure, but he could not grip the spoon. I fed him one bite at a time. When he turned his face toward the wall, I pretended not to see his tears.

Teeth

I find a box of my baby teeth. They are taped to the bottom and numbered in the order I lost them. I’m falling apart. But unlike my father, who suffered quietly, I rant and slam doors.

Choose

When I reminded my dad to take another sip of Ensure, he snapped, “Don’t tell me when to eat!” I felt complicit in his starvation. I stormed into the woods behind my elementary school and called my husband, sobbing into the phone. “I think you should come home,” he said.

Rock

I sit in the woods by the creek and a mask floats by. I find a pile of painted rocks on a tree stump. A note says you can take one or leave one. I take one for my dad.

Wave

My husband drove down to Virginia to get me so I wouldn’t have to travel through Penn Station. In case he was a carrier of the virus, he’d only say hello from the lawn. My dad struggled for balance as my mom dressed him. He took baby steps, panting, holding the wall. He stood behind the storm door and waved, the last we’d see him.

Music

I cry easily these days—ask the poor receptionists at the Pentagon Federal Credit Union and Dominion Energy—but there are signs we’ll be okay. My mother has begun to reimagine her life going forward. She thinks the room where we watch TV could become an art studio. She’s unpacked her guitar—it’s been decades—and keeps it propped beside the couch. During my shower, I blast Earth, Wind & Fire and discover I can still feel joy.

Salute

My dad weighed one hundred pounds when he died. Those last days I spent with him were brutal, tender, an honor.

Masks

All I desire anymore are simple things: to be out in the world without a mask, to pet a stranger’s dog, to sit close enough to the people I love to hear them breathe. I walk past my elementary school, empty now, and slip into the woods behind it once again. That last image of my father sits like a weight in my chest. I take every trail until the exertion reminds me to let in air. I step off the path to make room for a woman with a bandana tied around her face. We are connected—all of us with our smiles and sorrows hidden from each other, all of us so in need of human touch. As the woman continues on her walk, I check my phone. I’ve been here longer than I planned. I turn back toward the house, and start to run out of the woods and through my childhood streets. For fourteen days, no one has hugged my mom, but our quarantine is finally over. I hurry and, reaching for the door, have already flung off my mask. ■



Susan Henderson is the author of the novels *Up from the Blue* and *The Flicker of Old Dreams*.

[facebook.com/susanhendersonauthor](https://www.facebook.com/susanhendersonauthor)



Song at the End of the Mind

Susan Rich

Excerpt from *ALONE TOGETHER: Love, Grief, and Comfort in the Time of COVID-19*

I think of you as a radio frequency—
(sometimes hard to find)

as I touch this illuminated dial.
But tonight you arrive

murmuring into my ear in half-sleep;

you offer a suitcase of small pleasures
and laughter that somersaults across the country.

In this time of shelter in place,
we are fevered wanderers

with nothing but an open screen;

handheld devices offering luminous ellipses.
We heal the earthquaked bones

of our pasts decorating rough mouths
with new vocabularies—

no longer deferred.

As the world quiets,
I'm awake to our longings.

All that is left: to congregate
close along the shoreline

unbandaged and unadorned;

to listen to the smooth rhythm and cues
of Quarantine Radio.

This one goes out to you. ■



Susan Rich is the author of four books of poems, most recently, *Cloud Pharmacy*; *Gallery of Postcards and Maps* as well as *Blue Atlas* are forthcoming.

poet.susanrich.net

Writer Blocked

Nathan Leslie

Let's be honest: it would be perfectly understandable if writing was not really your biggest concern in 2020. Just as perhaps in 1968 or 1917 or 1944 or 1863 one could hardly blame a writer for having a few extra-literary things on their mind.

Sometimes life away from the page supersedes and transcends (at least temporarily) that of the mind and of the imagination, no way around it. If you happened to be a writer or artist of any sort attuned to the vacillations of society and social media as part of your material, 2020 was tough going. We saw this in 2016 when the political satirists and comedians

unexpectedly had to confront a reality which, thanks to the aggravations and antics of one Donald Trump, became self-satirizing. In 2020 there was only one narrative and it cannibalized all others; suddenly there was only one story—Covid-19. Suddenly all roads led to the virus and the nightmare death spiral that was its steady march across

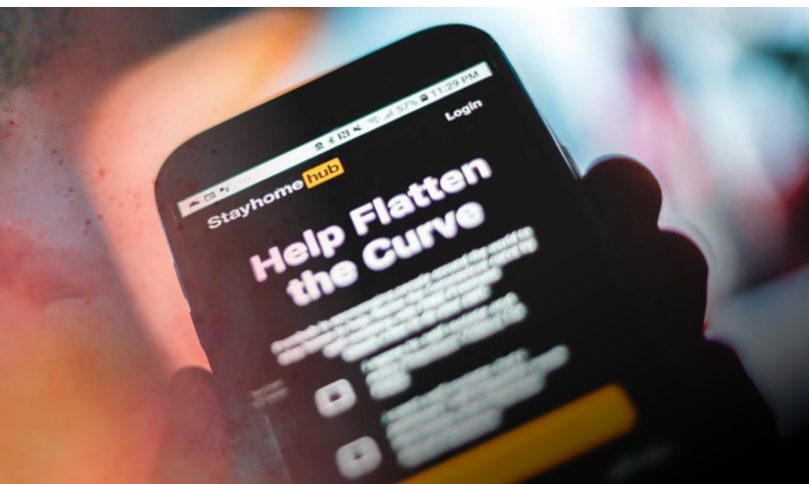
the world and through the U.S. Covid-19 not only consumed the other stories; it annihilated them. Suddenly the election, mass shootings, global warming—all secondary. Concerns over concussions in football, for instance, seemed trivial compared to 200,000 deceased Americans (and counting, as I write this). Talk about stultifying.

To cut to the chase, if one wrote vis-a-vis the imagination, what might have seemed preposterous became real, the so-called new-normal.

Post-apocalyptic scenarios—those were actually happening, and not just in the pages of the latest dystopian dreamscape novel.

With such confounding horrors unfolding in the daily news, fiction seemed inadequate for the moment, passé almost. To wit: I wrote a satirical story several years ago poking fun of remote reiki; it seemed perhaps humorously outlandish in 2018 and 2019. In 2020 it was an actual legit practice because the real kind of in-person reiki had vanished as a result of Covid (religious services via kayak, remote weddings, parking lot funerals, drive-through strip clubs and virtual, well, pretty much everything else were all new on the scene out of necessity). It's difficult to capture weirdness via fiction when the weirdness tsunami inundates your writing shack each morning.

On social media this spring many writers complained of a complete inability to piece together sentences—deep-seated writer's block. The impetus behind such a blockage is not difficult to understand: the writerly imagination, fragile as a desert



bloom in even the best of times, was subsumed by a mind-bending series of events we never thought we would see in our lifetimes. We became rattled with anxiety, concerned about our friends and neighbors and family members. It is difficult to write the next chapter in your novel-in-progress when concerned about your isolated and vulnerable elderly relatives and perplexed performing tasks such as a run to the grocery store.

Checking the morning Covid-19 case numbers and death counts became a grim morning ritual—how many people are sick and dead now?

Though I had more time on my hands as a result of the virtualization of everything in my life, frequently, I spent much of the

day worried, distracted and attempting to wrap my head around the latest scrolling updates. Anything approaching the steady calm and routine that a writer usually needs (as a writer, I, for one thrive on stability) was deep-sixed by the turmoil of a country sinking into a viral morass.

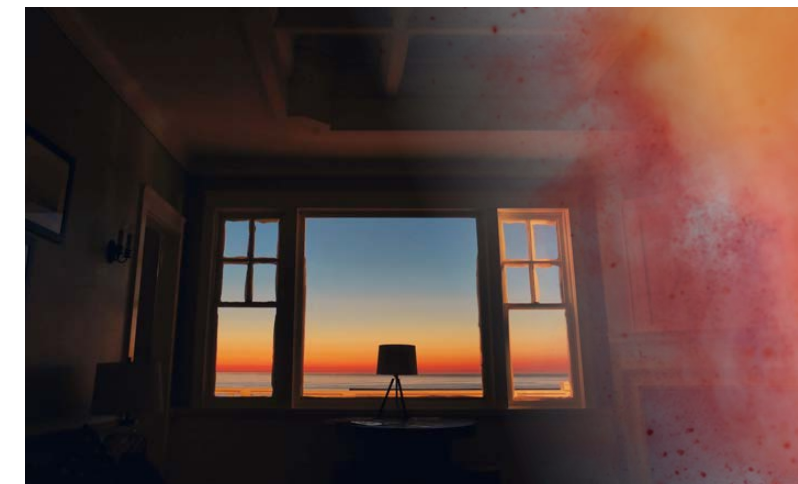
With all of this swirling around me, in March and April especially, the most I was able to accomplish was light editing and revision of previously composed work. I had a very difficult time composing anything new fiction-wise. However, at least for me, once I hit May—two months into the Covid-19 onslaught—I somehow finally found my writerly sea legs. Though I was still horrified by the illness and mass loss of lives, I perhaps, on some level, accepted the changes as something permanent and well beyond my control. I began writing again—with modest goals. With the lockdown and, what in Virginia, where I live, was called Phase Two and Phase Three (gradual reopening steps), I realized that, in a sense, many of us became Emily Dickinsons, hunkering inside or in our backyard, avoiding crowds and public gatherings, seeking the respite of nature, communicating via missives. For the writers who rely on outside stimulus or who write about their three-dimensional lives in the “real world,” the Covid-19 shutdown was

and is difficult. On the other hand, as a writer who can also lean internal, I realized that I had plenty of material in my memory and through the small fictional observations I could make Covid-19 or no Covid-19. I winnowed my scale and reacquainted myself with the page in a new (perhaps more limited) way.

This is also to say that as writers we can be at least partially selfish—or at least self-contained. Though it was upsetting to learn of the loss of life and mass illness, in some respects, over the past two decades, we had already become a society where to be human=becoming the recipient of the instantaneous bombardment of tragic news. 9/11. Iraq. Afghanistan. Syria. The many, many daily mass shootings. Police brutality. Fires. Hurricanes. Floods.

In the 21st Century we have become masters of learning of horrors instantaneously and then just as quickly blocking them out.

This is not something we like to admit. We fret and post our public statements on social media, but then we are on to the next thing. Short of self-sacrifice, what else can we do with all this inhuman knowledge?



I am not sure if my experience and patchwork solution was similar to others or if I was quicker (or slower) to slide over to the mental springboard that is the imagination. Everyone has their own timescale and respective inner gauges. Still, as writers we often find ways to trick ourselves to write when our bodies, hearts and even part of our minds may not want to. Family members struggle; friends are in need; poverty and depression spiral outward. As writers, if we sometimes fail at carving out our own mental bubble, we are done. For me, as was the case this spring, writer's block is usually external—some event in my life (or in this case everyone's lives) inserts itself into the forefront, pushing the delicate trapeze balancing that is writing into the broom closet. It happens. And yet, we have to



also persist. This year some writers shut down their social media or stopped reading the news (or claimed to). My hack was more basic: I just accepted reality, read the news for a few minutes each day (mostly headlines only online), minimized social media and tried to sally forth.

The downside is this: it struck me in 2020 how essentially toothless fiction has become—at least in the short term, in comparison with the full weight of events asserting their reality.

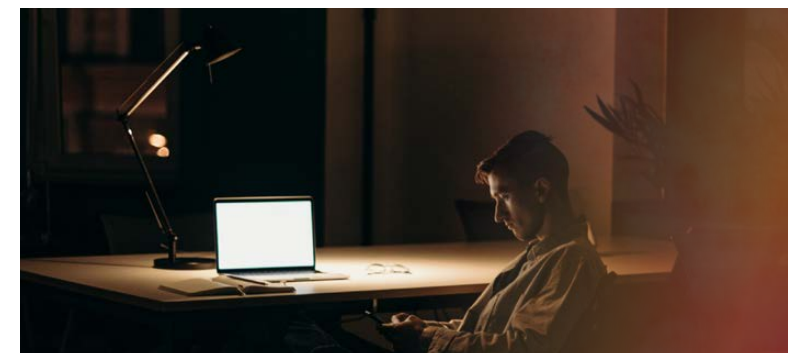
When shit happens, fiction is in the rear providing commentary only eventually, perhaps as much as a year or two later. Fiction may be more eternal, but the news is what everyone was consuming in 2020, not the latest novel or collection of stories or poems. For good reason. However, as a writer, knowing that there was absolutely nothing I could do to improve matters (aside from venting/preaching to the choir on social media or donating money to first responders) and feeling that I was relatively safe (as a cloistered health-nut/homebody Covid or no Covid) helped liberate my imagination again. Writing new fiction was also perhaps a way to calm myself, to reassert normality into my life, like it or not. An escape? Sure, why not. Writing

was a means to indirectly be or feel useful in an increasingly chaotic landscape. I was putting myself to some good use. Smaller goals and lower stakes helped.

Or, to put it another way: writing only matters to a certain degree, and mostly if essential health and stability are in place. When injustice and death reign, those take center stage—for good reason. Novels can sit unpublished; movie theaters can go bankrupt; concerts can be canceled; art museums can become repositories only; plays can go dark; libraries can be shuttered. And yet we still live and breathe. As the cliché goes, well-being comes first, and it comes first because without it, there is no literature; there is no ground. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs wins out.

And yet the paradox of the creative mind is that even within a tragic scenario, where little to nothing of consequence can be done, on some level creation is also the only thing that matters. Covid-19 turned most of my family and friends into pixelated Zoom squares or disembodied voices traveling through an electronic gadget.

Why should I also permit Covid-19 to suck away my imagination and creativity as well?



Wars and disease eventually pass; ideas and stories are eternal. Eventually.

We love to write for one reason or another. Starting anew with the premise that writing is for me alone, at least at first, felt like a way to keep my feet planted on the ground. Lower stakes, smaller goals. For now. This essay is not prescriptive in the least—this is just my personal take on how Covid and writing intertwined.

It would be perfectly understandable for any writer to cease writing in 2020. And yet, these words buzzing in my head persist nonetheless, stumbling and blind. ■



Nathan Leslie's ten books of fiction include *Three Men*, *Root and Shoot*, *Sibs and Drivers*, among others. He is also the author of *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*, a novel, and the poetry collection *Night Sweat*.

nathanleslie.net

Finding Community

E.A. Aymar

At first, it was necessary. In March, when the might of this pandemic was realized, there was a unique sensation that emerged from the uncertainty and panic – a sense of shared community.

We were scared and sad as COVID-19 crept into our cities, as we began to realize that, if we weren't infected, we'd know someone who would be. We'd know someone who would die. The comfort of distance, of watching terrible things from afar, was gone.



It was my friend Alex Segura, a crime fiction writer based in Queens, who first had the idea of a Virtual Noir at the Bar. New York City, of course, was one of the areas in the country hit hardest, but in Alex's typical selflessness and inventiveness, he had the idea to do a virtual reading in support of a local bookstore. I was one of hundreds who attended that reading, watching writers read short stories or excerpts from novels on my computer, chatting with other participants in the lively scrolling comments section.

And I realized, as I felt a necessary, urgent warmth of friendship, that this was the sort of thing that needed to happen elsewhere. Everywhere.

I told Alex that I wanted to steal his idea and, a few weeks later, launched D.C.'s first Virtual Noir at the Bar. I'd held these events for years in-person, at D.C.'s

wonderful Wonderland Ballroom, but this was the first time it would be done virtually. To separate it from Alex's idea, I asked my friend, local jazz sensation Sara Jones, if she would provide a couple of musical excerpts. I had no idea if any of this would work, mind you. The in-person events worked well, in large part because of the energy and audience, and the same is often true with musical performances. I didn't know if that would hold true over a computer.

Happily, the energy and the excitement were there. The readings were memorable, and Sara was as magnetic and powerful as always. The audience (in the hundreds which, as any writer will glumly tell you, is unusual for a reading) was enthusiastic and supportive. I quickly set up more readings and, over the course of two months, held seven in support of different DC/MD/VA bookstores. For a fun touch, I asked local celebrity mixologist Chantal Tseng to participate.

She crafted a custom cocktail based on one of the books for each event, and provided a mixing demonstration at the beginning. The attendance remained in the hundreds, and the series received attention—promotions from the Washington Post Book World, articles in DCist and Mystery Scene Magazine, mentions on WAMU and the popular Chatter on Books podcast. But I worried about burnout, both from myself and the audience, and switched the series from weekly to monthly. This timing was strategic; it coincided with Virginia’s decision to end the lockdown and turn to a phased opening. And the country was showing signs of restlessness. People were rebelling against masks and



guidelines. I wondered if businesses would reopen and concerns about the virus would be mitigated. And, consequently, if the need for these virtual events would be lost.

As always seems to happen in America, the decision to reopen was fiercely split, and accompanied by protests that brought people out of their homes. And further removed that initial shared sense of community.

Throughout it all, my virtual reading series has remained, and still enjoys enthusiastic support and engagement, but I’ve quietly noticed that the warmth has lessened. I think I know why that is.

This series was started in response to loss—the loss of community, the loss of interaction.

We needed each other and, despite the terror of those first months, that need was lovely to experience. America is so divided and, more often than not, that division borders on a hunger for violence, and is typically created by an act of violence. We loathe the worst characteristics of those who disagree with us, and that loathing doesn’t allow for empathy.

The dark days of the pandemic mistakenly seem behind us, and now we’re facing the dark days of civil unrest and an upcoming presidential election that is one of the most important and starkly contrasted in recent history. Against all of that, a virtual reading series seems rather small.

And the comfort that it initially provided, against the distance we felt when sheltered in our homes, against the worry we had for our families and friends and neighbors and strangers and country and this world, is a faraway notion.

But I will reiterate that, despite this backdrop, the audience has remained. Yes, we’ve all warily ventured outside of our homes, but with the understanding that each step forward is on an unclear path. Our political differences will never be fully bridged – and perhaps they shouldn’t – but we will find isolated shared moments, and I hope to God that we can forever remember the value and intimacy of these moments, that we can realize they are the basis of hope and understanding and love.

As Americans, as people, we’re in love with each other, and lovers fight and fuck and kill and care.



I’ve used the word “warmth” to describe this series of readings, and that descriptor is apt. Art wanes in importance, to individuals and societies, but it’s always necessary, an ever-glowing fire in darkness. If it gives a moment of respite to those who desperately need it, then that’s the most we can hope for. And, if you tune in to this series, or the events that 1455 is planning for the future, I hope you feel a sense of warmth. Of love.

Of the necessity of love. ■



E.A. Aymar’s next novel, *They’re Gone*, will be published this November (under his pseudonym, E.A. Barres), by Crooked Lane Books.

Learn more about the D.C. Noir at the Bar series, and upcoming events: eaymar.com/noirbar

Defining Community During Covid

Bethanne Patrick

Just before it all began, I was busier than I'd been in a while. I was making firm progress on my memoir manuscript. I had regular deadlines for several publications, a new critique client, and duties for boards of literary organizations.

Twice a week I took yoga classes, four times a week I walked our dog for an hour. My husband was content at work and we'd found a path as empty nesters, one daughter finishing college, another daughter living and working in another state. After a lifetime of depression (more on that in my memoir, coming 2022 from Counterpoint Press),

I had balance between writing, health, and family. In the days before isolation began, I attended my last in-person board committee meeting and my last in-person literary event. That evening, March 10th, my husband I decided that we could not welcome my college friends at our home for a mini-reunion; in any case, the

museum we planned to visit together shut its doors the next day. We hunkered down with a good supply of groceries and paper goods. Who knew when, or if, things would ever be "normal" again?

The college friends, who had chosen to meet in person that week anyway, soon organized

a bimonthly Zoom call and a rota of letters sent to a deceased friend's widower, struck down by the virus while his children were unable to visit or even leave their apartment. I wrote my card and was thrilled when this man recovered, but I found myself unable or unwilling to join the group chats.

Everyone was talking about "community" and easing our enforced solitude with online events—but I found myself craving more solitude, not less.

Easy for me to say, living with a husband to whom I'm long married, a small friendly dog, and in a neighborhood where we can walk safely and wave to people from a safe distance. We have been able to stay safe and distanced without too much fuss or stress. I know that isn't true for the majority of Americans. We are privileged, and my privilege shows in my increased introversion during this time.

However, I think my increased introversion has also helped me learn more about myself and about how I define community, not just during a pandemic, but for whatever comes afterwards.



And that has a great deal to do with a friend who decided to open up to me because of the pandemic.

Liza (not her real name) has always been a good friend, but for a couple of decades we lost touch, connecting only through holiday cards and the occasional quick email. She occasionally alluded to hospital stays but never elaborated on them; I assumed, I think, that she was having fertility issues.

As I learned, those hospital stays were not for anything related to reproduction. She has bipolar disorder and severe anxiety. While she receives treatment and is on medication for both, severe stress can cause episodes during which she needs in-patient care. No one knows about her condition except her husband—and, now, me.

Alone in the time of COVID-19, my friend Liza realized that not only did she need support to make it through, but that I might need support, too.

“You’re so open in talking about your mental illness,” she said.

“I know that I can’t be, that I don’t want to be, but maybe we can help each other.”

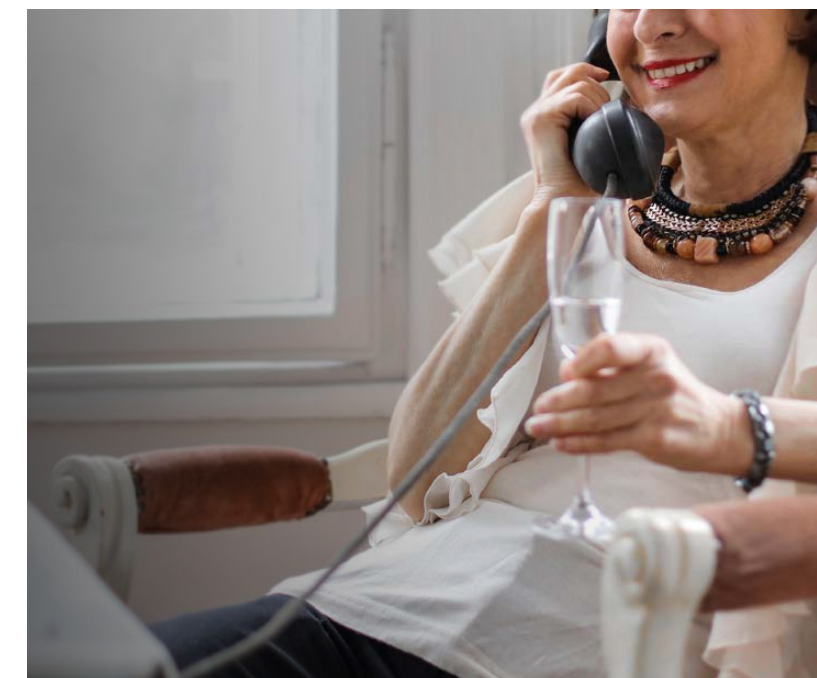
Liza suggested we try to talk by phone each week, however briefly, to catch up on the time we’d lost and also to share how the stress of current events was affecting our brains and emotions.

Each week, now, I look forward to spending 15 or 30 or 45 minutes on our old-fashioned landline with Liza.

We rarely talk about our conditions. We talk about our aging husbands and their cranky ways, laughing hard because we know that they could also talk about their aging wives and our cranky ways.

We talk about the vacations we’re longing to take once the world opens up a bit, the craft projects we are completing (hers) and not completing (mine).

As I write this, I’m on vacation with my family. Tonight, just because I’m a bit more relaxed than usual, I might make it on to the bimonthly college-friends call. But even if I don’t, I know that sometime this week I’ll talk with Liza. Sometimes community can be defined as a lifeline between just two people. ■



Bethanne Patrick is a writer, author, and critic whose column about hot reads appears monthly in *The Washington Post*.

bethannepatrick.com

Creativity in the Time of Covid

Gwydion Suilebhan

About five or six weeks into the pandemic, I started to hear from old friends I hadn't connected with in a long while: people I'd known for three or four decades and dearly loved, but hadn't stayed in touch with.



Living in isolation and anxiety made the sound of familiar voices, old voices, deeply reassuring. We're all in our 50s, so we griped about our health, complained about politics, bragged about our children, and reminisced with abandon. Our conversations were a balm for my disease-fearing soul.

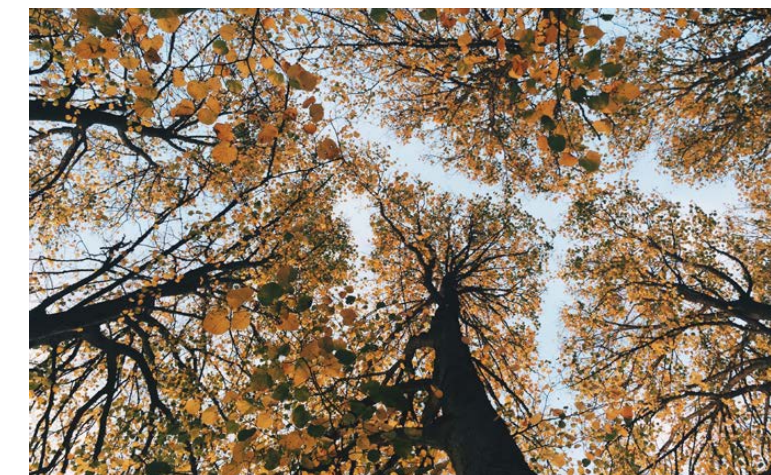
Among the old friends who reached out to me was Steve, who I met in Mrs. Tompakov's class in first grade and haven't really let go of since. Steve and I were in school together through tenth grade; a few years later, we both went to Johns Hopkins to do graduate work: while I got my master's in poetry, Steve got PhDs in both philosophy AND physics. (He's a genius.) Back in 2008, he did my wife and I the honor of officiating our wedding ceremony, but parenthood and professional obligations have meant that we've only spent time together two or three times since then.

In very early May, Steve asked me a favor. He wanted me to share my thoughts about the outline for what he hoped might become his next book. (He's published several.) He'd never asked me to do that before—mostly, I assume, because I don't have more than an educated layperson's understanding of either philosophy or physics—so I was intrigued, but also cautious. I wanted to have something meaningful to offer my dear old friend.

At first, I found myself making precious few notes on what he'd written... but it didn't take me long to realize that I did actually have a thought or two to share. More importantly, I understood why he'd asked me to weigh in: the subject of the book (I'm going to stay mum on that for the moment) was deeply familiar to both of us. We'd been talking about it, in various ways, for the entire 45 years of our friendship. I couldn't want to talk to him more.

By the end of what turned out to be an exhilarating hour-long conversation a few days later, I felt certain he was onto something.

I thought this might be his most successful book, and I told him so. He thanked me for indulging him, and offered the obligatory That's what friends are for, and then





just before we hung up, I added one last sentiment: That conversation was so much fun, it makes me think we need to find a way to collaborate on something. We agreed to stay in better touch than we'd managed to do pre-pandemic, then hung up.

Fast forward a few days, and I get another note from Steve: this time, it's an invitation... to collaborate on the very book we'd just discussed. My honest first response was to decline, while offering different projects we might work on together. The idea for the book had been his, and although we had a shared love of the subject matter (still mum, sorry), he knew it much better than I did, having devoted years to its study as an academic.

What did I really have to offer?

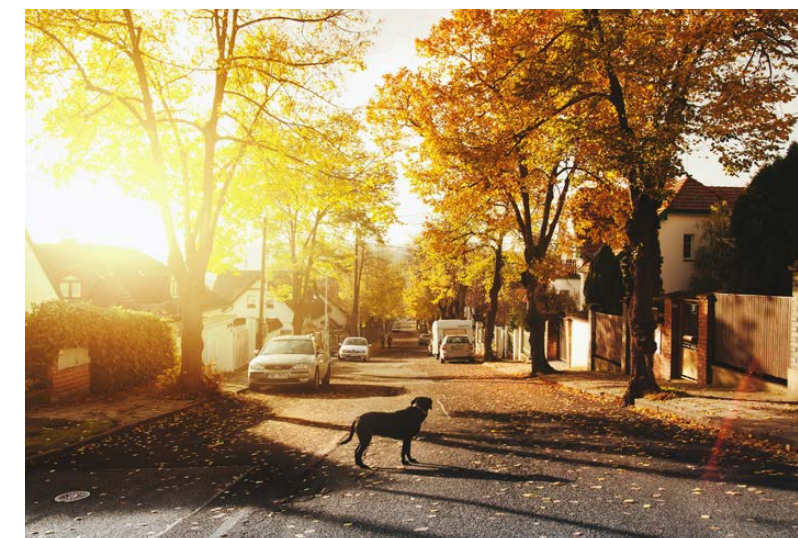
It took him another phone call to convince me, and I'm so glad he did. We started out slowly at first, refining the book's outline together, meeting once a week to tweak and talk and tweak some more, until we'd drafted a full proposal. We met with his agent to talk about it—she loved it, but (as agents do) she asked us for more—and we've spent the last three months hard at work writing. As of this moment, we've got an introduction, a first chapter, and a great deal more. I don't want to jinx anything, but we're both feeling very good about our prospects.

What I've also been feeling better about than I have any right to is life during this pandemic. Meeting with Steve once a week—we talk on the phone every Saturday morning, then I hit the farmer's market while he takes a good long walk—gives the wobbly time we're all living in some regularity.

Whatever else happens, I can count on my phone call with Steve. Between those meetings, furthermore, while I'm sitting at my desk working, I feel like I'm working with Steve by my side.

His presence in my mind, as my collaborator, staves off a bit of the isolation and loneliness. We expect each other to keep showing up for the work, and we both do. The shared task lightens the psychological burden of working in isolation.

Perhaps most importantly, having a project—a big, ambitious, long-term project—has given me something to look forward to in this dark time. Hope and aspiration and effort are excellent tonics, I can assure, for life in a crumbling democracy. ■



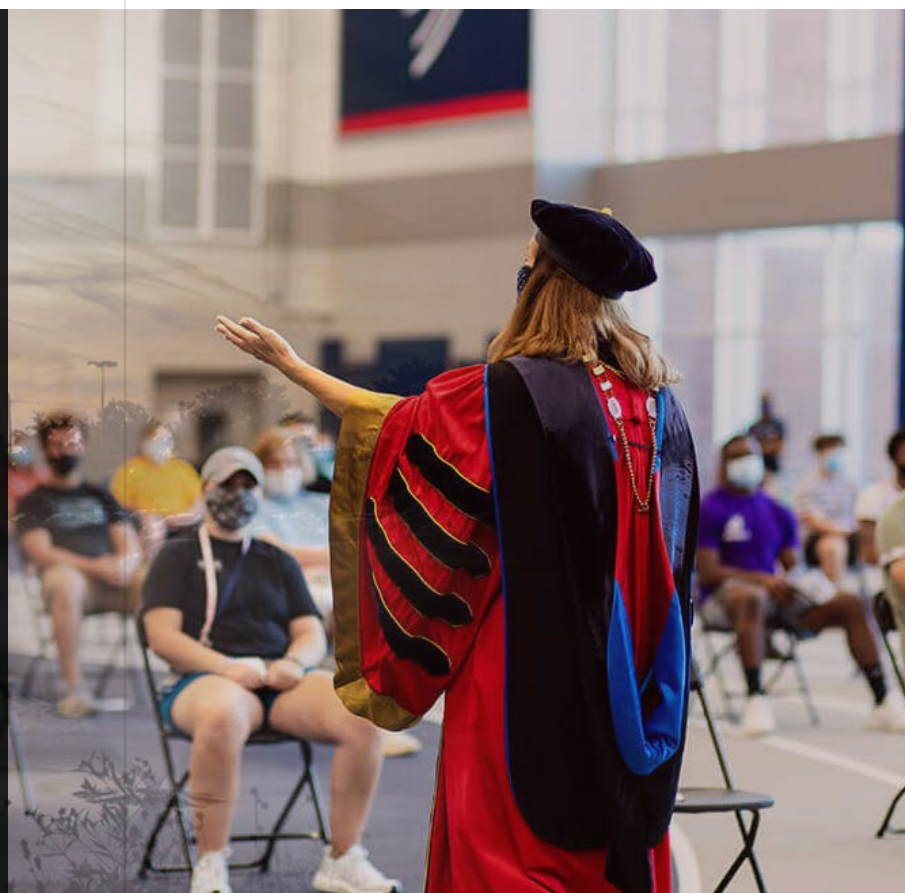
Gwydion Suilebhan is a writer, innovator, and arts advocate who serves as both the Executive Director of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation and the chief architect and evangelist of the New Play Exchange for the National New Play Network.

suilebhan.com

Higher Learning in the Time of Covid

Jeff W. Coker

Return. Renewal. August means the vibrancy and energy of a new year beginning.



Move-ins, classes added and dropped, the swirl of mascot and marching band, fraternity and sorority rush season, sports teams and colors--these are our seasonal transitions in academe, as much as changing temperatures or fall foliage.

This semester, plainly put, is different.

Colleges and universities across the country indeed have welcomed students back in the past weeks, with more than

10 million undergraduates arriving on their campuses. And yet, that sense of renewal, for those of us working within, seems somehow stunted. To begin, spring lacked closure, as most schools moved abruptly to remote teaching in March, and then watched as the semester tailed off into an ether of online discussion boards, hastily-recorded lectures, and virtual ceremonies. Summer, too, offered little respite. We contemplated shifting opening dates, "delivery models," and the

prospects of students sheltering in place in dorm rooms, while also watching a nation buckle under the burdens of an unknown virus and the realities of racial division.

Instead of renewal, this is a season of trepidation. We watch statistics. We talk of positivity rates. Contact tracing. We wonder if students will "do their part?" Each week, more stories appear of universities moving online and sending their students home.

So far, at my university, we are here.

Classes are in session with students in seats. Professors are stretched thin, offering classes in multiple formats so that students who cannot be with us may continue to learn. All are wearing masks. Outdoor spaces have become scheduled classrooms.

The historian in me is aware that we have been here before.

A century ago, thousands of schools closed mid-semester and stayed that way for months due to influenza. Other times, too: Polio outbreaks periodically shuttered schools in areas for weeks at a time. I even think of schools in rural America that, in times past, closed schools for the harvesting of crops. I have glossed over these details before, never stopping to think about their impacts. To students. To teachers.

Why bother? A handful of universities made the decision to close doors and move all instruction online even before the semester began. Others opened, planning for the worst and hoping for the best. We have known from the outset that Covid-19 will not concern itself with the amount of time put into thinking about distancing protocols, daily symptom checks, cleanliness campaigns and student pledges. All of the



hours that faculty have spent in the past months preparing courses for multiple contingencies won't flatten a curve.

And yet, so far, at my university, we are here.

I reflect on my first year of college. As a “first-generation” kid from a small town, my campus experience truly was transformational. (When colleges proclaim in their brochures that the experience can “change lives,” I know it to be true!) For years now, too, as a professor and administrator, I've seen this happen countless times. So often our students leave us as such different people than when they arrive.

Online education does have its place. A positive outcome of the pandemic likely will be that faculty will find ways to incorporate new teaching strategies, and new technologies, into their craft. I've seen this happening. Through necessity, professors are inventing. Many are finding out how to best distill the essentials of their courses and to think strategically about how to get material to students when all else might go awry. Some of this surely can occur remotely. Some of it, perhaps, even more effective than in a traditional classroom.

But what the pandemic is showing us, too, is what we already knew: that while we can move some elements of learning to an online format, the transformational village that is higher education requires, and likely always will require, just that—an actual village.

Why bother? During our first week, I meet a new student. Fully masked and appropriately distanced, she explains that she's a first-year and wholly undecided in terms of her major, with excitement and anticipation gleaming from the eyes above that mask. Her transformational journey starts now.

So far, at my university, we are here. ■



Jeff W. Coker is Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Professor of History at Shenandoah University, in Winchester, Virginia.

su.edu



Recreating a Community Space

Leigh Tivol

On the afternoon of March 13, we locked the door to The Potter's House and hung a sign explaining that we were closed until further notice due to the pandemic.

For the next two months, our nonprofit bookstore/café/event space in Washington's Adams Morgan neighborhood stood empty and silent: chairs resting upside down atop the scarred wooden tables, lights dimmed. For a neighborhood institution whose 60-year history is grounded in human connection, community-building, and radical hospitality, the hiatus was unsettling. Our work here goes far beyond selling books and coffee; it's about being a place of welcome and safety, where people cross paths who might

otherwise never have met. How were we going to do all that with our doors closed?

We let our values be our North Star as we navigated this unfamiliar path. We stayed in contact with our community through our newsletters and social media, and had Andy Shallal of Busboys & Poets paint our front window with a positive message as part of his #PaintTheStorefronts initiative. As the lockdown continued and it became clear



that we wouldn't be reopening anytime soon, we decided to use up the food in our kitchen so that it wouldn't go to waste. Over the course of the next few weeks, we prepared and gave away more than a thousand portions of free food, setting it out on tables on the patio for neighbors to take as they wished; often, it was gone in a matter of minutes.

And we spent many hours, days, and weeks planning for how we might

reopen safely. On May 20, we reopened for business, with all online orders, doorway pick-up, and reduced hours. The community response was immediate and supportive.

Five days later, George Floyd was murdered at the hands of the Minneapolis police force, and the nation—and our city—rose up in collective rage and grief.



These were deeply painful days for us at The Potter's House: under normal circumstances, we would have been throwing open our doors, hosting and convening meetings and protests, delivering meals to protestors, and much more. But in the midst of a pandemic, and with staff stretched to the limit just to keep regular operations going, our ability to play the active role we normally would was severely constrained. But we did as much as we were able to. We included information cards with every order with details on ways that our customers could support the Movement for Black Lives. We offered free food, drinks, and safe space to any protestors who needed it. We partnered with Freedom Fighters DC to

host wildly successful donation collection events for protestors and mutual aid groups around the city, and gave Freedom Fighters full use of our community room for long-term storage and organization of all the donated items. As other establishments across the city boarded up their windows out of fear of riots, we kept ours intentionally open, and a talented, generous neighbor gifted us and the community with a Black Lives Matter art installation in the windows.

Through it all, we kept going, and so did the city.

By July, after a significant retooling of our space, we began welcoming customers back into the shop for book browsing. Before the pandemic, we were a cafe that sold books; now, we've become a bookstore that offers takeaway food and coffee. We're not holding in-person events, we're not offering inside seating; the place looks and feels very different.

And yet the sense of community remains. We see it in the customers who are downright giddy about the opportunity to come inside an actual bookstore and hold books in their hands -- "it's okay to browse?" we are asked with incredulous gratitude. We see it in the dozens of

homeless neighbors who come in each day for free meals through our crowdfunded "Pay It Forward" program; not surprisingly, demand has more than tripled just in the past month. In the parent who told us how much it mattered to her family when her toddler ran right up to a picture book whose cover featured a little boy who looked just like him. In the humbling outpouring of community support when we created a Workers' Fund to help our front-line employees. In the unbelievable turnout we had for Independent Bookstore Day in August. And in the partnerships we've developed with groups like 1455 and others, through which we amplify each other's work and together reach new audiences with art, action, and connection.

There's much more to do, though, and we're in this for the long haul.

We're cooking up a whole slew of new ideas to help bring our community together safely, combat loneliness, mobilize in service to social justice, and bring the joy of books and reading to those who sorely need it. If you have ideas or would like to help, we'd love to hear from you.



And we hope that in these weeks and months to come, you and your own local bookstores will find comfort, respite, and community together. Our customers are part of our community, just as much as we are part of yours. Let's get through these dark days—together.



Leigh Tivol is the Executive Director of The Potter's House, a nonprofit social enterprise in the heart of Washington, DC's Adams Morgan neighborhood.

pottershousedc.org



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