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A Time Enduring

REJOICE! writers share a second set of reflections
about life in the shadow of COVID-19

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REJOICE!

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A Time Enduring

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A Time Enduring

I have received many words of appreciation for our first COVID-19 publication, *A Time Such As This*, and selected reflections have been used in devotionals, sermons, newsletters, and letters of encouragement throughout the U.S. and Canada. Thank you to our volunteer writers for making the publication possible, and thank you to those of you who shared it with others.

Since publishing *A Time Such As This*, our households and societies have been transitioning into a new phase of this trauma. Now less shell-shocked, we're more aware of the need to nurture ourselves and one another with real sustenance for what we now realize will be a long and grueling process.

For this reason, we've published *A Time Enduring*. The reflections you'll read here—again contributed by volunteer writers—describe creative ways of seeking and finding purpose within the confines of social distancing. They express a broad range of emotions—from appreciation for the space created by virus containment measures to anger and fear over lost jobs and shattered dreams.

We have a long way to go in figuring out what COVID-19 implies for our lives, but I believe that each phase of it is worth documenting as it reveals truth about ourselves and our world. *A Time Enduring* represents the uneasy peace we're seeking with this new neighbor, COVID-19. While we hope the virus moves out soon, we're recognizing the need to go on living in the meantime.

What are you learning as COVID-19 settles in next door? Do you feel like Jesus moved out as the virus moved in? Editing the reflections in this book helped me to sense that Jesus remains firmly by my side as the world around me changes. I trust that these meditations will help you, too, by reminding you that God never moves out of our lives. God is with us for good.

—Leslie Hawthorne Klingler

REJOICE! Editor

Editor's Note:

The following second set of meditations on life in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, offered in the order that they were received, were written by REJOICE! writers during the last two weeks of April 2020. I am grateful to each one of them and to MennoMedia for distributing this special publication.

—Leslie Hawthorne Klingler
May 18, 2020

Face-Mask Tangle

My wife, Audrey, and I reside in independent living at Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community, Harrisonburg, Virginia. This 40-acre campus adjacent to Eastern Mennonite University is home to some 750 seniors. We appreciate the care and concern shown to us these days by the administration. We're well cared for.

On March 12, we received the first of many official bulletins, each moving us closer to total lockdown and isolating in our apartments. It wasn't long until a smattering of masked staff and residents appeared. As things progressed, we witnessed many more masks, and now all of us don our face coverings before stepping outside our dwelling. Masks are unhandy—especially for those of us with hearing aids and glasses. Think of adding yet a third strand, one of which is elastic, behind each ear. Disentangling those elastic bands from all else behind my ears gets really tricky when it's time to remove the mask!

I recently provided the morning devotional on closed circuit for our community. I used Psalm 46 with its refrain, "The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge." And tucked away in verse 10, that lovely, haunting strain, "Be still and know that I am God." (By the way, part of that 12-minute devotional included sharing two inspiring pieces from *A Time Such as This*.)

We occasionally turn to the other to ask, "When will this all end?" We join in admitting that we don't know. We do know "the Lord of hosts is with us," masks and all.



Ken Seitz equipped for an outing. Ken is a retired pastor, educator, and service worker.



Ken and his wife, Audrey

—Ken Seitz
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Bloated

After weeks of reading about and listening to comments from those in the “know” (and those who don’t know!), I feel bloated with COVID-19 overload. It’s like I was hungry, so I ate six hotdogs.

When cattle become bloated from gorging on fresh clover, they quit grazing and are reluctant to move. They appear distressed; their eyes bulge; they breathe rapidly, tongue protruding; and they stagger. Symptoms that sound familiar? Yep, COVID-19 overload!



It’s initially appetizing to gather information on COVID-19. We’ve never experienced anything like this on such a local or global scale. So we eat it up! It is a part of every conversation, be it on the phone, by text, in emails, in Zoom meetings, over neighborhood fences, in grocery store lines, on the news 24/7, in late-night comedy and talk shows, in sermons—even this sketch! And on and on it goes.

“Symptoms sound familiar?
Yep, it’s COVID-19 overload!”

I think the bloated feeling comes not only from the quantity and quality of information I’m consuming but also from the anxious questions it raises. How long is this thing going to last? What does the future hold for my children and grandchildren? Will I have a job? Will the money run out? What about my doctor’s appointments? Am I going to go hungry? Will I go out of business? And, what about the house payment? Questions swim in our minds, almost drowning us at times, leaving us gasping for air.

I remember a time in the late ‘90s when I was on a rural bus in the impoverished mountains of Guatemala. I was sitting in

the back, and the repurposed school bus was jam-packed; it was the lone form of transportation for 90% of the villagers in that region. I met a man in the seat beside me, humbly clothed, with a machete and threadbare daypack on his lap. We struck up a conversation, the usual niceties.

My companion surprised me by saying he was the mayor of a local village. I asked him about life in his village: jobs, health, youth, etc. He proceeded to tell me about the cascade of challenges they were facing: deforestation, drought, poor medical service, drugs, weak markets, hunger, violence, and poor education. I thought, “This is depressing. This sounds terrible. It sounds hopeless.” So, when he paused, I asked him, “Is there any hope?”

The rural mayor was quiet; my query seemed to have stunned him. He looked at me for a few seconds, as if he could not believe I’d ask such a question. When he finally spoke, he said, “If there is no hope, there is no God.”

Touché!



Bob Buxman coordinates
Northwest church relations for
Mennonite Central Committee.

—Bob Buxman
Portland, Oregon

Masala Chai in the Garden

As the curtain rises on the pageant of creation, there is an intimate scene where a gentle breeze plays across a garden evening. Unseen, but distinct to the ear, is the rustle of divine passing. We are left to infer that the Creator has come to socialize with Adam and Eve. It is surely one of the most extraordinary pictures of human encounter with heaven.

There is a faint reprise of this very scene in the life of Jesus, who sandals through the tableaux of human life, seeking encounter with us.

The sweetness of that scene is underscored by our current experience of social isolation. In the warmer latitudes, where life plays out on verandahs, gazebos, and porches, or outside in the shade of friendly trees, this bent toward sociability or encounter reigns. The resulting culture of repartee: of jest, of tongue-in-cheek jive, the witty exchange of family and neighbor news, the offer of knowing but veiled admiration, the play of intimate nicknames, the restrained glee over some shared indignity, and sometimes what feels like prayer itself; these taken together constitute a collective masterwork of art. They become a measure of a community's health, its verve, its solidarity and resilience. The scene in Eden lays this down as a benchmark for the good life.

By sheer chance—or, rather, providence—Mary Kay and I had early fallen into the habit of late afternoon tea, a ritual from childhood in India. As it happens, served about the time an evening breeze begins to play upon the scene. This lifelong observance has found expression here in Durham, too, where under the strictures of city ordinance, we set the tea tray on our front porch, where four rocking chairs face a small garden and quiet street. A socially-distanced stool or two are deployed midst the daffodils



Tea-time on the porch of Jonathan Larson and his wife, Mary Kay, in Durham, North Carolina

and hydrangea for surprise guests.
And then, the masala chai is
poured. Unabashedly sweetened.

We are rarely a twosome.
Often, five or six—lately as many
as ten, pushing our city ordinances
to limit. All allowing the required
space. All joined in battle to stand
off the pernicious effect of alone-
ness with humor, can-you-top-this tales, and sometimes lament.

Beyond the company of family and passersby, beyond the
refreshment of epic beverage, what we crave most deeply is the
rustling of a certain passing—the hint that, however eerie the
silence of the garden now, we have not been abandoned to our
fate. That heaven itself approaches to join us in sacred repartee.

—Jonathan P Larson
Durham, North Carolina



Jonathan and Mary Kay carry on
tradition learned in India.

Nothing Can Separate Us

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Roman 8:38-39



On April 19, 2020, there was a mass shooting, with 22 victims felled over 100 kilometers. The violence spread out from picturesque Portapique, Nova Scotia, Canada.

The whole nation was shaken. What would memorials look like? How would this tragedy be marked?

We can't give hugs or show normal support during a global pandemic. Yet, a whole province and country have rallied. Passersby erected spontaneous flower memorials and notes near the 16 separate crime scenes. Children placed bright, home-crafted paper hearts in windows. People lit candles on porches, in Facebook live streams, and on Twitter social media feeds. Nova Scotians have displayed blue and green tartan ties and scarves on trees and balconies. People across the nation tuned in to a Friday night Virtual Vigil, "Nova Scotia Remembers" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4iLLafPw-c>). The vigil included tributes, poems, music, bagpipes, prayers from local religious leaders, and messages from the prime minister and local and provincial politicians. A particularly moving tribute was East Coast musician Natalie MacMaster playing fiddle alongside a video of another fiddler, 17-year-old victim Emily Tuck (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywQoD8xtanw>).

Romans 8 gives me solace and strength in the face of the unimaginable. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Community resilience is creating ways for us to come together

in tragedy and speak words of comfort and strength despite the restrictions.

In my own St. Jacobs Mennonite Church congregation, three beloved seniors have died in the past two weeks. Death at this time is complicated. There can be no public funeral services, gravesides are limited to nine physically-distanced family members, and celebrations of life are pushed to a later date. But we have not been separated from God. We have found ways to offer meaningful rituals, show community support, honor lives, and worship.

Families are finding different ways to grieve, from an expanded graveside committal service, to a private family sharing and worship time over Zoom, to a full public Zoom funeral ending with the cloud of witnesses as two hundred screens showed their caring faces. Each of these expressions of love has been profound and meaningful. Truly, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Of that, I am convinced!



Mark Diller-Harder is on the pastoral team of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, Ontario

—Mark Diller Harder
Kitchener, Ontario

By the Waters of Washington

(Parody on Psalm 137)

By the waters of Washington,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered life before
Covid 19.

On the evergreens there,
we gave up our hugs
and handshakes,
embracing instead
the six-foot decree.

We want to sing songs,
melodies
of lament and longing,
of sadness and
supplication.

But how can we sing
In this strange land
where gatherings,
even ones with music
can be deadly?

If I forget to wash my hands
for twenty seconds,
or do not remember the rule
about never touching my face,

Do I deserve to come down
with a fever that
causes my tongue
to stick to the roof of my mouth?
Remember when we had
righteous anger towards
the builders of the Wall?
When we shouted:
Tear it down,
tear it down to the ground?
Now we have more fear than ire,
toward unseen captors.
Ignorant of their workings,
we feebly frame walls
of distance, cloth, and mesh.
O, coronaviruses!
If only your little crowns
were bigger,
we would be happy to see
them dashed to pieces
against the rocks!

—Janet Toews Berg
Seattle, Washington



Janet Toews Berg and her husband have both been retired from medical practice for several years. She wrote this poem after her singing group, the Seattle Bach Choir, cancelled its winter concert—which would have featured a number of settings of Psalm 137. The words of the psalm stayed with her.

A Different Holy Week

Maundy Thursday services have been some of the most impactful worship experiences for me. I knew from an early age that what I experienced during those evenings was different.

At my home church, Hope Mennonite (Wichita), we often begin our Maundy Thursday service with some sort of meal—either elements of a traditional Seder meal or sandwiches and fruit. In the service, Jesus’ last days are told or reenacted, including the events of the Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, and Good Friday. We depart the church in silence and often darkness, remembering Jesus in the tomb.

“How different was this past Maundy
Thursday! We didn’t gather to
see, smell, taste, or touch the story.
Many of us felt we were already
in the darkness.”

During those Maundy Thursday services, Jesus’ passion becomes real to me as I taste and touch, pray and sing—bearing witness to the salvation story.

How different was this past Maundy Thursday! We didn’t gather to see, smell, taste, or touch the story. Many of us felt we were already in the darkness. The virus has cast over us the darkness of fear and anxiety of the unknown. Parents with children at home sense the darkness of failure as they assume responsibility for their children’s education, balance work and family needs, or simply struggle to put food on the table. We face the darkness of a mounting death count and concern for those sick, those alone, and those fighting the virus without proper equipment.

This year, it wasn’t as hard to imagine the despair of the disciples who lost their hope on Good Friday. How many have lost their hope during this pandemic?

But we know that Easter has come. Jesus, who “arose a Victor from the dark domain” (“Low in the grave he lay, Jesus, my Savior,” Robert Lowry) will defeat our present darkness. He will be the light shining in the darkness of our despair, uncertainty, loneliness, and pain.

May we join together this Sunday in proclaiming Christ the Lord as victor as we tell our friends and neighbors, communities and world: “I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear. I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear” (“The Servant Song,” Richard Gillard). May it be so, for we are an Easter people.

—Jennie Wintermote
North Newton, Kansas

“This Willow Tree angel stands on my great-grandmother Agatha’s organ, reminding me to hold the Christ-light for those in the nighttime of fear. As Great-Grandma played hymns on this organ one hundred years ago, my daughter and I sing praises to God as I play it today.”



Pandemic Limbo

As the pandemic lingers on, I've had the growing sense of being suspended in an indeterminate state. My adult life has been determined first by the needs of my growing family; then, as the children became independent, my time was carefully slotted in on my calendar. Until my husbands' deaths, my activities were balanced with time for them. Both of those dear men urged me to include moments to just be rather than always do. That was difficult for me—a person who enjoyed so many possibilities!



“Lake Huron Blues”

With the appearance of COVID-19 and the request to stay at home and maintain social distance, everything came to a screeching halt.

“For this “huggy” person,
social distancing creates a large void!”

At first, the new order of life felt like a welcome breather; in the past year, I'd been feeling mounting apprehension that I may be pushing the limits of my strength and energy. I've kept busy during the pandemic by writing, calling others who are isolated, and finding ways to stay in touch with my families. I've been involved in a few of the services our church records for distribution to our members. But living alone, without human touch, still leaves an empty feeling. For this “huggy” person, social distancing creates a large void!

I've often heard the saying, “Use it or lose it.” Most often, the speaker refers to exercise—but having passed the 80 mark on my last birthday, I wonder if I will have lost the ability to help with my community's many needs when we are at liberty once more. I may have to adapt to a new reality.

—Ruth Smith Meyer
Alisa Craig, Ontario

Peace Be Still

The wind was gently blowing,
The sails were billowing full
My ship sailed smoothly on
Toward the distant goal.
Then came a sudden change
Uneasy thoughts of gale.
Will waves grow vast
The storm 'gainst us prevail?
But the wind, in isolation,
Had left its vital role,
The sails? They hang inactive.
There is no protocol.
The storm seems all around me
Many have felt the toll,
My usual plan of action
Finds no functional role.
A dire sense of disquiet,
In a hurting universe,
It's time to let a higher power
My uneasiness disperse.
"Rest in me my child dear,
My peace to you I send
Though you don't understand,
I know beginning to the end."
And as that night so long ago,
When his "Peace be still" was heard
My heart finds calm and comfort,
By his love I'm reassured.

—*Ruth Smith Meyer*



We Share the Community

A week ago, I drove to a small town not far from Calgary to visit a pastor. I've long admired his humility and devotion to the people in his congregation, but in all the years I've known him I've never really heard him talk about his congregation; he talks instead about the individuals in it and the community in which they live. Each one of them matters to him.

Under the shadow of COVID-19, we sat for a while, safely distanced. He talked about a faith group that makes up a significant part of his local community. They dress more conservatively and keep themselves somewhat separated. A community inside a community.

“He wants to be able to greet them by name when he meets them.”

He told me he's trying to meet the families that belong to that group. It's nothing formal, but he's making an effort to learn who they are. He wants to be able to greet them by name

when he meets them in town at restaurants, funerals, auctions, and all those other places where people in small communities run into each other.

It would be easier for him to ignore them because that's how things have been. He has decided to change that. Curious, I asked if he was recruiting them for his church.

“No,” he said. “We share a community, and we can all be good neighbors. That's all.”

We see and hear about barriers coming up because of COVID-19. But this nasty little virus is also birthing in many an interest in getting to know the people around us. We need them. They need us. We share the community.



Abe Janzen, with granddaughter, Sierra, in Calgary, Alberta

—Abe Janzen
Calgary, Alberta

A Case of the Shoulds

From deep under the covers, I hear the kids crunching away. I haven't peeled my eyes open to look at the clock, but I know it's not yet 8 a.m. Cartoons play softly.

"We'd better stop eating the party mix before it's all gone," one of them says to the other as they giggle.

I should get up and make my family breakfast. I should change out of the yoga pants I've slept in. I should swap my glasses for contacts and straighten my hair. But, I'm not ready to get up.

The past few weeks have been a battle of the "shoulds." I'm experiencing the cultural pressure to be productive—to launch some creative project, lose ten pounds, and mother with color-coded charts, theme days, crafts, and made-from-scratch meals. Above all, I should be grateful.



Sherah-Leigh Gerber and her kids
Facetiming with grandparents

"I should be reveling in the excuse
not to go anywhere and a cleared schedule."

"This should be easier," I lament to my husband over coffee. "I should be reveling in the excuse not to go anywhere and a cleared schedule. I'm on sabbatical! I have nothing but time to bake, exercise, read, and homeschool the children."

But it's not easy. Losing our rhythms and routines, having social interactions confined to screens, canceling highly anticipated trips to see extended family, and managing the anxieties that come with uncertainty and scarcity are not easy things.

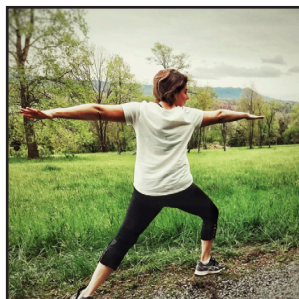
After six weeks of self-quarantine, my family is just being. We are trying to be gentle and loving, responsible and kind, creative and hopeful. And, above all, we are trying to be grateful for each other.

—Sherah-Leigh Gerber
Rockingham, Virginia

This is Tough

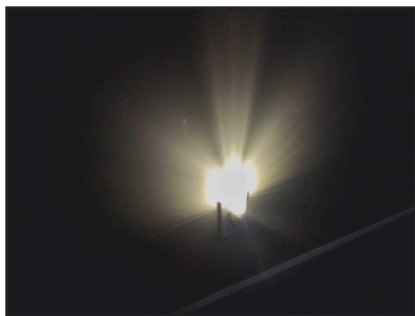
What day is it?
What's for dinner?
I need help.
I need a hug.
This is tough.
Treat yourself!
Learn a new language!
Lose 20 pounds!
Is it Wednesday?
Who is making dinner?
I think I'm going to cry...
I don't want to get out of bed...
This is tough.
Tend a sourdough starter!
Get that beach body!
Write the great American novel!
But seriously, what day is it?
What is there to eat?
I am overwhelmed and bored
I am struggling and grateful
This is tough.
But so am I.

—*Sherah-Leigh Gerber*



Sherah-Leigh, strong
(in Warrior Pose)

The Things We Say



When what is ordinary no longer is
we gather words
in hope we collect them,
stringing them like precious pearls
These days are beyond complicated
A mix of normalcy and emergency
The perpetual exhaustion of collective uncertainty
These days are disorienting
A weird upside-down time
This world-shifting time of change
These days are strange
A season of unraveling
The narrowing of horizon
But this is not the hardship olympics
What if the shutdown is really a reboot?
What if this waiting is yet a blessing?
Because eventually confusion turns to revelation
Things in the future may be different but they could still be good
The fog always lifts
When what is ordinary no longer is
we gather words
in hope we clutch them,
a nightlight in the stretch of darkness.

—*Sherah-Leigh Gerber*

Life's Journey

My husband, Dave, and I are getting our daily exercise during COVID-19 by exploring the network of cycling trails in our home city of Winnipeg. One afternoon, we rode by a colorful, intriguing public art installation. We got off our bicycles for a closer look.



“Life’s Journey” sculpture in Winnipeg

“Life’s Journey” is a grouping of mosaic sculptures illustrating the four stages of a butterfly’s life. It was created jointly by women residents at Bethania Mennonite Personal Care Home and girls from nearby elementary, middle, and high schools.

On a plaque explaining the artwork is a photograph of one of the mosaics in progress. It features the hands of the women young and old who had worked on it together. Looking at the photograph made me sad because I knew the kind of inter-generational sharing it depicted would not be possible now that seniors’ residences are closed to visitors.

The four stages in the butterfly’s life cycle displayed in the art piece are like the four living generations of my own family. Each one is at a different stage on life’s journey, and so each generation is being affected by the pandemic in unique ways. The cocoon and the butterfly in the installation reminded me of something a good friend said recently:



“This time of isolation we are experiencing is like being in a cocoon. When it is over, we will all emerge as changed people.” How will I have changed? How will our world have changed?

—MaryLou Driedger
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Grief and Gifts

I lost my job a few weeks ago; I cried when I got my layoff notice.

I've been employed at the Winnipeg Art Gallery for eight years, giving tours and leading workshops. I absolutely love my work there. It may be a long time before art galleries welcome visitors



Mary Lou giving a tour at the
Winnipeg Art Gallery

again and even longer before groups feel comfortable being together on tours. The gallery is losing so much money while it is closed, there is a good chance that there won't be funds to bring back us part-time staff members when they reopen.

"I cried when I got my layoff notice."

As part of my journey grieving my job loss, I have tried to focus on the many gifts I received at the gallery. I made friends with fascinating colleagues who shared their wisdom and life experiences with me. I gave tours to hundreds of groups of diverse ages, ethnic backgrounds, religious faiths, occupations, nationalities, and income levels. I learned much about myself, my city, and indeed the world from gallery guests as we looked at art together and talked about it. I had the opportunity to get to know artists in person and gain a storehouse of knowledge about art from different time periods, countries, and cultures.

These are things I won't lose, even though I have lost my job. I am praying that God will help me discover new ways I can share the richness of the gifts I received from the art gallery, even if I can't return there.

—MaryLou Driedger

A Balcony with a View

From our west-facing balcony on the fourth floor of our condo building, my wife and I can see the mountains on Vancouver Island. Some are still topped with snow. This cherished view has given us glorious sunsets, eagle sightings, and pleasant times of sipping tea with friends. We are grateful for our peaceful locale that has provided many moments of inspiration and joy.



Curtis and Lois Funk with their grandchildren in Vancouver, British Columbia

During this time of quarantine, our little balcony has taken on a new function.

“Oma! Opa!” Little voices ring out from the little playground below. “Here! Down here!” Our three preschool-aged grandchildren are looking up toward us, waving. They have their bicycles and are eager to show off their riding skills.

For the next few minutes, we call back and forth, doing our best to let them know that we are interested in their lives and activities. They are disappointed that they can’t come up to our place, where they are accustomed to playing with our collection of their father’s old toys and getting special treats from Oma. But for now, no hugs, no story time on a lap, no birthday celebrations, no physical contact.

These limitations can produce an aura of sadness that might permeate our lives, especially for those of us who are more at risk of contracting this unseen enemy. So, like the psalmist who lifts his eyes to the hills for consolation, we too look out from our isolated balcony to the distant mountains. It is with added warmth in our hearts that we see our dear ones playing in the park below. The view couldn’t be better!

—Curtis Funk
Vancouver, British Columbia

Haiku in a Time of Plague

Sheltering in place
Listening for God to speak
Holy quarantine

Domus ecclesia
Virtual church from my sofa
Rebooting my faith

Doctors and nurses
Exhausted and overwhelmed
Fight on and on and . . .

Seven o'clock sounding
Pots, pans, raising grateful psalms
Saluting courage

Social distancing
Two meters and a face mask
Buying essentials

No bending the curve
Stats motivating our fears
Endless reporting

Sadness upon sadness
Seniors in ICU wards
Alone at the end

Where do we find hope
Grief binds the world together
Normal not in sight

—*Curtis Funk*

A Hum of Hope

I sit in my office, where I write and work on my digital photos. In the guest bedroom next to me, my wife is busy sewing masks for family, friends, members of our congregation, local businesses, medical offices, and non-profits that serve the homeless. Her latest batch will go to Mennonite Disaster Service. Neva is close to completing 500 masks made.



Bruce's wife, Neva, sewing masks

The steady, satisfying hum of her sewing machine brings a smile to my face and warms my heart because I know Neva is not alone. That reassuring sound is being replicated far beyond our home. Hundreds—likely even thousands of others—are also making and donating masks for people in the COVID-19 crisis locally, nationally, and globally.

Hospital, medical office, and business websites posted their need for protective masks. And individuals, congregations, organizations, and communities have responded. It is a united, grassroots effort to help others regardless of their station or status in life. Serving others in this manner bonds friends, family, and strangers alike for the common good. These selfless acts of kindness inspire me, thrill me, and give me the highest hope against a universal, invisible threat to humankind.

Sewing masks is a practical and useful example of sharing God's love, grace, and mercy during a critical time in human history. In the simple act of sewing masks for others to be safe, my wife and her many mask-sewing companions around the world show me the living hope of our resurrected Christ.

—Bruce Stambaugh
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Gathering Remotely

My wife and I cherish participating in worship at Park View Mennonite on Sunday mornings. We appreciate the sermons, camaraderie, and lively and inspirational singing. Following the stay-at-home guidelines has put a halt to that meaningful interaction. I dearly miss in-person church!

We have been impressed by how diligently and tirelessly church leaders have worked to keep us informed and connected during required physical separation. We have participated remotely in worship services, a memorial service, and reflective prayer times.

As retirees, we know if we are to stay abreast of what is happening around us and beyond, we need to embrace rapidly-changing technology. We are glad the church has done so as well, that congregations around the world are gathering remotely during this COVID-19 crisis.

We need each other. If meeting via an Internet venue is how we can be together, then we will be there. No, it's not quite the same spiritual experience. I miss physically meeting together.

However, I will not lament what was before COVID-19. Instead, I look forward to the day we can all gather together again face-to-face, person to person. That will be a glorious day. Until then, I am forever grateful for the hard work that pastors, elders, and laypersons have done to ensure that we continue to connect as the body of Christ. Though we are not physically together, we are still one in community.



Bruce Stambaugh is a retired public-school educator. He and his wife, Neva, live in the Harrisonburg (Virginia) area, near their three grandchildren. They attend Park View Mennonite (MC USA) Church in Harrisonburg.

—Bruce Stambaugh

Posting Gratitude

My wife walks to the mailbox to post a note, card, or letter almost daily. Often, she sticks in an old photograph we have come across in our stay-at-home sorting sprees. As we sort through those old slides and pictures, the memories flow. Why not share them?



A sampling of the cards that Neva sends

During this time of sequestering at home, we try to communicate with friends and family any and every way we can. That includes returning to our old-fashioned methods. Neva sends so many notecards of encouragement and remembrances to folks, we've had to keep purchasing stamps!

“During this time of sequestering at home,
we try to communicate with friends and family
any and every way we can.”

We have also noticed an increased frequency in phone calls. Texts and emails sent and received have grown exponentially, too. We've learned to use Zoom for small groups, family gatherings, and even yoga classes. We use other social media venues to chat with friends and family near and far. When we celebrated our grandchild's 16th birthday that way, he seemed just as happy with our virtual gathering as if we were sharing ice cream and cake around the family dining room table!

We are social beings, and connecting with others is natural. Today, we have alternative means of being present with others. Why not reach out to others in this time of so-called isolation? Doing so blesses both the giver and the receiver. Even in these perilous times, each day is an opportunity to show and share our gratitude for life.

—Bruce Stambaugh

Ubuntu in a Parking Lot

It was slow going as we followed the line of cars crawling through the parking lot of a chicken plant, our horns sounding and hazard lights flashing. As virus outbreaks spread through poultry plants across the state, members of the community organized a car rally to show support for our local poultry workers. In lieu of convening a crowd at a traditional rally, participants caravanned through the parking lots of local meat-processing plants with signs taped in vehicle windows calling for safer practices and worker protections.



Meg Smeltzer-Miller is the finance officer at MennoMedia and Herald Press.

For me, this small gesture of solidarity stems from an underlying belief in *ubuntu*, a philosophy popularized by the theology of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. *Ubuntu* has many interpretations, but means something like, “I am, because of you” or, “My hu-

“Members of the community organized a car rally to show support for our local poultry workers.”

manity is inextricably bound up in yours.” During a global pandemic, we are brought into painful awareness that the way we relate to one another determines life and death. Of

course, this has always been true—now it is more apparent than ever. We are reminded that our survival is in the hands of our neighbor, and our neighbor’s survival is in our hands.

We need to put to death the myth of individualism and self-reliance. We must lay to rest the illusion that we can thrive independently of our sister or brother’s well-being. When one of us is sick or unsafe, we all suffer. As we watch, wait, hope, and pray for better times to come, let us remember this. And let us stand with the most vulnerable among us.

—Meg Smeltzer-Miller
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Through a Window Screen, Darkly

On a Sunday afternoon walk, my wife and I stopped at a nearby senior living center to make a “window visit” to a beloved relative on her birthday. When her adult daughter opened the window, we learned that hospice workers had just left the room, and the decision had been made to end treatment for her cancer.

Our relative was understandably shaken. We couldn’t see her clearly through the screen, but her voice was unsteady as we shared stories and memories, trying to ground each other in this new reality.

“Hospice workers had just left the room, and the decision had been made to end treatment for her cancer.”

As we began to leave, she asked if I would offer a prayer. Her son and daughter knelt by her chair and held her. From outside her window, I prayed that even in the valley of the shadow—and especially then—she would feel God’s arms around her. I prayed that her children and all those who love her would be the arms of God to her. I asked the God who raised Jesus from the dead to give her peace of mind, heart, and body.

In so many strange and unaccustomed ways do we love each other in this time. We find ourselves face-to-face not with each other but with images of one another on computer screens, through voices on telephones, and from distances just out of reach of each other’s arms. My prayer through the window screen is the one I offer to all of us: that, in the love that comes to us by every scattered means, we will find the arms of God.

—Leonard Beechy
Goshen, Indiana

Easter Memories of South Africa

This Lent and Easter season reminded me of how little control we have over our lives and world. At the same time, I also saw how every little thing we do makes a difference. As we've experienced during this global pandemic—even doing nothing can have a profound impact.



I think of a season of Lent and Easter when we lived and worked with Mennonite Central Committee in Durban, South Africa. It was 1994, during the run-up to the country's first-ever democratic elections. A violent and distressing time, many people were killed. Much as we do now, we listened to news updates each evening to find out how many people had died that day.

"We wept bitter tears and thought all was lost—that the election would not happen at all, or if it did, it would be bloody."

There were many times that year when we despaired. On Easter Sunday, several women were brutally murdered while praying at the foot of a cross. Just days earlier, those women—carrying that very cross, made of burnt-out timbers from a township—had led us down the streets of Durban to City Hall during the annual Good Friday protest parade. We wept bitter tears and thought all was lost—that the election would not happen at all, or if it did, it would be bloody.

Miraculously, peace prevailed. Two weeks later, President Nelson Mandela was elected in a day of holy hush, without a single act of violence. People of every race, age, and color again lined the streets of Durban. They made their slow way toward City Hall to solemnly cast their ballots (as though they were taking communion). They emerged with shining faces. Apartheid

officially ended that day, and a new South Africa was born. At Mandela's inauguration, joy flowed like a river, and people danced on the streets all around the country.

26 years later—last week—I talked with a South African friend, a doctor who grew up in a former homeland and now practices medicine there. She expressed grave concern over the spread of COVID-19 in her community. Many rural people don't fully understand the government lockdown or the need for social distancing. However, she concluded wisely, "All this shall also pass away."

I took comfort in her words. My hope is that this global pandemic will result in some kind of global resurrection leading all of us toward healthier and more just ways of living.

—*Leona Dueck Penner*
Waterloo, Ontario

Redemption

This year at Easter
as jubilant hallelujahs
hurried heavenwards
and bell-shaped lilies
bloomed upon green stems
a brightly-colored cross
(in almost human form)
began to dance above
an open empty tomb:

slowly at first, bowing downwards towards the cool and fecund
earth then reaching upwards towards the warming sun and
picking up the pace until the simple windows of the sanctuary
shimmered and glistened with golden showers of newborn light
which soon shook loose

the lingering shadows
of another Easter

when several thousand
mourners moved slowly
through the streets of Durban
following the cross-shaped
beams of a burnt-out house
from a war-torn township
(where a few brave women
wept and prayed
and died

for peace)

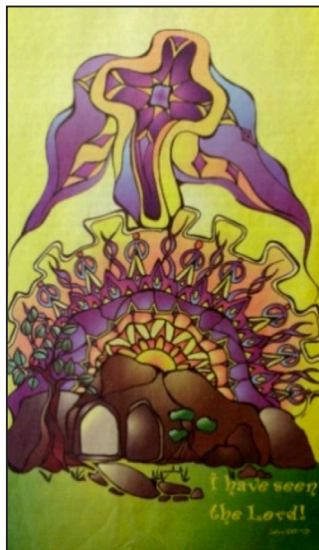
then came at last

to the steps of city hall
where the cross was raised

and dancing children wove

bright flowers of hope into
the charred and broken wood
while choirs sang soft hallelujahs
as we wept.

—*Leona Dueck Penner*



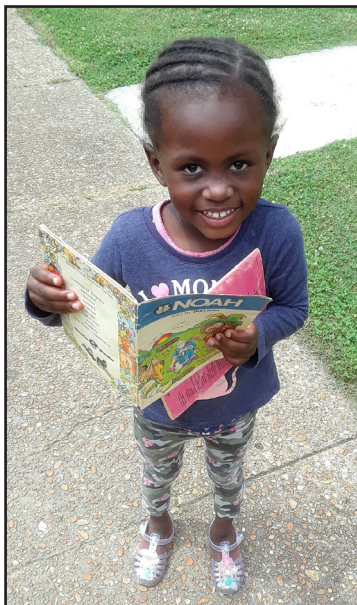
“This Easter poem, ‘Redemption,’ was written in 2009 and is based on our experiences of living and working in Durban, South Africa, with MCC during their first-ever democratic elections in 1994. It was inspired by an Easter bulletin cover series by Lynette Wiebe (see above).”

For the Love of Harmony

In the hubbub of preparing for Jubilee's outdoor food distribution, I noticed Harmony in a stroller parked on the first X in the chain of chalk marks along the sidewalk between the church and the street. On foot and in cars, our neighbors lined the street, waiting for us to open. Harmony and her mom, Ebony, waved as I deposited an armload of clipboards, files, and supplies onto the table by the street.

More than ever, our beloved community needed food from Jubilee's food pantry, God's Groceries. But my heart wasn't in it. Without the hugs, prayers, and time together, where was the joy in the pantry ministry?

Jubilee's food pantry provides food to our at-risk friends and also invites the neighborhood inside our gorgeous sanctuary and us into their hearts. We are more than neighbors as we grieve for their dead, give rides to rehab, and welcome them as church members. The note inside their bag of dry beans and canned goods proclaims that all is done in the name of Christ.



Harmony

"I saw Harmony running toward me, flashing her movie-star smile—but I could not scoop her into my arms."

Suddenly, I saw Harmony running toward me, flashing her movie-star smile—but I could not scoop her into my arms. My face masked and hands gloved, I had to stand back. She halted a few feet from me. I bent and said, "I love you, but I cannot hug you." I turned away before she could respond, before tears ruined my ridiculous mask.

Distribution began rolling as cars pulled through the paperwork station and rounded the corner toward the tables piled with bags of

frozen chicken, eggs, and bread. We loaded 30 pounds of groceries into each car trunk. “We love you,” I called through mask and open window. “We love you too,” came muffled responses. “Pray for us,” I said. “We do,” they promised. Call and response. Car after car.

Harmony’s family and other walkers came in turn toward the table. We loaded Harmony’s stroller with food for her family and a neighbor. The stroller struggled against its load—more than sixty pounds of groceries and a three-year-old. As they pulled and pushed the overloaded stroller across the parking lot, I heard a distant shout from Harmony, now out of sight: an enthusiastic, drawn-out, “Thank you!”

Times change. Touch is taken from us. Structures fail. But love? Love never fails.

—*Elaine Maust*
Meridian, Mississippi

My Little Corner of the World

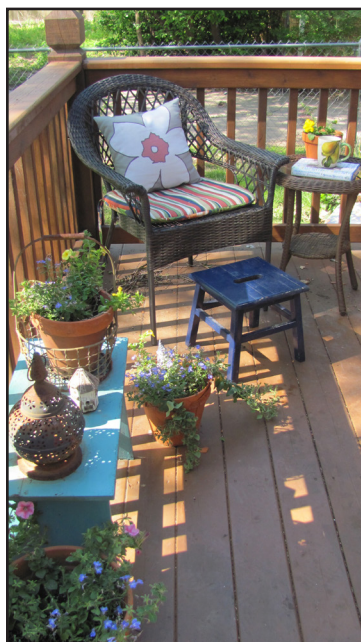
It was just like the scene continually running on the news: cars lined up single file, windows down just a crack as medical personnel with face shields leaned in to swab the next person with symptoms.

Last week, that person was me. For eight days, I felt achy and feverish and couldn't seem to shake it. My husband insisted I call the COVID-19 hotline at our county health department. After being screened over the phone, I was surprised that I qualified to be tested without any respiratory symptoms.

As the nurse reached through the crack in my window and gently swabbed inside my nose, she assured me that I would hear in a few days. "You're in my prayers," she said. Her eyes were kind.

While in the shower this morning, I heard the phone ring. My husband hurried into the steamy bathroom and put it on speaker: "We have your test result, and it's negative," came those hoped-for words. "I am relieved," I admitted to him, shampoo suds sliding down my smiling cheeks.

My energy is coming back. Today I feel well enough to sit in my favorite chair on our deck. My little dog climbs up onto my lap, the sun pokes through the budding tree branches overhead. I even see a robin. Thank you, Lord, for my health, for my family, and for all the people who are working so hard to make sure we get through this. I have much to be grateful for.



—Ann Minter Feters
Wichita, Kansas

Light-Exposure Therapy

In times like these, maintaining our spiritual practices becomes “essential work,” even more than usual. A practice that I have found helpful is to sit myself down at some point each day, preferably by a bright window, and intentionally open myself up to God’s presence. I think of this as “light-exposure therapy.”

No doubt, it is always a relief to get a break from the radio station in my head; that alone makes the practice worthwhile. But it is also a relief to tune in to another station, listen for God’s perspective, and consider my life from the perspective of someone not afraid. Like a nasty old dish rag hung out on the clothesline, a bit of exposure to the sun can do wonders. Some days, I’m able to sit still long enough to stop fidgeting.

Last week during light-exposure therapy, I said: “Okay, God, what’s the game plan for today?” Right away, I felt my attention turn to a woman from our church. I wasn’t sure what to make of it, because I think of her as someone who has tons going on in her life. I sent her a text anyway and invited her over for a socially-distanced coffee date on my porch. She accepted.

As we chatted several days later, it became clear that the nudge had been on point. She was lonely. I was thankful that something as simple as sitting in the light can exchange my knotted old dish-rag self for God’s warmth and sanity.



—Debbi DiGennaro
Harrisonburg, Virginia

Debbi DiGennaro recently moved from Nairobi, Kenya to Harrisomburg, Virginia, where she attends Community Mennonite Church.

Coronavirus Gifts?

To the thousands afflicted with the new coronavirus and the millions whose jobs and businesses are at risk, it may seem outrageous to think of coronavirus gifts. But gifts sometimes come in strange packages. When our son drowned when he was thirteen, it took a long time for me think about how we were upheld and what I could learn about not being able to help him in his time of need.

Beyond the fear and anxiety of these times, consider these possibilities:

- Temporary respite of the human assault on our natural environment, resulting in cleaner air in New York, clearer water in Venice, and birds being heard again in Wuhan
- Feeling the love and care of friends and family in a call from a daughter on the East Coast and connecting by Zoom
- The gift of immunology
- The sacrificial service of those who continue to work in nursing homes, emergency rooms, and intensive care units when immunology is not enough
- Reminders that we live in a global village where everything and everyone are connected
- Reminders that humans, animals, viruses, and bacteria are all connected
- The generosity and service of mask makers, meal givers, food producers, and grocery store clerks
- The wisdom and careful thinking of policy makers, researchers, and epidemiologists
- Not being in control
- Times of solitude and reflection

“Shepherd me O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death unto life.”

—Keith Harder
Hillsboro, Kansas

Getting Back to Normal?

How many times during these days have you heard someone talk about getting back to normal, or the way things used to be? People sometimes talk about the “new normal,” implying that there will be some change but the future will still resemble the past.

The in-between what is past and what is future is sometimes called *liminal space*. We know things are changing, but we don’t know to *what* we are changing. This tends to be an uncomfortable place, and we want to move through it as quickly as possible. We may cling to the ways things are or embrace anything that promises normalcy. It’s a vulnerable time, often full of anxiety.

Liminal space may happen with the death of a loved one, job loss, retirement, relocation, or a life-changing illness. For many, it’s happening now with the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Living in and through liminal space, from what is known into what is unknown, takes courage and patience.”

This liminal space is also full of possibilities and opportunities. It can provide an occasion for new thinking and perspectives. In particular, this pandemic can open us to rethinking our relationship with other living creatures and how “progress” has unleashed unexpected consequences and viruses. For some, it has provided a window into an environment that is less polluted. It also helps us think about how to create a more equitable economy.

As we live in and through these times, we may reconsider whether we really want to return to what was considered normal, when it was so deficient and dangerous. Living in and through liminal space, from what is known into what is unknown, takes courage and patience.

—Keith Harder

The Real Thing

Six weeks later, we're better at it. My "quarantine buddies" and I in Ukraine are now capable of quickly deciding which live-streamed church service to watch (Odessa or Kyiv? Russian or Ukrainian? A church we know already, or one we don't?). We no longer feel awkward about standing up and singing toward the sightless screen.

The televised services now run more smoothly as well. The post that used to sprout out of the preacher's head has been covered by a graceful drape. The music group doesn't back up into the pulpit anymore.

I've even learned how to join a Zoom meeting with my congregation in the United States to talk over prayer requests. It no longer feels odd to see their faces arranged around my computer screen, like the opening credits of *The Brady Bunch*.

Yes, it's better than it was, and I'm grateful. But I miss church. I miss real, live people gathered to worship God. I miss touch and conversation. I'm lonely.

Someone here has commented that the pandemic has succeeded in doing what seventy years of official atheism in the Soviet Union never could, namely, keeping Christians from coming together. It's not quite an accurate remark because we are still together in spirit—but I get the point.

Incarnation is important. There's a powerful connection between Jesus as God-in-human-flesh and our physical presence with one another. I hope I don't forget this in the future when boredom, irritation, or tiredness suggest that I skip church (see Hebrews 10:25). Virtual is fine, but it's not the real thing.

—Mary Raber
Odessa, Ukraine



Mary Raber is a Service Worker with Mennonite Mission Network based in Ukraine. At the time of writing, she was sitting out the pandemic with two other women in an empty dormitory at Odessa Theological Seminary.

Preaching from a Ladder



Sandy Drescher-Lehman is pastor at Methacton Mennonite Church, Norristown, Pennsylvania. Photo by only in-person witness, John Drescher-Lehman

It's long been my secret hope that I can retire before I have to learn one more new technical skill. Emailing and texting was enough for my brain's bandwidth. When I was a pastor at a big church, I made sure I had my notes to the technical team by Wednesday evening, so that they could make them into PowerPoint slides. I've had no desire to be a presence on Facebook or any other kind of media that has served my children well.

I've been thrilled to now pastor a smaller church where I can plan worship visuals on the blank wall instead of filling it with a screen, and where congregants are content to sing with hymnals and follow along in their own Bibles. This is where I wanted to finish out my days of pastoring.

Then the quarantine order arrived, and I scrambled to figure out how to come out of the technical dark! I sent emails for a few weeks, complete with words of worship, Youtube links for music, announcements, and a plea to snail mail offerings to the church treasurer. I went to the empty sanctuary each week to get a photo of the changing visuals to attach to the email. By Easter, I zoomed with my laptop on a ladder in my living room, with a bucket of forsythia on the worship table. Lord have mercy!

“It's long been my secret hope that I can retire before I have to learn one more new technical skill.”

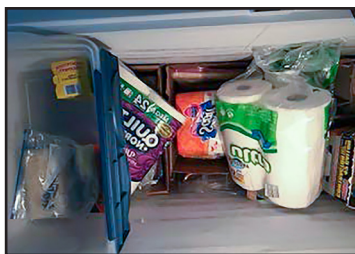
—Sandy Drescher-Lehman
Green Lane, Pennsylvania

Yup, I'm Freezing the TP!

I've taken great pride—too much, probably—in not going inside a store since March 13, 2020. I've enjoyed the challenge of using the food already stored in our cupboards and freezer. Every time I make creative use of one more unmarked container, I feel like I'm reincarnating

my mother, who was forever talking about needing to empty her freezer when she made dinner for us. I hope she's watching as I'm finally discovering what's been in my freezers' depths for

“Every time I make creative use of one more unmarked container, I feel like I'm reincarnating my mother, who was forever talking about needing to empty her freezer when she made dinner for us.”



years! It's so empty now that it has become storage for our remaining paper products. (Does that really save electricity?)

Despite my smug fulfillment of having stored enough food for seven weeks (who knew?), and despite the gift of assurance from younger family members that they're ready to make a

grocery run as soon as I admit that I'm done “being creative,” I'm noticing an underlying and sometimes overriding grief. I grieve for the many people who have no food left and no way to get more. Those who survive on daily pay who are now quarantined—like me but so not like me, with my freezer and shelves. So not like me, who has family, a credit card that can make things appear at our doorstep, a woods full of ramps, and even paper products. I grieve for those isolated—so not like me, who has never wondered where my next meal will come from. Lord, have mercy!

—Sandy Drescher-Lehman

R.I.P. Dear Novel

I was going to write a novel
It was going to be fun
A masterpiece
I would emerge
a world-famous author
from this dreadful quarantine

But my words got stuck inside my mouth
My eyes only begged for sleep
My hands got lazy
went on strike
refused to pick up the pen

I was going to write a novel
It was going to be great
A masterpiece
that died before it lived

I kneel at its grave
resigned to write
small poetry
Say that it will be okay

If you were going to write a novel
If it was going to be the best
If you birth something
Or nothing at all
Please know that it's okay
Our words will stir
Another day
Our eyes and hands awake
Another day
Someday

—*Melia Jubilee Hawthorne Klingler*
Querétaro, Mexico

Come to the Water... Interstate Highway?

“Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.”

—Isaiah 55:1

The lyrics of “O let all who thirst,” roll through my mind as we walk the trail near our house. It is late; everyone had already decided it was time to put on PJs. (What day or time is it again?) But out we go, masks in pockets, even headed only for the woods. As we come upon the creek, the colors of dusk embrace us.

With the sun falling ever gently in the west, we walk along the water of the unassuming creek. Never mind the interstate traffic above us, I think. The boys run to the water’s edge to splash in boots, looking for the wonders of a bug or fish or critter. The reflection of the sky on the water catches my eye: hues of orange, pink, and white floating in slow motion on the stream.



“The contrast of this place has always struck me: a quiet stream, going somewhere, moves beneath vehicles racing elsewhere in four lanes overhead.”

Alive. This stream is alive. I come to the water, weary; it is moving peacefully, somewhere, under a busy (but not as busy as other times) interstate highway. The contrast of this place has always struck me: a quiet stream, going somewhere, moves beneath vehicles racing elsewhere in four lanes overhead.

For a moment, I feel peace. I welcome it with all of my being, aware of the unknowns and the what-ifs and the fear and the grief of these days. I let those things flow peacefully by, struck by the mystery of life more than ever in these days. God is getting us through.

*—Kathy Dickson
Bluffton, Ohio*

Magnolia

“Never forget. We are alive within mysteries.”

— Wendell Berry

As I round the corner of our typical “walk around the block route,” I sense a feeling from my teen years. I remember when I’d round the corner of the track and think, “this leg of the track, again?”

The feeling of “running in circles” has always been a bit less motivating for me than the exploration of the open trail or path. Occasionally, with days and hours blurring into the next this spring, the running-in-circles sentiment persists. Yet, with the stay-at-home order continuing, daily walks around the block also remind of the gifts in each day: the way the flowers have opened up on that tree, the new nest, the teddy bear in the neighbor’s window. We try to see something new or look for our favorites.



“Brown, wilted, dying buds hang from the tree’s branches after this week’s frost.”

As we round corner three, I look for the magnolia tree. Watching it slowly transform into the most beautiful tree in town is something I watch for every spring, not just this one.

But as we get closer to the magnolia today, I gasp unexpectedly. Brown, wilted, dying buds hang from the tree’s branches after this week’s frost. Such a silly thing to get sad about in these times, I scold myself! You have the memory of how it was. Maybe next spring will be better, I think, trying to lift hopes.

But then, I see amid the brown and wilted tender buds are new ones, ready to open. In the days that follow, I see that they do open, bursting into new life and color—amid the hardships of weather, enduring.

—Kathy Dickson

Where's God?

I have to stand in front of the wall calendar and tap my finger along through the spaces to remember how many days have passed. Today is Sunday. It's time to join the congregation online.

The first time we went to church in this way, my husband had to put on his church trousers, citing old habits. The next couple of times we attended online services, half of us were still in PJs. Today, we're eager to pray and sing with others and find points of gathering in worship.



“As the music begins and those leading the service emerge on screen, he leans his face in close. “Hey, Mommy! Where’s God?”

Our toddler crawls into my lap, pressing buttons on my keyboard and talking loudly. As the music begins and those leading the service emerge on screen, he leans his face in close. “Hey, Mommy! Where’s God?” His eyes dart around the screen, and then he looks at me

for an answer. “Mommy. Where’s God?” he asks again, his tiny pointer finger pressing into the screen between the leaders’ faces.

“God is everywhere,” I say, feeling a bit inadequate to answer his theological questioning. He waits expectantly for some entertaining and grandiose God to appear, then hops down and goes to work with his tools.

Simple questions echo others of our own these days. Our preschooler asks, “Is the Virus bigger than God?” We must continue to look for God, and affirm the truth that we know. God is here among us, from the frontlines to between these screens, bigger than the Virus and this moment in the human story. God is helping us through each day, helping us endure.

—Kathy Dickson

Hockey-Stick Bundling

The pandemic is doing interesting things to the dating world. Our fear of illness does not remove our romantic inclinations, and so the game continues—but adjusted, just like everything else.

A number of the new adjustments actually look very old. Online dating apps have long been accused of facilitating only casual intimate encounters, but many users now are openly playing the long game—delaying in-person meetups and physical encounters until it is safe to do so.

One friend mentioned suggesting to a match that they could still go for a walk if they maintained a hockey stick between

“One friend mentioned suggesting to a match that they could still go for a walk if they maintained a hockey stick between them.”

them. (Not all regions would consider this adequate social distancing, but in this part of Canada, the versatility of a hockey sticks knows no bounds!) My friend remarked that his suggestion probably sounded crazy to her and me, but I said that I thought it was great. In some traditional religious communities, I told him, practices such as distancing couples with a physical object were common even pre-pandemic. While old-fashioned, I explained, such practices advocated caution in order to purify intent and reward sincerity.

This virus is changing dating into a surprisingly familiar pattern. Stages of a relationship are being delayed, making the heart grow fonder and the reward sweeter. Dating apps, often breeding grounds of indulgence, have become spaces of accidental traditionalism. Virtues of patience and gentleness are flourishing.

—William Loewen
Calgary, Alberta

Generation Next

Early in the pandemic, I called a couple from my congregation to see how they were coping. They reported good spirits, but they were tired of not being able to go anywhere.

“Oh?” I asked. “So, you’re just really sticking to the provincial guidelines?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Are there special rules in the apartment complex where you’re living?”

“No, it’s our kids. They told us that we’re vulnerable, and we need to stay home. We told them it was no big deal, but they said, ‘Yeah, that’s what we told you as teenagers, and you wouldn’t let us go out then.’ So, we’re staying in.”

“The roles have reversed, and now their children are restricting their freedom, saying, ‘It’s for your own good.’”

I’ve had similar conversations with five or six other parents in comparable situations. The roles have reversed, and now their children are restricting their freedom, saying, “It’s for your own good.” The pandemic has sped up that age-old process bound to happen with every generation. So, seniors, take solace in knowing that in twenty-odd years, your kids’ grandchildren will be old enough to step in and tell their parents what to do and not do!

We play many roles in this life, sometimes strong and sometimes weak. May God grant us the wisdom to embrace roles we’ve never had before—either leading or being led in new ways.

—William Loewen

Bird in the Word

Until the virus
makes its swan dive
into the nest box
of pandemic history,
may we take comfort
in sparrows,
two for a penny,
that sing tirelessly
over vacant
schoolyards,
migrant warblers,
that return
to shelter
at home,
flickers
that caterwaul
above quiet streets
in hushed
cities,
hummingbirds
that alight,
and bring light
to backyard
gardens,
and ospreys
that patrol the air,
above us
and the
rivers
below.

—*Bob Hoffman*
Portland, Oregon



Haiku

Facebook and hymnbook,
Tagged dear friends in the pews,
Gone to church online.

Texted scripture text,
Aired service from the server,
Come, church, follow me.

—*Bob Hoffman*



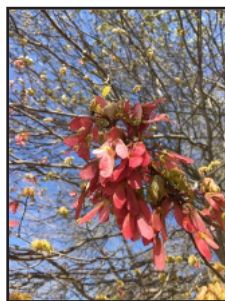
A Torturous Road [A Journal]

By Rebecca Mosley

STONY HEART

Within days, my family pivoted from lockdown preparations in Arusha, Tanzania, to boarding a plane for Washington, D.C. We reeled from emotional and logistical whiplash.

Like many other sudden, unwilling evacuees from international communities, we landed at the grim, grey tail-end of North American winter. We shivered in our borrowed cabin by the Chesapeake Bay. The lifeless, leafless brown forest around us suited the state of my heart. I wanted time to stop. I needed time to catch up with the invisible trauma of evacuation, deal with the accompanying guilt, and understand the mixture of grief, relief, and numbness.



Before our two-week quarantine ended, the grass had greened. Maple trees exploded in tiny red fireworks of leaves and helicopter seed pods. Violets burst out of the rainy mud. One day, we tied our jackets around our waists as we walked. Spring was coming.

In the years when I waited out a long northern winter, I always loved springtime. This year, I resented it. I wanted to push spring back into the earth. How dare there be joy and new life in this season of suffering! I needed more time to restore the balance of my disoriented heart.

But the Lord of life commands new life to spring forth out of darkness, death, and bleak and barren branches. Creation is obedient to her Lord. My stony heart could not block this unstoppable change in season. Resurrection Sunday in Maryland often coincides with the wide-open blooms of deepest red tulips. A trio of young foxes tumbled out of their hole and into the open, cavorting with their mother. All joy had been unleashed. Spring itself, the work of our faithful Creator, rolled the stone away from my heart.

SUSPICIOUS NEIGHBORS

Of course, we made them nervous at first when we drove up at dusk. The pair of Canadian Geese had gotten used to having the run of the place before we showed up! We now have worked out a social distancing pact: we show up, and they clear out.

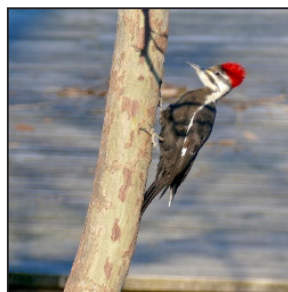
Since we're cut off from most of the world, we're paying attention to the neighbors we have.

The bald eagles are above it all, looking down their hooked noses at us. Perching together high on a tree above the lawn or swooping over the docks, voicing their stuttering cry, they could care less about a few lowly humans.

The pileated woodpecker, that spiky red-crested punker, plays hard-to-get, but he's always ready to strike a pose. Perched alone on a stump out front, his grating, heavy-metal calls always draw eyes.

A family of mergansers shows up on stormy days, frolicking with the cormorants, diving under the crashing waves.

The only friendly ones in the neighborhood are the field mice. Too friendly. Bold as brass, they greeted us by scampering right over our feet in search of a dropped popcorn kernel or morsel of a cookie, ready to cozy up and explore the couch cushions. We were not so excited about co-existence! On the first night, we got a trap and caught five of them.



Our nearest large mammal neighbors are the fox family: a flash of fire here and there, cool red wind blowing where it will, never tied down, drifting through the forest on the ridge above us, flitting out of sight into their den under the driveway: Mr., Mrs., and four little

kits. We are intensely curious about them, always eager for a glimpse yet trying not to get in their space: pure inspiration every time, a secret, a miracle. And at night, we sometimes catch them gazing through the picture window into our den. What are they thinking of us?



There is another family of bipeds a little way down the farm lane. As we pass on a walk, I greet them, well-trained by African warmth. “Hi!” I say.

No response.

“How are you doing?”

Crickets.

I offer a wave. Well, at least then I get a lifted hand in return. Is it an answer in kind, or does it mean “clear off”? It feels as if some believe that an exchange of words on the beach at a distance of four meters could transmit something. Contagion? Camaraderie?

I’ll stick with the foxes.

SLICED TOO THIN

I’ve made a home 14 different times in different countries and made precious friends in each. The secret: pour yourself completely into the community where you find yourself.

“The secret: pour yourself completely into the community where you find yourself.”

This present torture of being divided between two worlds—yet present in neither—sometimes feels like being flayed. Our kids start “Zooming” at 7:00 a.m. to catch their classmates live. There are the 9:00 a.m. calls to East Africa, keeping up with colleagues and church leaders on the other side of the world. To check-in with our Bible study group takes herculean math skills: How do you connect from Sydney, Arusha, Stuttgart, and Baltimore? Yet those

Zoom gatherings leave us hungry to go deeper. I've committed to walking and praying for my fellow church leaders every morning to keep them real to my heart.

Meanwhile, we have been grateful to reconnect with our home church community in the United States and see their smiling faces each week in all those little Zoom squares. But it's only screen-deep. The grandparents call, the cousins talk, and the youth group all meet virtually. Other friends are reaching out from our pasts to reconnect, play online games. We feel warmth and hospitality, but this is not home. We are not here. All of these interactions are as thin as the screen on my iPhone. We only get to see my parents in person.

I try to tell myself, "It's great, right? The way that we can be so connected to each other even while we are physically isolated. We can still support each other, listen, be involved!"

Why, then, do I struggle to pick up the phone and simply call my extended family? Why is it that I am instead drawn to walk in the woods with my kids? Why is it that a glimpse of the fox grounds me so much more deeply in who I need to be?



ONE OF 26 MILLION

[This piece was written a number of days after the previous meditations.]

Yesterday, we got the news that our job is terminal. Our positions with a Christian development organization will be closing by the end of this year.

Overnight, we've moved from the ranks of those coping with a home office to the millions of others who are looking at a future without work.

It was a beautiful day. We sat down to what we thought was a regular chat with supervisors in Kenya and Winnipeg. We stood

"Yesterday, we got the news that our job is terminal."

up nauseated, furious, hopeless.

I'm sure many of you, brothers and sisters, have watched helplessly as your jobs were swept away in this COVID-19 storm. Are you also walking around feeling dizzy, drained, sick to your stomach, trying somehow to play catch with your kid without crying, inwardly panicking about a wide-open and unsupported future? We are there with you. It's hard to see anything good in this loss. There's no use pretending today that the fox is any comfort.

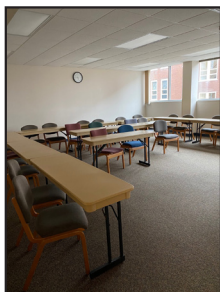
This job loss is another miscarriage. We were expecting: about to move into a leadership position in our country program, a new position which should have started tomorrow. We had hopes and dreams for what our program could become. We had planned for three more years in Arusha, for our older son to finish high school there. We had just built a roof over our stone terrace and gotten a cat. We were ready to settle down and call Tanzania home.

We've lost more than a job. Our *Ubuntu* is dying; that African understanding that "I am because we are." Everything that gives our present life wholeness is suddenly at the end-stage, and we are not even allowed to be in the room and hold its hand as it dies. We are stranded in beautiful limbo, and we can't even weep with the friends we will have to part from unwillingly in just a few months. My kids are online with classmates whom they may never get to see again in the flesh. Our eclectic, lay-led church: how I grieve for us!

How many other international members will never return with their gifts and energy when this is all over? It's one thing to lose your job; it's something else to feel like you're losing your entire life along with it. Dear Jesus, you said that those who are ready to lose their lives will gain them. Today, I'm not seeing it. Surprise me.

—Rebecca Mosley

We're Still Community



It all happened so fast. Classes were held as usual for the first three days of the week. Administrators tried their best to keep us informed about how the college was responding to the unfolding situation. We watched the news as plans were made and remade. We were advised to have students space themselves three feet apart in the classroom, use the hand sanitizer pumps that were appearing everywhere, cough into our sleeves, and wash our hands. We were told to prepare to move our classes online if the governor issued a stay-at-home order, which seemed likely.

“The farewell felt bittersweet and holy; it was a moment warranting a hug or at least a handshake. But, we were already acclimating to the new normal.”

Friday, March 13, was the last day that I worked in my office. Late that afternoon, one of my first-year students made the rounds to his professors to say goodbye. The farewell felt bitter-sweet and holy; it was a moment warranting a hug or at least a handshake. But, already acclimating to the new normal, we smiled and wished each other well.

Now, weeks later, many of us are teaching, worshipping, and visiting through our screens. Celebrating. Grieving. We are still a community.

On commencement Sunday, thousands of people across the country and around the world gathered on screens. How I missed seeing my students and meeting their families! As an introvert, commencement is always a combination of weird and wonderful for me. I love graduation; I love dressing up for it. This year was no different!



—Regina Shands Stoltzfus
Goshen, Indiana

All That Will Bloom



On my weekly jog, I noticed a farmer's field. It had caught my eye before because of its thousands of daffodils. For me, the daffodil is a harbinger of spring, a first-fruits kind of flower (although the humble crocus might object). Daffodils usually come out as we turn our calendars from winter to spring, and as the weather warms up a bit.

This year, daffodils in full bloom already grace the boulevards and medians. But they are not yet in full bloom in this particular field. The stalks are ready, and tiny bits of yellow are peeking through—but the expanse is still green. As I paused and looked through the barbed wire, I recognized that all that will bloom in that field has not yet blossomed.

I feel that way about the world right now. What is coming is kind of here but not yet fully present. The impact of COVID-19 is starting to hit us and has hit some hard already. Jobs have already been lost. Security has evaporated. We hear an ominous brooding in the daily news deluge: there is more yet to come. More pain and sorrow to be walked through. All that is coming our way has not yet come to pass.

But, amid this global crisis, not all of the good things that will blossom have fully emerged either. A slowed-down pace gives us an opportunity to rest our tired bodies. A sense of deeper connection can come from admitting to others that we have needs. A sense of stillness can allow us to hear God's voice and God's invitations more clearly.

Beautiful things take time and careful cultivation to bloom fully. We may not see them just yet, but as they begin to poke up through the chaos of this season and the soil of our souls, let us be those with eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to us.

—Brad Sumner
Langley, British Columbia



The Scary Crib

A few days ago, our 4.5-month-old daughter, Mariana, transitioned from sleeping in the bassinet to the crib. The first night was great, but on the second and third nights, she kept waking up. She would cry softly and then louder. I knew she couldn't be hungry again; she was seeking comfort. In the darkness, Mariana was aware that everything around her was different. She was in a new place that she didn't know and didn't choose, and so she cried out.

I answered my daughter's cries and went to her. Smelling, hearing, and feeling her mother comforted her, and she was able to fall back asleep. Even though she couldn't see me, she knew that I was there and was answering her cry.

We are in a similar situation. With this pandemic, we're in a new place that we don't know and didn't choose. Day after day, we stumble forward, not seeing a way out.

Mariana cried out in her unknown. I ask myself, how am I crying out? I have a God who is faithful and with me always, yet, am I foolishly trying to stumble forward on my own? Can I recognize that I need comfort and call out to the One whose love never ends?

As we comfort our daughter, I'm trying to hold this truth in my heart: "How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11).

—Kristina Toews
Abbotsford, British Columbia



Kristina, husband Isaías and daughter Mariana live in Abbotsford, BC. Kristina spent 6 years in Colombia serving with MCC and Mennonite World Conference, and continues as the MWC Chief Communications Officer.
Photo: Jacqueline Quiring

Not Remotely Close

Every Sunday since the quarantine began, our family visits Grandma through her window. On a bright but windy and bitterly cold day, we walked up to her window. I dialed her number.

She picked up her TV remote. “Hello? Hello?” She hit every button on the remote. Many wild gestures later, she put the TV remote down and picked up the phone. More gestures, sighs, and eyes nearing tears, she still couldn’t find the talk button.

My husband pounded on the back door of the care facility until a custodian opened it and agreed to pass the message of our distress to a caregiver. The caregiver came to our rescue and helped her turn on the phone.

“The situation was both comical and devastating, but we weren’t about to give up.”

“Hello, Grandma! It’s so good to hear your voice! We love you, and we miss you so much!”

I passed the phone to my husband, but an inadvertent brush of skin on the screen disconnected us.

We spent the next minutes dialing, stomping our feet to stay warm, and leaving messages on the answering machine in attempts to reconnect with Grandma. But she didn’t realize that our voices were coming through the speaker of the machine. She’d talk back to the disconnected phone in her hand, and we’d listen through the window. The situation was both comical and devastating, but we weren’t about to give up.



This is what love does, right? Love persists. When one method fails to reach us, eternal Love finds other ways to make sure we get the message and makes sure we connect. At least that’s what I’m counting on.

—D.L. Diener
Goshen, Indiana

A New Calendar

The diagonal slashes across boxes crept closer and closer to that last set of boxes marking our vacation days. They were mocking me, so I hid the calendar away.

I grieved that COVID-19 had canceled our trip. Friends suggested cooking up special dishes or listening to music to mimic our destination. But, I knew such things would pale in comparison—and that made me sadder than I already was.

A new idea started to bubble. What if there was a fresh slate—a new calendar with happy, open boxes waiting for us? While my rational side kept reminding me that we had a perfectly good calendar hidden away, I decided that treating myself to a new calendar was part of a God thing. The idea was bringing me a ridiculous amount of joy.

The new calendar is smaller (no extra-long, gridded boxes), but there's enough space to note video meetings and the few responsibilities we have.

All the white space per box on the new calendar reminds me that our family has been given the luxury of time. God invites me to breathe and savor what the day contains because it's not filled up with stuff we usually have to do. This is the unexpected gift our family needed: time with each other that doesn't need much room on the calendar.

2020 APRIL						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

—D.L. Diener

The Blessed Comfort of Doughy Rings

C OVID-19 life stretched her to her limits, she wrote, but relief was on its way. She had ordered a slim cardboard box full of fried and filled doughy rings. She'd managed to grieve a brother from afar. She'd found a



new way to hold onto her faith through a computer screen. Her husband kept her company on walks outside in the sunshine to help keep her heart tethered to her brain and frustrations at bay.

My friend's parents, who live nearby but not close enough, are finding face masks both an indignity and cumbersome. They're not bothered or anxious, knowing that earth isn't their last stop on this eternal journey. Their daughter, though, is barely holding on. She needs her parents to stay well. She needs her children and grandchildren, even farther from her reach, to be okay too. And, none of it is under her control.

"And, none of it is under her control."

Through it all, though, my friend doing what she should: finding creative connection, reaching out to friends—and ordering doughnuts to be delivered. But when the day's packages arrived without the doughnuts—the one thing she was expecting to alleviate her anxiety—she lost it. She started shouting at the universe, her husband, and to anyone who'd listen because this was too much. It is too much.

So, as a Christ-bearer in my friend's life, I am googling ways to make this small dream come true. Blessed be that sacred doughy ring. May we all have what we need to get through this.

—D.L. Diener

C'mon and Get Rhythm

"Hey, get rhythm when you get the blues."

—Johnny Cash

I spend a lot of time at my sewing machine these days. I'm helping to fulfill our local community's commitment to sewing 2,000 face masks. These will be added to 8,000 other masks that Mennonite Disaster Service will donate to Catholic Charities staff and volunteers working in homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and other social services.

Making masks is likely the most significant thing I do these days, but the task involves hours of sitting in the same spot and a lot of repetition, so I like to sweeten the hours by listening to a variety of music.

Recently, Johnny Cash broke into my sewing room as my Bernina hummed away. "Hey, get rhythm when you get the blues," his voice

"I was inspired by how they continued to hold fast to their particular way of being despite the upheaval in their lives."

commanded. So, I listened up. It's easy to get the blues these days, after nearly two months into isolation, and I found the lyrics delightful. A

shoeshine boy grins when asked how he keeps from getting the blues and says, "You gotta get a rhythm when you get the blues."

Rhythm. My mind traveled back to the weeks I spent with my parents after my father was diagnosed with ALS. A rule and rhythm of life had guided them for as long as I could remember, and I was inspired by how they continued to hold fast to their particular way of being despite the upheaval in their lives. Breakfast, meditation, morning prayers, and other routine commitments provided strength for those shaky days. I recognized the strength they gleaned from the rituals they practiced for more than 50 years of their married lives.

When a rhythm and rule of life carry one's dominant movements, the blues will find a place to rest even through tough times.

—Gloria Diener

Harrisonburg, Virginia

Confessions of a Reluctant Mask-Maker

I confess that I am a reluctant mask maker. I especially feel this when I compare myself to “true blue” mask makers: those who have been sewing for weeks, morning to night, producing quantities of well-made masks. I imagine Pauline, Dorothy, and Tom each on their machines, wholly dedicated to this task. Somebody tells me that Linda sewed 40 masks in one day, and I’m less pleased about the fewer that I managed to make in four days.

“I can think of
a million things
I’d rather do
than sew masks.”

As I stitch, seam-rip, and stitch again, I marvel at my tendency to make mistakes. It’s easy to sew a piece of elastic that isn’t supposed to be stitched into a seam. All too often, I turn the mask inside-out only to discover the liner facing the outside. I’m pretty sure real sewers rarely have to use seam rippers!

I can think of a million things I’d rather do than sew masks: bicycle, garden, write, or work on the quilts that I’ve promised my granddaughters. Even cleaning comes to mind as a good excuse.

I pause, recalibrate, and consider the worker who will wear the mask that I hold in my hand. Her task is exponentially tougher than mine. She probably doesn’t always feel like doing what she’s doing. Maybe she doubts that her work is making a difference and thinks from time to time about things she’d rather be doing.

I say a prayer for her and for all God’s people who do what they can to make a difference in this wild and weary world. I ask that God will have mercy on us all.

—Gloria Diener



Looking Odd in a World Gone Strange

I don't remember why I ordered walking sticks the week before moving into isolation several miles west of Harrisonburg. I do know I wasn't expecting to use them on Muddy Creek Road, a narrow country road utilized mostly by tractors, pickups, bicyclists, and horses and buggies. Regardless, I picked up the sticks one day to try them out, setting out from where I was.

Walking is a rhythmic affair: one step at a time, body and soul connecting in ways impossible to put into words. I experience peace and healing as I enter acres of space at a pace slow enough to tamp down questions in my mind that have been racing for days without resolution.

“Walking is a rhythmic affair: one step at a time, body and soul connecting in ways impossible to put into words.”

I had no idea the walking sticks would inspire my upper body to enter the rhythm, and I hadn't expected such comfort in the sound of the sticks as I click my way along, creating percussion to the music of Muddy Creek as it ripples alongside the road.

I'm aware that I must look strange. My walking sticks aren't needed; I can walk perfectly fine without them. I imagine what drivers see, speeding past as I wave and smile with my walking sticks in hand.

I no longer worry about looking odd. We all share a world grown strange, and our only hope lies in listening for the steady heartbeat of God that breaks into our knowing as we wholeheartedly walk whatever road we are on.

—Gloria Diener



“Emergence” by Leslie Hawthorne Klingler

“For I am convinced
that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor
things to come,
nor powers,
nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from
the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

**A Time
Enduring**

APRIL–MAY 2020