

# Finding Sanctuary in the Gathering Dark

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When the frenzy of the first wave of COVID-19 began, I made a pledge to leave behind my screens for a few minutes every day to walk in the woods near my home. I needed contact with the trees and the earth to ground myself in the midst of the unreality of what my life had become. On a day in early April I walked in a dense fog that perfectly suited the moral fog we were navigating at the start of the pandemic. Back then I was optimistic that the fog would lift and life would return to the familiar rhythms, routines and priorities of my pre-COVID work and life.

But then it all happened. The list of cataclysmic world events we have witnessed over the past nine months needs no enumeration—it is under our skins and burrowed into our hearts. The summer afforded the temporary distraction of sun and social gatherings, but now the warmth has vanished from the air, and winter is closing in.

This Sunday I walked in the woods through the first snowfall. I didn't feel like walking. I felt like curling up under the covers and staying there the whole afternoon. But I knew from experience that if I didn't walk my body would clench in grief around all the things I have lost to the fog of COVID: my uncle who died and couldn't be communally mourned; my cherished colleagues who have left my organization; my son working and studying in the Atlantic bubble whom I cannot not see until spring; my creative community scattered; my friendships that have fractured along the fault lines of values I thought we shared.

And I knew if I didn't end up grieving the past, my mind would skip ahead to the unending list of challenges our healthcare system could face in the coming days and months.

I am not special, I know. So many of us working in healthcare find ourselves ping-ponging constantly between the poles of grief and anxiety, mourning our many losses (large and small) while facing an uncertain and sometimes overwhelming future.

What else could I do? I got on my boots and I started walking.

At the fork where I normally turn right, I went left, on an unfamiliar trail. Immediately, my mind stopped spinning as I had to bring my full attention to navigating the slippery rocks and orientating myself to the terrain. At first everything felt barren, ugly, miserable and cold. But as I walked, I warmed from the inside out. And the longer I looked the more I saw.



The trees, stripped bare, revealed the stark shapes of their bones. Each sturdy trunk rising and rising to uplift hundreds of branches reaching and reaching towards the sky. And how much sky I could see now, unimpeded by summer's canopy—a clear view all the way from mountain to downtown to lakefront!



At every turn there was something new to savour: the moment the falling rain pellets turned suddenly to puffy knots of snowflakes; stumbling onto a whitened soccer field that invited my inner child to carve a message in the snow; finding a brand new pair of gloves hanging by their tag next to the path, inviting anyone with frigid fingers to help themselves; the mountain face, craggy and beautifully lined after eons of exposure to wind and wet.

And suddenly I saw the traces of someone who had walked just before me on this path. Following those soggy footprints I remembered all the people I was following now. I thought of my own grandparents and great-grandparents who had survived famine, war, displacement and persecution—who had lived through historical cataclysms a thousand times worse than COVID—and who founded new lives through grit and faith and the application of their steady hands and ready hearts to the work of building community. I thought of the teachers who had encouraged me to tackle the big problems rather than fixate on minutiae. I thought of the friends I made over the decades who encouraged me to trust my own strength and the blossoming of my quirky spirit.



Pausing under a stand of naked trees to examine their silhouette against the leaden sky, I saw at the end of every branch a bud—tiny and closed tight. Each seemed like a vow that is felt in the heart, but not yet ready to be spoken. Looking around I saw these promises of spring everywhere—berries, seeds, pods and buds. Each capsule contained a verdant future, yet each had patiently surrendered to the quiet sanctuary of winter. Turning towards home I considered how I could find sanctuary in this coming season, and

courage in the face of foreboding; clarity of purpose in the midst of this muddle; and companionship during a holiday season in isolation.

I have given up any pretense of predicting the future; COVID cured me of that folly. But I have a hunch that the way through this winter of woe bears some resemblance to my Sunday hike:

- Get up every day and face the future, just like my ancestors did—and trust I carry their resilience inside of me.
- Open my eyes to the simple wonders all around.
- Break the habit of doing what feels comfortable; take a new turn and see where it leads.
- Watch for hidden signs of life.
- Feel gratitude for the people who have walked before me and walk beside me now.
- Trust that every season comes to an eventual end. Soon the light will return and the days will start to lengthen, just on the other side of December.
- Challenge myself to reframe lockdown as sanctuary.
- Choose to focus my intentions on what is life-giving in the midst of strife: peace, gratefulness, love and hope.



My wish for all of you—my companions in the fight against COVID and the fight for human dignity, healing, compassion and care—is that you will find a way to sustain your hope, safeguard your health and deepen your wisdom in the midst of your own grief and anxiety. If we each care for ourselves well enough to stay on our feet, that is one less person who needs to be carried by others. Self-care is an act of altruism as it allows us to rest and strengthen ourselves to be of service to the world in whatever small ways we can.

If you are looking for some positivity and companionship as we face the challenges of this season, I invite you to join me and other members of PEaCE (Program for Ethics and Care Ecologies), including Diana Tikasz and Erika Caspersen, for an event we are calling MIND SHIFT.

Every Monday to Friday from November 27 to December 24, we will be offering a daily morning resilience practice on Zoom from 7:40 to 7:55 a.m.

In this 15 minute practice you will have the chance to:

- Get grounded
- Set a positive intention for your day
- Be in a virtual community (cameras off... pyjamas welcome!)
- Practice a secular, neuro-science based resilience strategy
- Reflect on how to bring more peace, gratitude, love and hope into your life

Wishing all of us weathering this winter together Peace, Gratefulness, Love and Hope,

Andrea