

Where Fear Meets Hope: Stories from Here and There by Emily Rose Barr

As we grow accustomed to life under lockdown, we are discovering the richness that can emerge from the quiet, contemplative nature of solitude. Hoping to tap into the inner wisdom of our collective attempt to find light amidst darkness, writer Emily Rose Barr asked one simple question of individuals across the globe: What are you doing that's bringing a little extra joy, light, or laughter to your days? As the answers poured in, she realized that perhaps the paradoxes of our time -- hope and fear, connection and isolation, anger and compassion -- are not meant to be reconciled, but simply to be lived. Read more to learn how the discomfort of uncertainty invites us to take care of ourselves with renewed deliberation and embrace the mysteries that call us into stillness.

From where I sit, in a space that has long been a source of both comfort and yearning and now borders on claustrophobic, the reality of my day-to-day experience is one at which I can only marvel. No two days are exactly the same, and yet, the passing weeks seem more indistinguishable from one another than ever before.

There's a beauty, a sacredness even, to be found in ritual as our sense of time under lockdown becomes increasingly warped. When we feel the steam of our morning coffee or tea greet our face like a welcome dew and savor each sip that follows, we invite a new kind of presence. Even the simplest acts, like rising from bed or taking a shower, can bestow a sense of harmony with the space around us when done with awareness.

As we settle into uneasy rhythms, our once liberally-exercised freedoms are now escapades into the foreign and forbidden. A walk outside reminds us of nature's resolve to see us through a new season with an utter disregard for the turmoil that we struggle to quantify and for which we were woefully unprepared. The symphony of birds outside my window provides a familiar soundtrack for spring that I find both grounding and at times disarming. "Don't you know what's happening?" I ask. They sing on, ignoring my attempts to reconcile the unfathomable with the expected.

The consequences of our actions are no longer limited to our immediate surroundings. The newfound scale of interdependence we are witnessing is at once frightening and profoundly life-shifting. Our togetherness is staring us in the face like a memory that can't be forgotten, beckoning us not only to acknowledge, but to act.

This time invites us into the heart of multiple paradoxes. Our contributions seem at once valuable and far from enough, significant and inconsequential. We're feeling energized and depleted, hopeful and uncertain, connected and alone, desperate and grounded, mindful and unaware, angry and compassionate, striving for some degree of normalcy that only a short time ago might have felt mundane, even stifling.

How do we find our footing as the ground continually shifts beneath us? Last month, as part of my own inquiry into this question, I reached out to my community of friends and invited them to share their responses to a simple question. Today I have the joy of being a weaver of stories, of uniting voices from India, Switzerland, New Zealand, France, England, Canada, and every region of the United States.

I cannot promise that what's shared will be new to you, nor do I know how it will resonate in the days, weeks, and months to come. I do hope that these brief glimpses into the lives of others will serve as a steady reminder of the comfort to be found in our shared humanity and the abundance that can arise in the face of overwhelming odds.

What are you doing that's bringing a little extra joy, light, or laughter to your days?

"One way I am making my way through these times is to make a daily practice of reminding myself of my place in the wide web of Life. Today, it was kneeling in delight to watch the chickadee pulling tufts of discarded fur and flitting off to her construction project in the tupelo gum tree. Living here in the woods for the last twenty years, I have learned some of the ways life comes together in a magical orchestra of timing. Nest building for the birds coincides exactly with the shedding of thousands of leaf bud coverings, spent oak blooms and the animals shedding their winter coats. My favorite rite of spring for many years now has been combing out the dogs' and cats' coats and then trimming all the bushes out in discarded fur balls. Then I wait in anticipation for the chickadee and titmouse birds to come and noisily bounce among the bushes stuffing their beaks full. It has become a ritual for the birds too. They will come and light in the sweet olive bush closest to my spot for morning tea on the porch, chiding me if I am late with my part in the pageant. This year especially, the joy of joining the web of connections to usher new birdsong into the world remembers me into the abundance still all around." - Rural USA

"A sewing project which is making a bedroll for a homeless person (this is a new thing for me; I am not much of a seamstress!)" - D.S., Illinois, USA

"I and my sister are doing deep cleaning of every corner of the house. Each day we take one cupboard and looking at things that we have stored/not used from ages. We are upscaling and recycling the waste. With the physical cleaning I feel there is mental cleaning also happening. We meditate, cook together, watch film together and are catching up on lot of conversations. I listen to the birds singing outside (due to less/no traffic I am able to listen to them too), I feel the breeze, enjoy a cup of tea and just trying to connect to what nature is telling me." - T.P., India

"Thinking about the positive sides of this virus. That it will make people more conscious to shop, apart from food and basics, that it will save our environment a bit. Also that less people fly by plane in the future. Drive their cars less, maybe buy a bicycle instead. Far better for one's health and cheaper." -Zurich, Switzerland

"Knitting shawls when I want to calm myself and using EFT tapping to clear the fear and anxiety."

"Painting most days, as I'm an artist. Making each dinner a little party with candles, etc. Finding surprises in the pantry and freezer, and then thinking of ways to cook with them has been great fun!" - North Carolina, USA

"I've been around a while and don't remember anything that has ever so dramatically

affected the daily life of so many millions of people on earth. And this observation, even knowing that this virus will most certainly pass, scares the hell out of me. So I try not to dwell on the unrestrained global impact that social media wields today (though I have no idea if that's what's at work here) and instead, I spend a lot of time writing." - R.M., Illinois, USA

"Exercising regularly with my husband first thing in the morning. Not watching too much national news, just a little local. Not watching television all day, just evenings. Staying busy with projects, hobbies, lots of reading, FaceTiming family and friends." - Alabama, USA

"Taking time for self-care! With trips being limited to only essentials, I'll admit my showering has not been daily. However, when it is time to clean up, it's been a slow, focused process! Doing hot showers (bath if I had a tub), shaving for no one but myself, hair masks, full face skin care, etc. Really putting myself in the moment helps me to turn off my mind for a bit. Music and fun podcasts go well with self-care too!"

"Online yoga every morning, daily walks locally, cooking for my family, reading lots, continuing professional education as I am an acupuncturist." - K.D., Wellington, New Zealand

"The thing that is bringing me the most joy is FaceTiming with my granddaughter who is 5 years old every afternoon for about 30 minutes. She lives only about five miles from me and since she was born I have spent at least one evening a week with her and my son and daughter-in-law, what we call Grandma Night. From the first week of staying inside I knew I would miss her terribly (I live alone, my husband passed away almost 8 years ago.) So I got the idea to FaceTime with her even though I had never used FaceTime before. That worked well though of course not the same as being in person together, so it gave me the idea to volunteer for other families to be a reading partner to their young children through FaceTime or video chat. I posted my availability to do this on Facebook and I have read in this way with another 10 children, two others besides my granddaughter daily, others weekly. It is a great gift to see their smiling faces and to be welcomed into their homes in this way and the parents have told me that it gives them a bit of a break." - J.J., New Jersey, USA

"Spending more time outside, raising baby chickens and ducks, baking, yoga, talking with friends. With time off from work I am discovering what really interests me!" - Connecticut, USA

Greeting the sun in the morning, taking time to listen to the songs of the birds, the trees, the wind, and the song in my heart. Letting my bare feet feel the earth. Spending time with sacred texts. Sensing into the inherent rhythm of simple movements and actions--chopping vegetables, sweeping the floor, folding laundry--everything can be a dance of holiness if I approach it that way. Letting our Christmas lights continue to twinkle in our window even though it is nearing the end of April. Because it feels like the time to keep all our little lights shining-- where passersby might see them, and take heart in the darkness. -- California, USA

"Working at home, as a longarm quilter. I enjoy it very much. My 2 cats are thrilled I'm home all day, every day." - Ohio, USA

"Taking a family walk each day - we always play hide and seek in the bushes then look for painted pebbles that people have been leaving out. We paint 2 new ones a day and find a

good hiding place. When we go back the next day they're normally gone so we look for them on the rest of the walk to see if we can find where they've been moved to. It's like a mini treasure hunt every day." - K.G., England

"Working on projects around the house. Connecting with friends and family that I don't connect with as much. Setting up video calls with people. Taking walks in the neighborhood. Walking to the grocery store rather than driving. Being grateful for having a nice home to hang out in, retirement savings that will keep me whole in these tough times." - C.V., Illinois, USA

"Keeping things in perspective - we are all doing the best we can under the circumstances. I hear many moms getting down on themselves about failing at all this, me included. No one asked for this, give yourself some grace!"

"Reading and learning about something new each day." - R.S., Maryland, USA

"Walking outside daily, knitting, playing the piano, writing, meditation, online yoga. During this time, I'm learning the difference between being an introvert, and being a hermit. I'm much more patient with my introvert-self, feeling freer to connect in ways that are more authentic, understanding my hermit-self is a much smaller piece of me than I thought." - Wisconsin, USA

"Reading with a lit candle and a glass of wine, working on my writing project, doing some meditation, yoga or gym videos, taking the time to cook. Let's try to look out for the positive effects this situation may have on our lives: a time to slow down, reflect on what's really important, the simple comforts of life." - France

"De-cluttering, walking and enjoying the spring weather outdoors." - Alabama, USA

"Playing board games with my husband, watching videos of my grandchildren, playing my organ (lucky to have one in my home), eating healthy foods, exercising daily, sharing homemade bread with neighbors every week. People I know are spending time doing things they haven't 'had time for' in a long time. My hope is that life won't return to 'normal', but that we will all seek a new normal - one that keeps us in touch with ourselves and the people we've been caring for during this abnormal time. The schools are shut down and the kids are spending time with their parents and families. No super-packed schedules. Back to the way it was when I grew up in the '50s. It was a good time - now is a good time - and it will be a good time going forward. It may be different, but it will still be good, but only if we make it so." - J.B., Utah, USA

"Writing snail mail letters." - Illinois, USA

"Watching Matlock with my kids. Kids have their own concerns around COVID-19. For us, school closures, ballet, baseball, swimming have made our kids realize they don't get to see their friends. They don't always understand the economic and health impact. It's important to address it in a sensitive, age-appropriate way." - Vancouver, British Columbia

"Learning Spanish, hiking, cleaning, reading, yardwork. This situation is out of our control. Do the best you can." - Connecticut, USA

"I'm trying to remember to add to my gratitude list." - Oregon, USA

The world as we know it has slowed down. On a warm day, the kind for which April is known, I spotted a woman playing guitar in the field across from my house. As I got closer, I recognized the melody as "Happy Birthday." She went over the notes with such care and precision, patiently starting again when she didn't get the sequence quite right. If she noticed my presence she didn't let on, singing softly for an audience of one, as if placed there purely for my enjoyment. Perhaps she was rehearsing for someone - I'll never know.

We cannot tune into the great suffering of this time without also allowing ourselves the moments of relief, connection, and reverence it brings. We cannot rush to return to normal without first recognizing that normal is fluid and far from guaranteed. We cannot look for answers without pausing to ask ourselves, "What are we afraid to question?"

Perhaps the paradoxes of our lives are not meant to be reconciled but simply to be held. When we welcome them, we see that we are not limited by their presence but expanded. It's ok to feel sad one day and uplifted the next. It's ok to grieve the loss of routine while embracing time at home. It's ok to be discouraged by the numbers while being inspired by ripples of kindness. It's ok to fall short while feeling proud of yourself for trying.

We are being called as a collective to embrace the unknown. While for many this can induce feelings of fear, it can also be an opportunity to feel grounded in the groundless. When you look back on this time, I hope you are able to hold space for the deep mysteries for which there were no answers, but that enabled you to live with greater awareness, humble gratitude, and renewed appreciation for the fullness of your ever-changing experience.

Many thanks to those who volunteered their coping skills. While I was unable to include all responses, I am most grateful to everyone who replied and touched by the openness, humor, and vulnerability with which you shared.

Be-the-change: As you go about your week, tune into the paradoxes that surround you. When you feel afraid or sad, be mindful of what these moments might be trying to teach you. When you feel joyful or relaxed, let yourself sink into your body and appreciate its steady companionship. Be gentle with yourself and those around you as we ride this tremendous wave of uncertainty.