

Growing Up Again (and Again)

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“Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark,” writes Rebecca Solnit in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. “That’s where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go” (4). In early 2020, these words would’ve tasted sweet on my tongue and lit a fire in my belly. Eager to maintain momentum after passing my comprehensive exams and ready to pursue the research questions for my dissertation project, I would’ve taken Solnit’s call as an ontological challenge: be open to the unknown and step bravely into the dark of your PhD journey.

And then COVID-19.

What began as rumors I and my first-year composition students thought were “just overreactions” quickly turned into a WHO-sanctioned pandemic. The rapid rate of infection in big Asian and European cities was difficult to imagine against the rural Southern backdrop of our day-to-day. Next thing we knew, our university president announced that the physical school campus would close after spring break and move to online learning until April 5. As words like “social distancing” and “flatten the curve” became part of the vernacular, that return date moved to “who knows?” Then came the theories bordering conspiracy: the National Guard is mobilizing, the entire nation is locking down, toilet paper gathering is essential. Erring on the side of caution, I found myself at the local grocery store, picking up frozen pizza, canned beans, and other inexpensive foods with generous expiration dates. I paused to snap photos of the barren shelves where toilet paper, paper towels, hand sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes once sat. Things were starting to sink in, albeit slowly.

With my pantry gradually resembling a doomsday prepper’s and with only my own mouth to feed, I was ready to weather the storm of pandemic as I had all previous hurdles as a single, twentysomething graduate student: alone. Thoughts of self-isolation seemed daunting until I realized that this “new normal” hadn’t dramatically changed my

daily routine. I was already moving about my day alone; sequestering myself in an on-campus office to read, write, and grade alone; bringing work home to do alone. The threat of coronavirus, I thought, was just another PSI unit in the pressure cooker that is graduate school. As a serial, introverted “yes” person and with the job market looming in the periphery, I’d been so busy spreading myself thin that being lonely never crossed my mind. I was adulting, damnit.

This image of myself came crashing down when my father (a man who calls, maybe, twice a year to make sure that I’m still alive) summoned me home, a three-hour drive away. “Your mom and I just heard that states will go on lockdown soon, so you need to leave your place and come home immediately,” he said matter-of-factly. This request posing as a command didn’t register at first. “Home” was my apartment, my academics, my teaching. I hadn’t called my parents’ home “home” for well over seven years. I had a job that allowed me to pay rent and buy frozen pizza. I had a life wholly outside of the ecosystem I grew up in, which enabled me to try on versions of myself barred throughout childhood. I resisted the summons for a few days, registering it as an affront to my singleness and my ability to care for myself, until I learned that my brothers were also returning home. The youngest, a senior in college, got evicted from campus housing when his school moved completely online weeks before mine. He said premature goodbyes to his friends of four years, packed up his belongings, and moved in with my parents. His girlfriend, unable to return to her home state due to travel restrictions, moved in as well. My other brother, a fourth-year medical student, would also be en route as his clinical rotations and final classes had either been canceled or relegated to Zoom. The choice now was between canned beans and my complete family, the latter being an extremely rare occurrence. With academic conferences canceled and the rest of my semester transitioning online, I could make this move. COVID-19 kicked the door open and made “home” the unknown. I chose to go through the door from where I’d originally come.

Giving myself a two-week limit, I drove home and set up camp in my childhood room, immediately feeling like a kid in an adult’s body. *You’re just here to humor dad and convince him not to worry*, I thought. A younger me I barely recognized smiled through a picture frame someone had placed on a nightstand. Nostalgia tugged at the heart-strings, but my head quickly reminded me how different things were

now—how much that little girl let go of in favor of becoming her own, thinking differently and for herself, pursuing a career in the humanities that her relatives didn't understand because it went off script. In an effort to preserve that distinction, I projected a rather self-inflated "I'm busy" ethos to my family. While I did have a terrifying to-do list, I was more desperate to keep pace with a self-imposed academic tempo than I was with acclimating to their dynamic. Plus, I didn't want to be a bother. Even though I'd been invited to the house, part of me felt like I was disrupting. I was an extra mouth to feed, an extra body leaving dead skin cells on the floor. Who would want to care for and accommodate that?

This question and my other personal hang-ups immediately took a back seat as the news cycle took center stage. I watched as Italy's pandemic-related death count reached an all-time high and Spain's began to rise exponentially. A few days after my arrival, I learned that COVID-19 cases were in my parents' county as well as in the one I'd left behind. With grandparents nearby and a father continuing to work in the medical field, the threat of infection was no longer something we saw on the news in a different country. It was at our doorstep, maybe even on our hands as we scrubbed soap for twenty seconds any time we touched something. Our relatives in South Korea, seeing case numbers in the US double and triple each day, offered to mail us hand sanitizer. I expressed mutual concern for their safety and health, but they told me *geogjeong-ma*, don't worry. Their country had somewhat contained the virus, had tested thousands of people, were actively contact-tracing infected individuals. Mine had just become number one in the world for most confirmed cases.

With each passing day, my academic life and wounded pride receded like a wave returning to the ocean, back to the overwhelming unknown that I thought I could skillfully sail. This new unknown was lethal, tearing through the globe with unprecedented speed, filling my belly not with fire but with knots. I worried for my nurse and doctor friends and family who were in need of proper personal protective equipment. I worried for my peers with family and bases overseas, their countries' borders disallowing reentrance. I worried for my colleagues with dissertation defenses coming up and threats of Zoom-bombing on their minds. I worried for my students who didn't have access to necessary technologies, whose parents were contracting the virus and/or losing their jobs, whose books and notes were captive in

dorm rooms to which they couldn't return, whose mental health issues worsened by the day. I worried for family friends who'd recently closed their bistro and laid off several employees. I worried for the mail carriers, the retail workers, the furloughed, the immunocompromised, the elderly; the list continued. Fear nursed the worry and gave birth to paralysis. I tried to accomplish academic tasks—things that felt so important a week ago—but couldn't focus. My reading and writing seemed useless in light of the pandemic and what people around the world were going through.

"I'm sorry I'm so useless," I said to my mom as we washed dishes together one evening. She paused and put down a soapy dish.

"Why would you say that?" she asked.

"I feel like I'm not pulling my weight. I'm not paying you rent or buying groceries. I feel bad that you and Dad have to take care of me during this crazy time," I explained, picking up her dish and rinsing it.

A beat of silence.

"You are *ridiculous*," she replied, laughing and also looking a bit heartbroken. "This is not a place where you have to earn your place. We asked you to come here; we didn't want you to be alone in your apartment. I have zero expectation for you to 'pull your weight,' whatever that means. Nobody knows what's happening right now. We're all in survival mode. Just exist, ok? That's all you need to do right now."

She opened another door to the unknown. How do I "just exist"? If I'm not contributing something meaningful, responding to a call, or checking something off of my to-do list, what am I? What purpose do I have?

And then I heard myself, a quiet voice that prompted more questions. Did I actually believe that deliverables and productivity defined my worth? Were the "take a mental health day" and "be kind to yourself" emails I sent to my students just paying lip service? Was the stress of academic life, the incessant push to work, work, work, the motivator of my daily behaviors and action? To what end? At what cost?

The world was exploding and here I was having a full-blown existential crisis. And over someone expressing care—someone telling me that I wasn't a bother, that I didn't have to prove something or overthink to feel worthy and accepted, that I could just be as I was for a second instead of anxiously mapping out my next ten steps.

In this space of sounding out the unknown, I caught a first honest glimpse of myself. She was tired and burned out but still running

on fumes. Since energy was in short supply, she was obsessed with efficiency, growing impatient with things like flowery adjectives and essays that didn't make "the point" immediately clear. She forgot that she enjoyed meandering narratives and getting lost in ideas. She forgot that her brothers were an absolute joy to be around. She forgot that productively engaging with her parents required time and energy, resources that she'd channeled exclusively to academic outlets. She realized that her identity and goals were still in flux, still uncertain. In some ways, she was still a child in an adult's body.

In light of these reflections, I took a day off for the first time in a while. A Saturday. A 24-hour timespan to listen to podcasts, walk outside, cook a meal with my siblings, and sleep without setting an alarm. Gradually, I began measuring out a few hours each day to actually connect with someone or something, not out of obligation or to check a box. I privileged a FaceTime call with a friend undergoing a fourteen-day quarantine over knocking out another reading. I left my room and started studying with my brothers who were also in the throes of academic work. I was able to help console my brother's girlfriend when she lost her job. I celebrated my birthday with friends over video chat on Facebook. I swept debris out of the driveway after tornadoes decimated areas just miles from our house. I helped care for an injured baby turtle that my brothers found in the rubble. We rescued and adopted out four puppies that someone abandoned in the woods near our house. My family learned how to play Exploding Kittens. I geared up with gloves and a disposable mask to go grocery shopping. I helped prepare dinner. I watered my mother's tomato plants. I folded my father's laundry. I called my grandparents.

Two weeks home turned into six. Now fluent in the rhythms of my family dynamic, I moved about my day with new, more balanced routines. I still worked to check things off of the to-do list and fulfill my professional commitments, but my evenings often ended in conversations with people rather than anxious nights alone. Perhaps this was life now, one where I opened myself up to other people and sought daily community more actively. Maybe a bit of togetherness, whether virtual or in person, is what we all needed to get through this horrific moment in time.

It wasn't until shelter-in-place orders started lifting that reality slapped me in the face. *No*, it said. *This isn't life now—this was a rare and fleeting moment to figure something out. The world continues to*

break. It's time to return and rebuild. I knew the easing of restrictions wouldn't be a return to the way things used to be and would only be a first step in a much longer process that would require careful, deliberate steps forward. At the same time, it signaled that I could not stay as or where I was. Though I wouldn't be gallivanting in crowded public areas, I wouldn't be forced into isolation anymore. My dad wouldn't have an argument for me to remain home with everyone. With my FYC course wrapped up and my research study ready to go, there was nothing keeping me from going back. So, I set a departure date and began packing up my things.

Before leaving, I cleaned my room, making sure to leave as few dead skin cells behind as possible. As I vacuumed, scrubbed, and tidied up things, I felt the ghosts of my adolescent selves follow me. They held my adult hands as I remade my bed with washed sheets, winked at me through picture frames on my nightstand. During my first night home, I feared them—feared turning into them again. I'd worked so hard to forage my own way, to sluff off the identities prescribed throughout childhood and early adulthood, to prove that I was a grownup who could hold her own. I'd conflated return with reversion.

Reversion, however, occurred the first few weeks when I returned to my apartment. With a new frozen pizza stashed away and only myself to account for, I threw myself back into the old routine and the emerging concerns I witnessed through my computer screen. My parents' home and lessons of togetherness quickly became a memory that I found easy to forget as my isolated environment prompted me to work. Wrinkled sticky notes with to-do lists dotted my desk, replaced by fresh ones written in anxious scribbles. Days would pass before I'd see another face besides my own in the mirror or leave the apartment for fresh air and vitamin D. The time I'd previously allocated to personal conversations or walks around the neighborhood morphed into a few extra hours to be "productive." As I made progress on projects, formed a new dent in my carpet from standing at my desk all day, and credited this alleged productivity to the extra effort I was exerting, I began thinking, *Did I just waste six weeks at home?* Within days of my return, the pendulum had swung back to go, go, go.

And then I began writing this essay.

In late March and early April, the CCCC Documentarian Team administered five morning and evening surveys, each hitting my email inbox the same week I drove to my parents' house. What began as

my obligation to a box I semi-arbitrarily checked to be a volunteer Documentarian at the Conference on College Composition and Communication soon turned into a lifeline as I wrestled with what it meant to be “home” during a pandemic. Revisiting my answers to the survey questions—e.g., what do you hope to accomplish today, what emotions are invoked by your reflections, describe the scene around you, etc.—I read another unrecognizable version of myself. Who was this person calling a “walk in the sunlight” an “accomplishment”? She expressed feelings of gratitude for the opportunity to “tune my ears more intentionally to those around me.” She even described and reveled in the sound of people snoring in the next room, the familiar scent of floral shampoo, the buzz of a light as she sat at a desk in her childhood room to write about the mundane moments of her day.

Another door opened.

Shortly after re-reading my survey responses, my mother called out of the blue. We hadn’t talked since I’d left. I answered, feigning happiness to mask feeling annoyed by this unanticipated cadence in my work rhythm. I had this essay to write and other deadlines to meet.

“What are you up to?” she asked.

“Oh, you know. Just the same routine. Busy, busy,” I replied, hoping my repetition would signal something to her. “Is everything ok?”

“Mmhhh, everything’s ok. I was just calling to call,” she said.

“I see.” The happiness façade and my patience were beginning to unravel. “Well, I’m glad everything is ok. Do you need anything?”

“Nope, I don’t need anything. Are you eating ok? Have enough food?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Well,” she added after a brief lull, “you seem busy. I’ll let you go. Just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Ok, sounds good! Talk to you later, Mom!”

“Also—”

“Yes?”

“. . . never mind.”

“No no, say it.”

“Just—don’t forget to be human.”

I hung up feeling slapped in the face again, unmoored by another profound one-liner from my mother. At first, the hackles went up. “Don’t forget to be human”? Didn’t I meet my “being human” quota after giving up so much time to be with family? Wasn’t I the *most*

human in the family since I was dedicating my professional life to the *humanities*? Doesn't my scholastic striving for attuned, empathetic, civic-minded rhetoric speak for itself?

No. No, no, no.

Why feed the academic machine human messages and not offer the same to my mother? Why do this "human work" for everyone else except for the ones who are the closest? Why talk the talk and obsess over research questions that seek empowerment, connection, and understanding when I cannot apply these concepts in a simple phone call or to myself?

The memory of my COVID-19 quarantine at home, an event that was never in the cards, screamed these questions into my ears and offered a new ontological challenge. The past, which I learned was a very dynamic present, called me not to revert but to re-version myself by stepping perpetually into the unknown of my humanity, a process that could not happen on an island unto myself. It forced the willingly unacknowledged parts of my daily habits into an uncomfortable consciousness. I came to realize that though self-sufficiency and hard work were key to surviving graduate school and an academic career, they weren't the measure of all things or sole characteristics that secured my worth and defined my interactions with others. I'd known this in theory all along; I'd heard it articulated by my professors, colleagues, and in books I read. Believing it, however, required re-versioning the child who would always be growing up again and again.

WORK CITED

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Penguin Books, 2005.