The Art of Isolation

Amsterdam in Corona Times

Kimmen Sjölander

Almost exactly a year ago, in late March 2020, eighteen months after my husband and I left California to move to Amsterdam, taking advantage of his UK passport to get into the EU before Brexit closed those doors, I opened my email one morning to find a poem. It was sent from a woman I knew only professionally, a serious woman, a scientist; not the kind of person—or so I thought—to send poetry to near-strangers. The poem began like this:

> Stop. Just stop.
> It is no longer a request. It is a mandate.
> We will help you.

It was, as you may have recognized, Kristin Flyntz's poem, "An Imagined Letter from COVID-19 to Humans," and the email I'd received was one of those email chains that sprang up like mushrooms in the rain during the first days and weeks after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. If you're one of the dozen or so people in the world who haven't been on the receiving or sending end of a chain email, the basic idea is that the number of people contacted will grow exponentially as long as those receiving an email forward them to others. It's rather like a virus spreading through a population. If everyone followed through with this poetry-exchange chain, very quickly the whole planet would be overrun with poems. Depending on the poems sent, this could be a good thing. In the case of viruses, obviously, it's not.

There was no question about whether I would join in the poetry exchange. When my husband and I packed up our house in California, knowing we'd have limited space in Amsterdam, I'd carted almost half our library to used bookstores. But I'd kept all my poetry books. The question was: which poem would I send?

My favorite poem at that moment was by a thirteenth-century Zen poet. I'd added it to my email signature as a kind of mindfulness mantra during a major health scare almost a decade earlier. I'd had some symptoms that concerned my doctor; she'd ordered tests; the results hadn't looked good. They'd looked, in fact, like uterine cancer. The earliest date for surgery was two weeks out, then there was a two-week wait for the biopsy results to return from pathology. All told, I had a month to think about all the what-ifs and to get royally worked up.

That month somehow, fortuitously, fell during the semester break, so instead of preparing and giving lectures, grading, writing and submitting papers and grant proposals, directing research, and doing committee work, I was able to spend endless hours sitting in my backyard imagining my demise. After the first couple of weeks, during which I grieved over every life I'd wanted to have, but now might not, it was a surprisingly pleasant time.

When I bought the house a dozen years earlier, the house was small and in poor shape.

The plot, although large—one-third of an acre—was little more than an expanse of baked sod halfway up a west-facing hillside with a hard-scrabble slope covered with assorted cactus below the house and a stand of pine trees above. A redwood deck wrapping around two sides of the house was rotting in places. At the time, I was a newly minted PhD and single mom with a ton of student loan and credit card debt, and I was barely able to afford the mortgage; but anyway, I hardly cared about the interior. I figured we could step around the most treacherous section of the deck and live with ratty carpets. I bought the house for the seclusion, for the view of the rolling hills, for the two large valley oaks spreading their gnarled limbs like beneficent wood spirits. And because this was California, for the school district.

I was working at a Silicon Valley start-up, but my salary barely covered the basics, and it wasn't until I remarried—an English physicist who courageously joined a family that included twins in middle school—that we began the work of transforming that ugly plot into a garden and fixing the many problems left by the previous DIY owners.

By the time I was contemplating my mortality, we'd been digging and planting and mulching for a decade. I'd painted and sculpted and composed in my youth, but had put all that aside after my divorce when practical considerations took precedence over romantic ideas about being an artist. The garden was my primary art form in those years during which I left industry and joined the faculty at Berkeley. It was a collaboration with nature, and it turned into an ecosystem that beckoned wildlife from miles around. We planted bamboo, palms and ferns, lavenders and sages and poppies, succulents and cactus, and a hundred other species from around the world. Birds I'd never seen before nested in the crowns of the palms, eating the seeds, singing. Lizards came out of nowhere. Deer began taking naps in the shade beneath the date palm. Foxes showed up. The largest oak was home to endless generations of squirrels, one of whom adopted us; we called it Maximus, thinking it was a big fat boy squirrel, only to discover he was a she, and she had been pregnant, and soon there were a half-dozen baby Maximuses coming around for peanuts too. We had a wooden hot tub set into the deck; it was a magical space at night.

I do not miss any aspect of living in suburbia, but I do miss that garden.

Bertrand Russell wrote that every time he spoke to a savant he was convinced of the impossibility of happiness, but it was the opposite when he spoke with his gardener—an old man who drew so much delight from his battles with the rabbits (of which, Russell wrote, the gardener spoke "exactly as Scotland Yard speaks of Bolsheviks") that he gleefully cycled sixteen hilly miles to and from work daily.

It turns out to be hard to remain morose in an oasis with squirrels that come to eat out of your hands, deer peeking in the windows, hummingbirds hovering inches from your face, a scrub jay who comes when you call his name because he knows there's a peanut in it for him, and foxes playing on the garden furniture at night when you finally go back inside. I spent that month wandering around the garden, watering the plants, doing some light pruning, reading, writing in my journal, and not much else. I didn't want to see anyone other than my husband, or even talk to people. I read poetry, the *Dhammapada*, Seneca's essay on the brevity of life. I read no scientific papers at all. I listened to a lot of music. And I stopped following politics.

That month had a happy ending: it wasn't cancer, after all. But it laid the seeds in me that grew into a vision of a new way of living, a path that would take us to Amsterdam.

And it was a poem that I first read during that semester break, by the Zen poet Wu-Men, that I returned to that morning in Amsterdam, eight years later, at the beginning of the COVID pandemic when that poetry-chain email arrived with the invitation to pick a poem and send it.

> Ten thousand flowers in spring,
> the moon in autumn,
> a cool breeze in summer,
> snow in winter.
> If your mind isn't clouded
> by unnecessary things,
> this is the best season of your life.

I wanted to send the poem, but I got stuck on that penultimate line: "If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things."

The problem was, I knew enough about viruses from my work in biomedical research for my mind to be totally clouded over by all sorts of things: the bull-headed bravado of political leaders claiming the virus would disappear, like *magic!*; the unwillingness in western countries to mandate masks, even when evidence was mounting that the virus was air-borne; the disinformation campaigns on social media. All of it was building in me to a crescendo; I was as socked in by worries as San Francisco in the summer fog.

I needed a way to handle all that angst, but I couldn't ignore the evidence that things were about to become very, very difficult. To put it more concisely: I was in desperate need of inner peace but suspicious of a facile optimism that ignored reality. From an evolutionary perspective, anxiety has always seemed a fundamentally protective trait. Humans would have gone extinct eons ago if we'd lacked the capacity to respond appropriately to potentially serious problems. And that includes imagining just how bad things could get.

And the last thing I wanted was to send a poem that made the people receiving it feel inadequate, or ashamed, if they were simply unable to view this as the best time of their lives; if they were, like me, unsure that this story would have a happy ending.

Humans are story-telling animals. We have our own private mythologies; we tell ourselves stories about who we are and what has happened to us and what will happen next; about our people and our enemies, who are sometimes the same; about what things mean. We are the heroes of our sagas and the tragic victims. The stories we tell and the stories others tell us about ourselves, the stories we listen to and those we reject—all have the power to transform, to shrink or distort or expand us. But how can we know what stories to tell ourselves about what is happening to us before we know how the stories end? An old Buddhist parable asks exactly that.

Long ago, there was an old man who lived alone with his son on a small farm. One morning the old man discovered that his horse had broken down the fence and escaped. It was his only horse, and he relied on it for plowing the fields, bringing crops to market, carrying firewood. His neighbors heard about the loss and came by to express their sympathy.

"Such bad luck!" they exclaimed.

"Good luck, bad luck. Who knows?" the old man said.

The next day the horse was back, followed by two wild horses, magnificent stallions. The neighbors came by again.

"How lucky you are!" they said, admiring the stallions.

The old man just shrugged. “Good luck, bad luck. Who knows?”

The next day, the old man’s son, just eighteen years old, tried to mount one of the stallions. But the stallion bucked and threw the boy off, breaking his leg. The neighbors heard the boy screaming in pain and came by.

“Such terrible luck!” they said, secretly happy it wasn’t their son who had suffered that tragedy. All of them knew that broken bones like these might not heal, that the boy might always be lame.

“Good luck, bad luck. Who knows?” the old man said.

The day after that, the ruler’s military officials came by. They were looking for young men to conscript into the army. But when they saw the young man in bed, his leg bandaged and bloody, they only nodded and went to the next house where the neighbors lived with their eighteen-year-old son. The next day, the neighbors came by.

“How lucky you are!” they said, resenting his good fortune.

You know what the old man said.

There is no question that for millions of people around the world, COVID-19 has been horrific. In addition to the millions of deaths worldwide, the restrictions imposed in attempts to control the spread have caused tremendous economic and personal hardship. Continuing and often disabling illness—long COVID—have left many with uncertain futures. And at times when we have all needed the support of our family and friends, we have been isolated and alone.

Is this time a terrible misfortune? Yes, most certainly, for many. Can we, nevertheless, find a silver lining? Or is the silver lining something we ourselves must make?

A silver lining can be found, or stitched, in almost every situation, including the most grim. Viktor Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, wrote of his time as a prisoner in Auschwitz. As a physician and psychiatrist, Frankl brought with him a framework to observe and understand his own experiences and those of fellow prisoners, and he took that understanding into his work after the war. Frankl’s system, which he termed logotherapy (*logos* is the Greek word for meaning), was based on the observation that “striving to find meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man.” Prisoners who were able to find meaning in their experiences were more able to have survived the horrors—both spiritually and physically.

Let’s pause a second to reflect on Frankl’s central thesis. It’s appealing on a philosophical level, but is it supported by science? I’d argue it is. Consider what it means to be human. Our name for ourselves—*Homo sapiens*—means *wise man*. (Whether we’re truly wise is debatable, given how we treat the planet; I’ll return to that later.) According to some religious systems, God has placed man just below the angels, separated from the rest of the animal kingdom; we have souls, but they do not.

What we know from science is that *Homo sapiens* evolved from a common ancestor with all other forms of life, including bacteria, archaea, and eukaryotes. On the Tree of Life, we are placed on a small branch with the other great apes, also known as *hominidae*: chimpanzees (including the common chimp and bonobo), orangutans, and gorillas. Phylogenetic reconstructions of the family tree show that humans and chimps are more closely related to each other than either are to gorilla; from a gorilla’s perspective, humans probably seem like another type of chimpanzee, except for being immeasurably more dangerous.

On the other hand, a few small differences in our genomes have resulted in some striking changes; notably, our much larger brain size with the corresponding increase in intelligence.

What is all this intelligence for? It’s for our ability to learn. The first humans needed that cognitive capacity to adapt to almost every environment on the planet. Some of this intelligence is used analytically, logically. But much of it is intuitive. Our brains want to see patterns and to have explanations for things. We see faces and figures in shadows on the walls, gods and animals in the stars and clouds overhead. Our brains are remarkably efficient at classifying things: cats, dogs, horses, tables, chairs. We learn from experience; we extrapolate from past events to predict the future, and from people’s actions to infer their character. From the first days after birth, human infants pay close attention to the world around them. It is that urge to understand, to derive meaning, that Frankl is referring to. It’s what Richard Feynman meant by *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, but it’s not just for theoretical physicists.

There were two essential secrets to those who survived. First, what they arrived with. Prisoners, said Frankl, “who were used to a rich intellectual life may have suffered much pain, but the damage to their inner selves was less. They were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom.”

Second, some prisoners were able to view Auschwitz as an opportunity to grow spiritually.

Those who survived mentally and emotionally intact drew on inner resources set in place potentially years before, but it was also a decision they made: to cultivate personal growth not only despite suffering, but through it: to view their captivities as a kind of spiritual fit-trail.

This is not to say such heroism is easy, just that it is possible. Most people, understandably, do not fare so well in such terrible circumstances. My own father was a Jewish POW in Germany; the trauma from his experiences never completely left him.

Humans are social animals; the degree of social, physical, and emotional isolation stemming from COVID-19 have been painful for all but the most introverted among us. The Buddha, when asked about the relative importance of the sangha (the community of the Buddha’s followers) for a disciple’s personal spiritual practice, replied that the sangha was not simply important, it was everything.

Extroverts may have had a harder time under COVID restrictions than introverts, but most of us need a mixture of socializing and solo time. Even with our partners (and perhaps especially with our partners) we need ways to balance the need for private space—Virginia Woolf’s room of one’s own—and common space to connect with others. Both are problematic under COVID.

In times of trouble and danger, we often seek to isolate ourselves. Many medieval castles were surrounded by water-filled moats, so that under attack those within could pull up their drawbridges, creating artificial islands; and some plants use a mechanism called the hypersensitive response in reaction to pathogens, killing off healthy cells in a circle around a lesion to create a barrier to further invasion—another kind of island.

The ultra-wealthy have all sorts of recourse when it comes to creating safe, comfortable places to hide away from the pandemic. A headline in the *New York Times* half-way through the year read: “The Island Brokers Are Overwhelmed.” But you don’t have to be wealthy to go live on a tropical island during COVID. My friend Gabriela,

a professor-scientist with no particular financial resources but tons of chutzpah, flew from her crowded east-coast city to the Caribbean near the beginning of the pandemic after all her classes went online, planning to wait out the storm. She thought she'd be on the island a few months. She's still there, living in a modest rental apartment, teaching and meeting with her students on Zoom. She feels a little lonely and isolated, she says; but she's gotten both jabs now, as has everyone she knows, so as long as COVID is so poorly controlled on the mainland, she hopes to stay on that island.

The connection between islands and isolation is not accidental: the English words isolation and isolated have their most recent origin in the French *isolé*; but if you go back a bit further, you'll find the Latin root, *insulātus*, made into an island, from *insula, isle*.

I live on an island, too, I reminded Gabriela, although I knew the comparison wasn't fair. Gabriela is a couple of hours away, by plane, from the kind of cultural life and friends she'd grown attached to; we, by contrast, live in the capital of the Netherlands.

My husband and I arrived in Amsterdam in November 2018, renting an apartment in the Jordaan while we looked for an apartment to buy. The first COVID-19 cases emerged in Wuhan on December 31, 2019, giving us one full year of normal life. We found an apartment on a small island built in the seventeenth century, in an area called the Westelijke Eilanden (westerly islands) and moved there in November 2019. COVID-19 was classified as a pandemic on March 11, 2020; three days later, on March 13, the WHO declared Europe the new global epicenter.

During that first year in Amsterdam, in the pre-Corona times, we were almost never home. Most of the time we were out and about. We walked from our apartment to the Saturday organic farmers' market at Noordermarkt, to the shops and cinema on the Haarlemmedijk, to the restaurants and old brown cafes of the Jordaan, and to the Westerpark with its summer festivals and winter ice skating. We walked along the canals of the Grachtengordel, admiring the grand architecture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; we visited the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksmuseum; we went to concerts at the Concertgebouw, where we once heard a mind-blowing piano recital by a beautiful Russian woman of works by Debussy, Chopin, and Satie. We traveled abroad, walking to Amsterdam's Central Station to catch trains to London and cities across the Netherlands and the EU, and to Schiphol airport for flights further afield.

Some folks had warned us, before we moved to Amsterdam, that it would be difficult to make friends, but our experience has been very different. It could be the incredibly friendly group at our squash club, or the local writing community, or the fact that Amsterdam is one of the most cosmopolitan cities on the planet, so they're open to newcomers, or just plain luck, but within a few weeks of moving to Amsterdam, we were somehow included in several social circles that combined Dutch, assorted Europeans, several Australians and Brits, a few Asians, and a couple of Americans. We gave and were invited to all sorts of parties, went with friends to movies, concerts, literary and political events. We sampled almost every restaurant, cafe, and pub within a fifteen-minute radius of our home.

But when Corona arrived, all that connectivity to people and European culture and the rest of the world came to a stop.

COVID-19 rates are up, hospitalizations are up, deaths are up. Simultaneously, Dutch vaccination levels are close to the worst in Europe, which is lagging behind the US and the UK for all sorts of political, economic, and logistical reasons. Although Amsterdam has imposed a partial lockdown and a curfew, these don't help much, as both mask-wearing and social-distancing protocols are largely ignored. With all that virus circulating in the population and with people not wearing masks and refusing to isolate if they test positive, I don't feel safe going into crowded areas and shops. This, along with the yucky (cold, gray, windy, drizzly) weather much of the year, limits our wanderings around the city.

When Gabriela first went off to her island hideaway, she was a little jealous of our situation in Amsterdam; now things are reversed. We're effectively even more isolated than Gabriela, except with much worse weather. And we can't walk down to the beach and go snorkeling.

All this is to say that life this last year under the shadow of COVID-19 has been so different from the first in every aspect—the physical setting of our days, how we spend our time, who we spend time with, what we think about, what we worry about, how we feel inside—that our first year in Amsterdam, pre-COVID, feels like a lifetime ago. We could have been in an entirely different country. Or we could have been entirely different people.

All this change is disorienting. I suppose that can be a good thing, but it's not always comfortable. Major life changes are difficult for most people, and even before COVID came around, my husband and I were both dealing with a few biggies: moving to another country, selling our home, retiring from work we loved, leaving friends and family behind. (And, for me, leaving the garden.)

So it's a little hard, but it's far from tragic. If there's a silver lining to the isolation and limitations of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, it's in the invitation to slow down.

Bertrand Russell, the Nobel Laureate, logician, and activist, in his outstanding small volume *The Conquest of Happiness*, wrote about the value of enduring what he called *fruitful monotony*.

> I do not like mystical language, and yet I hardly know how to express what I mean without employing phrases that sound poetic rather than scientific. Whatever we may wish to think, we are creatures of Earth; our life is part of the life of the Earth, and we draw our nourishment from it just as the plants and animals do. The rhythm of Earth life is slow; autumn and winter are as essential to it as spring and summer, and rest is as essential as motion.

Along with that invitation to slow down, we've come to know our neighbors. In avoiding exposure to COVID, we've stayed closer to home, keeping mostly to the Westelijke Eilanden. At our first apartment, in pre-Corona times, we knew only a few of our neighbors. That's changed. Amsterdammers in general are sociable folk, but the people who live in the Westelijke Eilanden are particularly friendly. We work together in the community garden, planting tulips and daffodils and other flowering bulbs. On warm days, people pull their chairs and tables out onto the sidewalks, with glasses of wine or tea. Puppies are everywhere, begging to be petted, introducing their humans to others. The canals froze this

year, the first time in a decade; it was a festive time, with the snow crunching underfoot, people skating up and down the canals. It's like living in a painting by Breugel. Everyone who lives in the Westelijke Eilanden says the same thing: we live in a village.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, wrote that he who travels abroad much has many acquaintances and few friends. Seneca could have been describing a typical American academic. It's wonderful to live in a village, to know the local people, and to be known.

That's a really lovely silver lining, if you ask me.

But is there a silver lining for the world in this COVID pandemic? Or, to put it differently, in the language of logotherapy, what is the meaning of this time?

At any moment in time, all sorts of futures are possible—an uncountably infinite number of possible futures. Which future happens is only partly outside our control. To a great extent, it's up to us.

And just as in research, when certain ideas are so ripe that multiple groups can simultaneously invent a novel approach (often leading to battles over patents and Nobel Prizes), the meaning of certain points in history is not only what ends up happening, but what could have happened. It's the choice, the branch-point, the fork in the road, and the decision made. It's not just the inn you find by accident after many hours on the road and the person you meet there who becomes the mother or the father of your children, and the stories you tell for years later about how lucky you were that you didn't turn left instead of right; or the person next to you at the bar who puts something in your drink when your back is turned so that you wake up hours later in a room, alone, with your wallet and your dignity gone, and the stories you will tell then. When all of that is in the future, the meaning of a moment is in all the possible paths forward. Some lead to justice and a healthier planet, but some do not.

The meaning of this moment in time, of these Corona times, is in what path we choose to take. That is the meaning of this time.

Kristin Flyntz's poem, her imagined letter from COVID-19 to humans, has gone viral. The entire poem is astonishing, but here's another snippet:

> Despite what you might think or feel,
> we are not the enemy.
> We are Messenger. We are Ally.
> We are a balancing force.
> We are asking you:
> To stop, to be still, to listen;
> To move beyond your individual concerns
> and consider the concerns of all

COVID-19 is a global pandemic and must be tackled globally, following the science. COVID-19 is airborne. It can linger for hours in the air indoors; it's not enough to stay a few feet away from the person next to you.

Your safety from being infected from COVID depends on your neighbor's willingness to wear a mask, and because so many people with COVID are asymptomatic, all of us have to wear masks. Herd immunity depends on most people being vaccinated, and that depends on global supply chains and wealthy countries not hogging vaccines. John Donne wrote that no man is an island. We are, as vulnerable human animals, dependent on each other. The wealthy are more protected, without doubt, but no group is immune. We are all locked within our skins; not

omniscient, not omnipotent, not immortal; we are hurt and hurting and afraid. But we share this experience of being human, with all those limitations, with each other.

One of the core practices of Buddhism involves *metta*, lovingkindness. A Tibetan Buddhist variant of this practice—which is closely related to Dr. Kristin Neff's work on

image info

self-compassion—involves being mindful that when you are suffering, whatever the cause, that all around the world, at exactly that moment, thousands of people, perhaps millions, are suffering the same pain as you.

We can look at that teaching as a way of feeling less alone, knowing that others share in our pain. But we can also take it a step further. We can turn it around and use our own suffering to gain empathy for others.

Our isolation, then, can be a tool to pry open what has separated us from others. If we are struggling with the restrictions imposed on us by the pandemic response, whatever they are, we can remember so many others who have been imprisoned, unjustly, and for longer periods, and in worse circumstances, physically or in other ways.

The human sense of being apart from nature, above all other life forms, is even more dangerous. We have treated the planet as if it were indestructible, like a child beating on his mother's chest with all his might. But it is not so. As Sir David Attenborough pointed out in his 2020 documentary *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and a Vision for the Future*:

> We have come as far as we have because we are the cleverest creatures to have ever lived on Earth. But if we are to continue to exist, we will require more than intelligence. We will require wisdom.

Wisdom and the will to change: this would be the greatest silver lining. ✦