

Aging in the Time of Covid19

Word Count (1968)

Covid19

December 2020

62 years old

Groceries

Somewhere in Covid my earlobes started drooping, heading back to the earth. I bought a beautiful pair of large, rose colored fresh water pearls online just before the word “pandemic” became the center of our worlds. I had planned to wear them out to dinner with friends for my birthday in February, which never happened. When I put them in to prepare for a family Zoom get together in June, my earlobes had sagged about a full centimeter. The lush, round pink pearls hung like bobbles on a Xmas tree. Not pert and forward looking but downward gazing and bulbous, the earlobe thinning out to a point. Aging is quickening.

Going out is different now. I gear myself up once a week to leave the house for grocery shopping. Double masked, hair under a hat so it does not come into contact with Covid, I am ready to face the world. I step outside my house and into my car, attention becomes focused on all I touch. A new sensibility has arisen: hyper awareness of body and environment.

I arrive at the grocery store, open the car door and step out. My awareness moves to the outer surface of my body and at the same time to everything around me. There. I have touched the grocery store carriage, now with both hands. It has happened. I have made my first physical contact with an object that could be coated in Covid. My hands will have to be sanitized. I leave my purse, which is backpack style, on my shoulders/ back so it does not touch the carriage. We all socially distance to the best of our ability in these narrow aisles

passing each other to get our food stuffs for the week. Eyes darting, momentarily meeting another above the mask. The rest of the information one usually needs to assess friend or foe cannot be seen now: no smile or taciturn frown. Just darting eyes. Faces covered in masks and darting eyes. Each package, each piece of fruit I touch and put in my carriage, I make a mental note of how it will need to be cleaned when I get home. Vigilance born of fear. Fear of the loss of control over the body, the life. Fear of being helpless and alone, intubated in an ICU. Aging and meeting death are quickening.

PMR: Polymyalgia Rheumatica

January 2015

57 years old

Several years ago, I asked the man I was living with to please move out. We had been together 16 years, but had clearly come to the end of our time together. Nothing was left but sadness and broken promises. Our home was a war zone, just like my childhood home. A month before he moved out I began having constant aches and pains in my shoulders and hips. It was winter and I chalked it up to the cold, dry air. A couple of weeks after he left, I awoke one cold morning, kitty huddled against my body, and as I attempted to lift my head and shoulders, I felt a pain so severe I could not move.

I was alone. My greatest fears realized; in deep physical pain, barely able to move, and no one to care for me. Pain like dry rubber bands pulled as taught as possible, just about to snap, seared throughout shoulders and hips.

Tightened torso, expulsion of breath, pushing through the pain, made movement doable.

“AHHHH!”

I yelled, and moved my arm on top of my chest.

“AHHHHH!”

I sat up.

“AHHHHH!”

I stood.

Then, a very slow shuffle to the kitchen to feed the cat and make tea. Bending over to get the cat food bowl was almost impossible. Every fiber of my awareness was in my body tracking up and down nerve lines to monitor movement. Any tea or food making, any dish washing or laundry had to be done very slowly, with elbows locked to my side to not engage my shoulders. After a month of this, I could no longer lift my arms.

Sitting up in bed was the only way I could sleep. In the middle of the night, in that odd mental space between dreaming and waking life, I found myself thinking of ways to take the arm off, put it beside the bed, and get some sleep. As if it might really be possible to just take the arm off for a while and separate from the constant pain. In grief, my immune system had turned on itself. Three months into this pain I am diagnosed with Polymyalgia Rheumatica (PMR) and put on Prednisone for 11 months.

Covid19

December 2020

62 years old

Groceries

Once back in the car, I grab my self-made bottle of hand sanitizer. I spray it all over my hands, wringing them appropriately, spraying more. “Don’t forget the finger tips”, I tell myself. Wiping and rubbing until all the fingers and palms are soaked in sanitizer. I do the

same with my car keys, steering wheel, and car door handle. Success! Another trip to the grocery store navigated with clarity. I hope.

Back home, the cleaning and disinfecting of everything I have bought begins. A mixture of one part bleach to five parts water is best, they say. Anything that can immediately come out of its packaging, does. Other things I know I won't use for a while have a resting place in the corner of the kitchen for at least 3 days. When the week's food purchases have all been wiped down with bleach and stored in their places, I take a shower.

On laundry days, I disinfect the hallway banisters and laundry machines after the tenants have used them. The handyman has come a couple of times in this first year of Covid to fix a window and the clothes dryer. I follow behind him with my bleach solution wiping down door handles and whatever else he may have touched. I am determined that today will not be the day I get Covid and wind up intubated in an ICU.

Car Accident

August 1977

19 years old

Hitchhiking through Guatemala with my boyfriend, we are picked up by a Honduran man, his son, and his son's friend sitting in the back. I slide into the car sitting next to his son's friend and my boyfriend slides in next to me. I am wedged between the two young men. In my broken Spanish, I tell the father driving the car that we are headed to Panajachel, a beautiful lake with several Mayan villages in a huge circle around its shores. I see the father take a pint bottle from under his seat and take a swig before we head out. I put my head back on the headrest to take a nap. The next thing I remember is the screeching of car tires. My eyes widen to see us smashing head long into an orange school bus.

Black out.

I lay in the road, people standing over me. I recognize their American accents.

“Praise Jesus”! An older woman in a pink dress says clutching her bible.

“Hold this child in your arms, dear God!” “Praise be to God in the highest”. Say several people at once in the small crowd staring down at me. Some of them are taking off the back fender of the car to brace my bleeding right leg.

Black out.

I awake and I am in the back of an ambulance. It is tiny inside and the ambulance bounces from side to side on the bumpy mountain road. I look down at my right leg and see my thigh bouncing in two parts, separated at the middle. I am screaming louder than I ever have in my life. The screaming helps alleviate the pain. All the pain is squeezed out of me through the pressure of screaming. It doesn't last long, however. The pain comes rushing back the moment I stop. My head is level with the windows. I see women dressed in intricately woven “tipicos” bursting in brilliant colors of woven fruits and vines against black cloth. Animals and women run in all directions as the ambulance and its siren pierce the air. Lightning bolts of pain enter my body at the smashed right elbow and sear through my brain, entering my right thigh, searing through my pelvis, entering my right ankle, searing the length of my whole body and ricocheting back from my brain to broken wrist, thigh, bleeding ankle, to heart. Then, bursting at my heart and again splintering back out through the pathways of my nervous system.

Black out.

Then next time I awake, I am low to the ground on a cot. Looking to my left I see two men who I later find out are the father and his son's friend lying on gurneys much higher off the ground than I. The son is not there as he died on impact. They are covered in blood and die later that day in this tiny clinic at the base of the Atitlán Volcano.

I don't know what is broken in me but I know I have to pee. I start to get up from the cot and realize immediately that it's not going to happen. My whole body feels like one mass of mass. No bones. I ask my boyfriend, who has only suffered a scratch, to please get me a towel to pee into. He does. I do.

Black out.

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May 2021

63 years old

I look around at all of the vulnerable trauma bodies just trying to buy groceries, go to the post office, take a walk. You don't know who you are infecting. You don't know who is infecting you. We are always infecting/affecting each other with either our vitriol or our inspiration. We are all carrying trauma from this pandemic, but our response-ability is always present. Courage to be in the body and face the pain yields a deepening of what I always knew to be true; this body is my temple, and it is also aging, heading back to the earth.

I want to remember the various phases of my life, inner and outer, in this year of pandemic lockdown. I want to remember how angry I was in the beginning of Covid at all the cancelled projects, the misinformation, the lies, the mounting rage in the body politic, the reckoning in our country that has only just begun. I want to remember all the intimacy that grew in the online platforms – how we all have been able to zoom into each other's living rooms and lives. I want to remember how my heart and mind calmed over the course of the year, how my home came alive for me.

My home used to be the place I ate and slept and prepared for the next day. Now, I am mesmerized by the beauty of the passing of the seasons out my kitchen windows. I see powerful, noble, and bewitching crows in January and February that swoop and caw by the hundreds, lighting in the trees for 20 minutes each day then lifting off like a massive cloud of blue black beauty against the stark, white snow. I want to remember my view of the state house here in Providence, Rhode Island and its ever-changing light show to honor those dying from Covid19 throughout the year. And then, losing my view of the statehouse in April and May as the trees pop with bright green buds bursting into leaves, and the songbirds arrive. Deep gratitude erupts in my heart and spreads through the sinew of this aging body.