

## MY COVID PAUSE

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By the middle of March my husband, Joe (75), and I (70) had absorbed the presence of COVID. We stayed inside and came to accept our identity as “vulnerable”—receiving local grocery delivery and kind help from students and former students. At first, I didn’t go outside at all, and then I realized that was increasing my sense of fear and anxiety. Now we get out every day with the dog to a local park. And I started jogging three times a week. This was the first of a set of seemingly spontaneous, unplanned changes in my behaviour. I finished teaching via Zoom by early April. Having cancelled travel plans, suddenly there was a lot of clear time. Indeed, my whole relationship to time (and work and remembering appointments) seemed to have shifted. My days took on a different rhythm. I was having long phone conversations with old friends, I was writing down dreams, I was doing a bit of journaling, I was actually meditating almost every day. I was in Pilates and Alexander Zoom classes three times a week and cooking healthy meals. I used my new-found Zoom skills to organize meetings for my little United Church congregation and began hosting Sunday services. I devote a lot of time and attention to my little garden. I pick kale and lettuce every day and go out each morning to see how all my plants are doing.

I had not exactly planned any of these things. I had a sense of watching myself out of the corner of my eye, noticing all kinds of new behaviour. The earlier anxiety gave way to a kind of curiosity about all this welcome, but unplanned transformation. There were, of course, recurrent times of fear and anxiety, and sometimes I would have a dream full of terrors that suggested I was not really as calm as I thought. There were also waves of distress at the suffering and the incredible inequalities of this crisis we were supposedly all in together. Despite that, somehow it has been an oddly positive pause in a mode of living (and writing) that had not actually been quite what I wanted. A pause for priorities.

COVID heightened a long-standing awareness of our privilege and the tensions surrounding it. My “pause” is possible because we are insulated

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from anxiety: our children are safe, we feel financially secure, and we have the support to stay isolated. It is painful to contrast this with COVID's intersection with long standing racism, poverty, and indifference to the vulnerable. Even the pain reminds me that privilege makes it possible to turn away when it seems too much. I do believe that my inward-turn will better enable me to not turn away and to take action for change, but sometimes self-care feels like an indulgence.

When COVID hit I was close to finishing *A Care Manifesto: (Part) Time for All* (co-authored with Tom Malleson). It was percolating in the back of my mind as this "pause" evolved. I welcomed the sustained media attention to the importance of care and all its inequalities, at the same time that I was reminded how deeply embedded our collective denigration of care is. Meanwhile, an important shift in my attention was happening.

The book argues that we need radically new norms of work and care: no one does paid work more than 30 hours a week, and everyone does unpaid care 22 hours a week. In the sections where we define what counts as care for these purposes, we say that the kind of care we have in mind builds relationships between care giver and receiver. We include care for the earth, but we also insist that activism and community participation (although vital) are not a substitute for direct care. During my COVID pause I spent more and more time thinking about responsibility for care for the earth and how little we had said about that. In the context of human to human care, I had quite clear ideas about the difference between direct care and advocacy for, say better child-care policies. (Direct care counts for one's care obligations; advocacy, while admirable, does not. Making important contributions to Greenpeace doesn't mean you don't have to take care of your kids or wash the dishes.) What, I started to wonder, was the analogue with respect to care for the earth? I read more work by naturalists and Indigenous scholars, trying to understand how one learns to care for the earth. I see the answer as a combination of patient practices of attentive observation and direct activities of care. Both allow one to learn what one needs to know in order to care well and to feel the loving responsibility of mutual earth-human care.

The book has a section on learning from human-to-human care. It is crucial to our argument that everyone needs to provide care not just to share the burdens of care, but to learn the value of care in a first-hand,

visceral way. I am certain that there is something similar to be said about the physical and emotional experience of direct care for the earth, whether by tending gardens or forests, planting native plants, removing waste from land, caring for animals, raising monarch butterflies, or protecting ancient rock formations. These examples all require attentive observation and might combine with advocacy.

I am now extending the argument about human care to say that everyone should also care for the earth. Some caring practices may be material (like gardening); some will be aimed at learning from the earth through receptive observation: of bird song, or moss, or changing seasons (*Gathering Moss*, Robin Wall Kimmerer; *Our Wild Calling*, Richard Louv). I find this extension challenging given the urgent need for policy changes to respond to the climate crisis. But as in the human to human context, I think policy advocacy is vital, but not a substitute for a caring connection to earth. Advocacy won't teach you the same things. Western societies need to learn how to learn from the earth. Caring and receptive attention are direct ways of cultivating the necessary capacities.

Everyone needs to learn to experience the nurture the earth provides and our reciprocal responsibility for care. (Some already have.) The earth requires and deserves care, not just for instrumental reasons of human necessity, but because it is a living system—comprised of a vast interdependent community of plants, animals, microbes, and geological formations. Humans are part of that system and we rely on it. But there is a difference between seeing our reliance in instrumental terms that call for prudent resource management, on the one hand, and a sense of loving, respectful mutuality of care, on the other. The ancient language of “Mother Earth” expresses this mutuality. We should think about making judgments about how to care for the earth the way we would for a beloved parent in urgent need of complex care, not with the cost benefit analysis that resource management is likely to yield. Trade-offs that might be acceptable in cost benefit analysis (economic growth vs. species extinction) would become unimaginable in the context of care for a loved one.

Of course, I say all this knowing that collectively, most western countries have chosen to underfund care for the elderly to an alarming extent that has become obvious during the COVID crisis. It turns out we are quite capable of making cost benefit choices for the care of our parents in ways

that are every bit as callous and destructive as our treatment of the planet. I am quite certain that the denigration of care and those who do it is connected to the disregard for the well-being of the earth.

There are puzzles in both cases. The first is, how can we *not* know that care is fundamental to our well-being and that it requires skill and attention? How can we collectively and individually participate in the denigration of care in ways that are radically at odds with what we must at some level know? The book presents active participation in care by *everyone* as a way to redress this painful puzzle. The puzzle of the ongoing, permanent, dangerous harm to the earth is connected to the denigration of care, but it has an additional dimension: the idea, promoted for centuries by Christianity, that seeing plants and animals as having spirits or the earth as truly a living entity deserving of care and respect is a mark of a primitive religion and civilization. (See Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*.) Such views were marks of the inferiority of Indigenous people that justified taking their land. This belief about primitive inferiority is an important part of how we, as a culture, can “know” that we are dependent on the earth yet continue to harm it. The dominant relationship with the earth is one of resource extraction, not mutual interconnection and care. It is, of course, an improvement that more people are advocating for *prudent* resource management. But I do not believe that will be sufficient to accomplish the profound change in world view that will be required to reorganize our economies and societies so that we stop harming the earth. We have already seen that compelling science about how imprudent our current management is, is not enough to get people to change.

Of course, today many people who are part of “established” religions like Christianity, Judaism, or Islam can make sense of the idea of all of creation bearing the spirit of the divine within it. Those for whom this language does not make sense need another kind of language to capture a sense of inherent value in the earth community that does not foster an instrumental approach. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* is one such effort but I am not sure it can generate the affect of care that I think is required. I believe that our personal choices, as well as our laws and policies, need to be guided by a sense of being embedded in a mutual relation of care with the earth. This relation, like all human relations of mutual care, can give rise to feelings of fear and frustration as well as wonder, love, and appreciation. Whatever the language used to ground a caring relationship

with earth, the capacity for that relationship needs to be learned. When learning to overcome deeply embedded denigration (of all care and all non-human entities) and limited understandings of human interdependence, both embodied practice and conscious intention to learn will be important. To get started will require a recognition of the terrible harms of our current practices.

In my COVID pause, I started taking better care for my body and soul. And I turned my mind to the lessons my work on the embodied practice of care had pointed me toward, but which I had not pursued. The embodied practice of care for the earth will now have an important place in the book, even though the full dimensions of that issue will require more later. I feel grateful that the pause meant I did not send the book off for publication without this addition. Finally, there is a further demand of care for the earth that the book project does not itself address. It is obvious that some of the most important resources for rethinking our relationship to the earth are the legal, cultural, and spiritual traditions of Indigenous peoples. It should be equally obvious that settlers cannot imagine that we can “take” and absorb the knowledge of the deep connection between the land and Indigenous peoples without acting to redress the massive wrongs of dispossession of their land. For settler societies like Canada, creating a just and caring relationship with the earth and with each other will have to entail a serious redress of these wrongs. It is a daunting project but as we feel the fragility of our lives and their reliance on mutual care, COVID could give us pause and call forth a response.