

No Matter What

Written by Vivian Bikulege

Tuesday, 31 March 2020 09:09 - Last Updated Tuesday, 31 March 2020 18:09



A pandemic isn't a hurricane. We have water and electricity, internet and roads clear of fallen trees, but there is a sort of strange preparation for the unknown akin to a storm. It's taken shape in bare store shelves, curtailment of entertainment, and news conferences by a governor and president buoyed by doctors, educators, lawyers, administrators, and in South Carolina, chaplains and signers.

What are you doing in self-isolation? I started to clean out my garage. There are remnants of dust and dirt under my workbench that could bury dinosaur bones. Excavating power tools and electrical cords hidden behind boxes and milk crates is a kind of homemade archeology dig, and I am enjoying it. It is tactile therapy and an unexpected bonus was the discovery of a package of latex gloves and painter's facemasks that may be necessary in the weeks ahead. I hope not.

I've imagined setting up a toilet paper stand at the top of my driveway to sell septic-safe rolls for a nominal fee. From a safe distance, I discussed the business venture with my mailman Ryan as he delivered my Amazon package in blue latex gloves.

"Sounds like a good idea."

"It isn't." I laughed and handed him a free roll for safekeeping.

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I'm retired and I don't have kids, so the stress of home schooling and on-line learning, or imagining inventive ways to maintain family sanity are not a factor for me during these days of confinement. Sarah, my 16-year-old neighbor, expressed her frustration with internet speed and the sudden void of social interaction with friends. I wanted to hug her but the invisible shield of social distance blocked our touch. She woke me up to the ripple effect of school closures on our youth and their parents. As a person on a fixed income — and be assured, I am grateful for ANY income — the diminishing value of retirement savings weighs heavy. It's ugly. Yesterday, the president stressed that we are in a medical crisis, not a financial crisis. It's both.

We are breaking our habits of Friday Congregational prayer, Sabbath, and Sunday worship. Churches are streaming prayer and worship. I can attend daily Mass via smartphone or computer screen with prayer and contemplation in the afternoons. It's surreal, but faith is a kind of unearthly act, trusting in something without solid proof. Hope is the same, wanting something good to come from all of this, wanting it to end, hoping that family, friends and neighbors, our community, our world stays safe and recovers — soon. The marquee in front of The Technical College of the Lowcountry reads, "No Matter What, Stay Strong." Strength is a resolution to face the fear of the unknown

On my walks with Trooper along the Coosaw River, I look up and wonder what the gulls are witnessing as they glide over our coastline. It's a new kind of quiet. Without the daily number of cars and trucks moving along the roads, the air must be different. Do they sense an infection spreading below them? Are they as baffled as we are by the sudden changes? What are we going to learn from this outbreak? Will this change the way we live our lives, treat our environment, and care for one another?

It's weird, the places we find gratitude. As interesting are the things to be grateful for during these virus days. I am grateful for milk in the refrigerator, bananas on the counter, and cans of Campbell's tomato soup in the pantry beside the jar of peanut butter. Maybe this potential mixture of foodstuffs in any digestive system is justification for the frenzy to stock up on toilet paper!

I am writing *Whatever* with the knowledge that fewer people may read this *Lowcountry Weekly* edition as it may or may not be distributed in print. Following the rules to stay at home, there are less people moving about to pick the paper up from the wire racks on street corners, at the YMCA, or in the library lobby. I'm just grateful for the opportunity to process this virus through sentences and paragraphs.

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No, this isn't a hurricane. We track tropical storms and hurricanes using predictive technology to chart the strength and path of events like Hugo, Matthew, Florence, and Irma. This is a tempest of disease testing our medical know-how, our resolve, and who we are as individuals and as a collective of human beings. The paradox I struggle with is that the best thing we can do to stay together is to stay apart. Unlike our medical professionals, first-responders, and law enforcement, I feel helpless to help so I pray, donate, try to focus on long neglected household tasks, and write.

Stay strong, the signboard says. And no matter what, love one another.