

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Confronting My Anxiety During Quarantine

Jenn Robbins · Wednesday, May 20th, 2020



Photo by Adelaide Brannan

One week after we brought our newborn baby girl home from the hospital, I bought cemetery plots for my husband and me. Eighteen years later, I neglected to have a health care directive notarized for my daughter when she went off to college — and a few years later, for her sister. I was too anxious. My generalized anxiety propels me to action and inaction in equal parts and not always logical ones. The pandemic has made this, and my privilege, very clear. Now what?

Pre-pandemic, my husband and I nearly had an empty nest, save for our third child: our 8th grade son. This sweet boy-almost-man would make quiet appearances only to pass through the kitchen to grab another clean glass or fry up some bacon. Safer-at-home has restored the noise and chaos of ours with the glorious sound of his sisters: “The girls.” Laughing and yelling at each other and him; discussing art and sustainability strategies in their online classes; hitting their phone alarms while they sleep through group projects; fighting over the washing machine; making avocado egg toast and tacos at all hours, and creating lots and lots of dishes. I am pinching myself. The sublime gifts of their presence and their health are ones that I’ve cherished these weeks. I don’t take my privilege lightly. It is glaring.

And yet, as a white woman, with economic stability and all of my children home and healthy, I’m still nagged by petty, humiliating anxieties. I’m worried about not finding flour even though I rarely bake. I’m avoiding the grocery store but feel guiltily relieved since I hate to grocery shop. Sheltering in place is still the order, but I typically shelter in place anyway, so I worry about what it will be like when I’m expected to resume normal activity. Pushing through my anxiety already meant me doing a good deal of primping and planning; sometimes forcing myself to get out there by making commitments and finding projects I care about more than assuaging my fears. Pre-pandemic, I was making theater with dedicated teaching artists and inmates at Folsom State Prison. Like most things, our production has been put on hold; I don’t know if or when I’ll be allowed to go back. For now, I pray that they will be safe and I write articles to raise awareness, but there is always more to do.

Assisting Marin Shakespeare’s rehabilitative theater program, Shakespeare for Social Justice, was the most transformative work of my career. I have never been more anxious or been made so aware of my privilege than the first time I walked across that prison yard. I am a free person. COVID-19 has opened my eyes to my freedom and privilege even wider. It follows me around as I walk through pandemic life. I still have it really good. As it turns out, anxiety is nearly as much of a quarantine as being quarantined.

I think of my elder daughter who just finished grad school, and of the Class of 2020. I wonder what they think now about their vocations. Frederick Buechner defines vocation as God calling you to “the kind of work a) that you need most to do and b) that the world most needs to have done...the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” In light of the suffering and loss of COVID-19, a lot of us question what we’ve been doing or how we’ve been living, but each of us can affect positive, equitable, sustainable change. We can make our work the place where our “deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” Living with anxiety is hard. But I realize more and more that living with anxiety does not mean I no longer live with the privilege of my socio-economic status and all that affords. Anxious or not, socially-distanced or not, I can stand for others in the space that has always existed — the space that the pandemic is relentlessly exposing — the space that more than ever I feel responsible and humbled to stand in, alongside and for my fellow humans.

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