

Reconnecting, Rebooting, Restoring, Relaxing, Rejiggering, Responding, Recording, Resurrecting

Today on Braes Bayou the bluebonnets, and pink buttercups and Mexican blankets were out. Also, more people than usual, even for a Saturday, but certainly more than a gray chilly Saturday at the end of spring break. Usually people are traveling back into town, or preparing for the week ahead, catching up on errands or going to the gym. I was also closer to home than I anticipated two weeks ago. Instead of an MS 150 training ride in Brenham I was taking my usual route along the Bayou that is closest to my house.

Usually I would feel disappointed, today I was delighted. Happy with my ability, at least for today, to exercise and be outside and breath easily. All of my loved ones well. Even my inner critic was silent after beating me up all week for flying to Malibu and potentially endangering my family there and here. The concrete -walled ribbon of water attracted a yellow-footed snowy egret, and a great blue heron soared along the channel. Spring flowers pushed up and the scent of the fresh green growth overlay the smell of decaying organic matter in the water – life, LIFE! abundant and rich and irrepressible.

Families with and without children have sprung up like a spring crop, walking or biking on the trail. Two young boys' race past me on Razor scooters with such glee on their faces that I laugh out loud. They are enjoying the moment in ways adults are only now resurrecting. In my neighborhood people try out little – used front porches, friends who sit six feet away are still much closer than they would be on the phone. The sidewalks bloom with chalk drawings, and voices and laughter carry through the evening air. People greet strangers again in passing. We are all in this together.

My family is too spread out for times like these so we reconnect any way we can. A ten-person group chat of the Stout-Irwin-Kaufman generation gets rebooted and stories are shared, including funny anecdotes, cartoons of the times, and the unfortunate loss of Jennifer's beloved dog. My son Thomas joined our Marco Polo family group earlier this year as part of his New Year's resolution to stay more in touch– did he have insider information? Kara and Andrew share the houseplants they are tending for others, and meals, and silliness and we all sing to Gabby on her birthday which is today. I send my picture of a bluebonnet to my college friends who live in San Francisco, Boston and Vienna wishing them wellness in mind, body and spirit, or at least two of the three, and they send flower photos of their own. These are very different posts than the usual social media exchanges. They are smaller, and richer, and precious.

I am sitting on the bay porch draped in Jennifer's signal flag quilt she made for my birthday last year. I take a picture of my covered legs and the view, and text it to her instead of a hug, and she calls back and we talk, something we rarely do. Inside Tim has built a crackling fire and resurrected his banana bread recipe from when our kids were little, and when I get cold from the rain and wind and chill, I move in to enjoy them both.

That's not to say there is no fear. Often it leaps up and grabs me by the throat. Is my head a little achy? Did I cough because I swallowed wrong or is this the beginning? I usually never cough. I take my temperature in the morning and afternoon after returning from LA. One afternoon I notice my cheeks are flushed and when I check it, I get 98.9 when it has been 97.1. In a nauseating cold sweat I pull out the old glass mercury thermometer to recheck it. Waiting three minutes by the clock I sit and breathe deeply and try to meditate, praying the Jesus prayer over and over "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner". The recheck was 98.6 and I felt my life had been restored, at least for a little while.

I have never had to live with this day to day fear, the ever-present angel of death. It is easy to think no one in my generation has, to naively think that we have all had it so ridiculously easy that this unknown fear is newly terrifying to all. But most of the world lives with daily fear- of hunger, or inability to find shelter, or illness, or violence or war, or death. When those stories appear in the news, they fill me with sadness and guilt but not with dread. That is because I have felt remote from them, once removed by my circumstances and geography and advantages and good health. This story is different, potentially sparing no one. How will we respond, not as individuals but as a human species, as prone to extinction as any other?

Unlike other species we can do a rejiggering of how we live on this world and adapt quicker than we can evolve. We can learn from this experience and use it to guide our future. This will take reconnecting to what is really important to humanity – relationships, and love and caring. A process that has already begun even in this moment before the moment. Few of us want more in these next weeks than being able to see the face of our loved ones, staying healthy and free from harm, and being at peace. All the rest of our mundane concerns melt away in the face of this.

Some people have been using the term Apocalypse to talk about these "end" times. I kind of like the word myself. The Greek word apokalupsis, from apokaluptein meaning "to uncover, or reveal". Much is being uncovered, much is still to come. People empty the shelves at the grocery store of food, taking more than they likely need. At the VA hospital an email is sent out to all employees not to take PPE home with them, as the exterior cameras will catch them. A doctor cancels her elective cases per CDC guidelines and finds herself in an existential crisis as she is berated by her employer. Neighbors of my parents email them to see if they need anything. My husband Tim shops and cooks for us all. My staff text funny things to each other to keep their spirits up. Tim's assistant offers to drop off extra pasta and potatoes from their Costco run. People reveal their best and worst at times like these. May the best win.

- Ann Stout