

Learning How to Love From Afar

I am trying to survive this season of fear as I did another one, the summer of 1951, when I contracted polio. But how long can you live on the knife edge of unknowing?

By Gail Caldwell

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One afternoon in early February, a gazillion memories ago, I put a few things on the curb the day before trash pickup, in accord with my neighborhood's ongoing swap meet. By the next morning the mail carrier had carted off the fireplace irons; someone else took the French coffee press. But my old kitchen wall clock went unclaimed. I propped it against a tree, a forlorn Dali melting into the rough winter earth. Its hands had been stuck at 7:00 for years.

A day later I saw the clock placed high in the branches of the tree, like the Cheshire cat; its hands were reset to 8:20. I took the bait and changed the time again, to 12:00, and so it began: A game of time tag, whimsical and anonymous, that went on for weeks. It was our little version of "Kilroy was Here," a wave of urban camaraderie during a New England winter.

Nobody touches the clock now. People are trying not to touch anything, especially one another, unless it's an emergency, an act of mercy. Time feels broken but so does space, every day a fluid lapse where nothing, or everything, happens. [Numbers have become the telltale dispatches](#) from the front: over 1.5 million cases, more than 90,000 dead, too few ventilators and too many hungry people, a million exhausted medical workers.

"I don't have the virus," [Gary Shteyngart wrote in](#) The New Yorker last month, about his middle-of-the-night sweats. "I have the fear." I do too. I follow mine like a bell-shaped curve through the day, trying to stay a mindful six feet away from my panic. Breathe, take your temperature, turn off the news, go for a walk, hug the dog. Count the things around you that you love; now, count the things you don't. The day's moods are volatile and unforgiving: Despair, denial, anger, anxiety, heartbreak. We're deluged with tips on how to survive, provided you're blessed and healthy and following the protocols. Turmeric in the tea, online yoga or bridge, Zoom graduations and AA meetings.

The tangible things I miss the most are nearby but might as well be on the moon: the swimming pool, my boat upon the river. The intangible — well, sorrow and emotional chaos can cross any border, no passport needed. I miss, most of all, the absence of fear. And touching people, a spontaneous hand on a cheek or shoulder. I miss good old neurosis, I told a friend, back when most of my problems were of my own doing.

Even on the bad days I know I'm one of the fortunate, protected by the time and space of economics: I have money for groceries and a safe house; I don't have to get on public

transportation; I'm over 60 but healthy. I also realize that for vast numbers on this tattered planet, Covid-19 is merely another brick on the load of suffering they face every day.

"The world was already an awful place for billions of people," I blurt out to a friend one night, and his Zoom-blurry nod looks weary, like I've just awakened from a child's dream. Even my sadness feels inadequate, or slightly obscene, an Hermès scarf held up against a tsunami of grief.

I was lucky, too, during another season of fear, the summer of 1951 when I was 6 months old and contracted polio. It was one of the last, worst years of the epidemics that swept through the 20th century, just before the Salk vaccine came into use in 1955. The virus was claiming more victims with each seasonal phase and was still badly misunderstood; it often struck in summer and seemed to target the young, so parents kept their children inside during the vacation months. Movie theaters and water fountains were shut down; nobody went to the beaches. As with Covid-19, the rate of death or permanent affliction was difficult to pinpoint because of subclinical cases; many people caught polio and never knew they had it. A fraction died or suffered permanent paralysis.

Probably because I was so young, I had a relatively mild case: no dreaded iron lung, no utterly maimed childhood or cut-short life. What I had was a weak leg that never worked as well as the other, a limp that slowed me down but didn't fell me. Polio was a shadow in my life, not a divining rod.

I was too small to remember the fear my parents must have known. But I remember the mythic dimensions of what were called "the polio years," when the swimming pools were chained shut and the March of Dimes poster child was everywhere you looked. Most people recovered. The ones who didn't became polio's legacy and reminder, and their numbers gave rise to the field of modern physical therapy as we know it.

Polio changed the world, and so did its cure. When Edward R. Murrow interviewed Jonas Salk, just as the vaccine's success was announced, he asked him, "Who owns the patent to this vaccine?" Salk's answer became a part of history. "Well, the people, I would say," he told Murrow. "There is no patent. [Could you patent the sun?](#)"

We don't know yet what the scourge of Covid-19 will mean. Not just who and how many will die but also what it will do to those who live. It's a new model nobody can trace or predict: the way courage and loss and failure and endurance can interweave into social mores. Will we go to basketball games again, sing in a choir, let our kids try out for wrestling? What happens to all that precious, infernal time as we wait for a vaccine? How long can you live on the knife edge of unknowing?

When the quarantine began I reread Katherine Anne Porter's wrenching story about the 1918 flu pandemic, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider." Even better and fiercer than I remembered, its hallucinatory description of Miranda Gay's illness plays out against a backdrop of ambulance

wails and jingoist patriots. What Porter so agonizingly captures is the koan that death takes the sunlight even as it leaves the living. Recovered and grieving her dead lover, Miranda has one of the saddest final lines in American letters: "Now there would be time for everything."

My neighbors and I have driveway parties where we line up lawn chairs for the four of us, 10 feet apart, and laugh about nothing. One night I take over a pot of chicken soup; two days later, a friend of a friend brings me a roaster she found at the store. We start to call it the chicken cycle of life.

I'd been making a maypole, adorned with ribbons, from old bamboo stakes for the front yard, but today it seems like a dumb idea; today, bleakness has beat out perseverance.

Then my adored 10-year-old friend comes crashing down the driveway, stopping the bike halfway to me. I gasp in happiness. "I miss you *so much*," I cry, and Tyler cries back, "I miss you too!" Together we put our arms up and out, heart surfing, bending toward each other like reeds. We have learned, lickety-split, how to love one another from afar.

Gail Caldwell's fourth memoir, "[Bright Precious Thing](#)," will be published in July.