

Writing through the grieving process of self-isolation brought by coronavirus

April 1, 2020

The freedom to go where I want, when I want without fear— is a temporary loss. Knowing it is temporary though does not make the emotional impact less painful. There have been days where I find myself angry with no means of using my energy to effect change. After all, there are only so many times I can clean out a closet.

In her book on Death and Dying (1969) Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote about loss and the five stages of grief:

Denial - pretending it's not happening.

Anger - feeling helpless and needing to do something.

Bargaining - trying to manipulate the situation.

Depression – a paralyzing feeling of hopelessness.

Acceptance - finding a healthy way to deal.

The stages are fluid and sometimes occur when least expected.

Depression.

I try to exorcise it in hand wringing and washing, try to predict it with statistics and graphs, but, in the midst of a pandemic, death is an intrusive reality that says - not if - but when. From the loss of life to everyday losses there is a grieving process.

Denial.

College students partying in Florida pretending like the virus is not allowed on the beach. In the words of the character Ricky Fitts from the movie American Beauty, “Never underestimate the power of Denial.” Ricky knows his father needs to live in a state of denial to cope with life's disappointments. This in turn allows Ricky free reign to wreak havoc.

Bargaining.

Shamefully, I must admit that sometimes I go to the grocery store to buy something I pretend I need. The unspoken bargain - lie - I tell myself, is if I am in a store for a “need” then I shouldn't get the virus since I am not breaking rules.

Acceptance.

Restless, but determined to self-isolate, I think about “Imagining Home: The Stories Photos Tell”. This was a two-day workshop at the Garcia Center in San Bernardino, hosted by Dr. Natalie J. Graham and Kaya Vance, founders and directors of Kayjo Creatives.

The first day we were shown how a story can be told in the context of the everyday. We were treated to discussions on photos by George Hammons' - Quilt at CAAM, Gordon Parks' - American Gothic and Carrie Mae Weems' - Kitchen Table Series. We were given cameras and took photos of mundane objects: a toy car, a mug, a piece of fruit. We learned that it wasn't the object that mattered as much as the angle and framing. The second day, Cynthia Alessandra Briano, director of the Rapp Saloon Reader in Santa Monica, guided us through a series of instructions that helped us craft poems to give the photos a voice.

A quote by photographer Weems resonates with me now, "... what I could do in my own environment." I am going to delve deeper and find the unique, odd, and beautiful in what surrounds me and let objects in my home tell me their stories – accepting and creating new ways of redefining and coping with self-isolation.

Anger & Acceptance.

Entering a grocery store with its neon lights and empty shelves has the eerie feeling of being in a sci-fi movie scene. Last night, the clerk bagging my groceries said she keeps thinking she will wake up. I feel the same way, helpless and angry. I pull out my phone to capture the empty shelves and plan to play with different prompts to give this new experience voice. In this way I am reframing and creating ownership of this moment.

*Because I could not stop for Death –
It kindly stopped for me – Emily Dickinson*

But how do you truly prepare for Death? I imagine someone in the States receiving a text from a friend in a country under quarantine– "should have got more toilet paper." There you have it. Sociologists will be studying the great US toilet paper rush, the angry brawls, and it will boil down to a text.

This in turn reminds me of a scene from the movie Birdman (2014) by Alejandro Inarritu. Sam (Emma Stone) is talking with her father Riggan, (Michael Keaton). She has a sheet of toilet paper with dashes and each one represents a thousand years. She hands her father a sheet with one hundred and fifty thousand years on it; he wipes his mouth with it, and she says, "You just wiped out the entire human race." Witty – bleak – prescient?

*Romaine Washington is a poet, writer and educator living in the Inland Empire.
She is a facilitator for the San Bernardino Inlandia Workshop.*