

EVERYTHING CHANGED, YET SPRING STILL CAME

**DUE TO COVID-19, THESE ARE SURREAL TIMES FOR EVERYONE. JOURNALIST
AND FLOW EDITOR CAROLINE BUIJS SHARES HOW IT AFFECTED HER DAILY LIFE
IN AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS, AND LOOKS TO PHILOSOPHERS FOR HELP.**

One day in early February when I was at the Flow office, I read a text from my friend Angie in Beijing, China, out loud to a couple of colleagues. ‘The virus is really a big thing right now,’ she wrote. ‘We feel like we’re living in a disaster movie.’ I first met Angie when I was working for a travel organization, and she made all the arrangements for our customers traveling to China. I also wrote a story about her for Flow a while back. My colleagues and I felt awful for her when we read her message. Fortunately, China was far away and, to be honest, that secretly gave me a comfortable feeling.

Sadly, that comfortable feeling was short-lived because it didn’t take long for COVID-19 to reach the Netherlands and the rest of the world. Every morning when I wake up, I still need to muster up the courage to read the news. The first day after the schools, restaurants and bars closed—shortly after the announcement in March advising people to work from home as much as possible—my daughter and I would sometimes pinch each other in the arm to see if it was all just a dream.

BACK TO BASICS

The family calendar that was always packed full of fun activities—school plays, birthday parties, weekends away—hung there forlornly in the kitchen; everything had

been canceled. The cafés in my neighborhood and the movie theater I always loved going to were all closed. Fortunately, my work continued uninterrupted, unlike that of some of my friends. And as I was already working from home most of the time, not much changed in that regard, apart from the fact that I now had three ‘office mates’—my husband, son and daughter—and there were new sounds coming from different rooms in the house: “Hello! Hello, can you guys hear me?! Yes, I can see you. Oh, you can’t see me?” These were the initial attempts at using Google Hangouts and other videoconferencing apps. The four of us had to figure out how to adjust to being cooped up together 24/7. I kept hearing stories from other people how this took them some getting used to.

We all made charts full of plans and chores, only to abandon them just as quickly; aside from the fact that we didn’t have any time for them, I noticed that it was much easier to not have overly high expectations. Sometimes, when I needed some fresh air, I took a walk through Amsterdam at 7 a.m., and I noticed how it began resembling more and more the city I knew as a student in the late 1980s in terms of peace and quiet.

I also discovered out how nice and cozy it was to be able to spend more time with my own family, a sort of back-to-basics feeling. And how relaxing it was to >

‘MY SON LOOKED FOR CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO “ATTEND” GRADUATION PARTIES’

not receive text messages five minutes before setting a steaming pot of risotto on the table from a teenager casually informing me he won’t be home for dinner.

The funny thing is that, in a way, everything was still the same, even though it wasn’t. I still walked down the same street every day to do the grocery shopping, but found myself zigzagging down the sidewalk to stay a meter and a half (about five feet) away from other people, an apologetic smile plastered to my face. The view from the bench in the shopping street where I like to sit was still the same, yet different: I saw the same façades and houses, but all the cyclists were gone. Nature of course doesn’t care about any of this, and spring sprung with a vengeance. The sun shone with abandon, but the difference was obvious here, too: the sky was bluer than normal because there were no contrails from airplanes.

GETTING TOGETHER ON FACETIME

So how do we cope with such changes? In crazy times like these, I turn to the philosophers for wisdom, such as the Flemish thinker Patricia De Martelaere. She found that we can make life unnecessarily hard by thinking and worrying nonstop; it’s best just to learn to accept it. In her words, ‘Change is just a given and death and loss are also part of this. Resistance is futile. This also applies to everyday things, such as an illness that interferes with your vacation plans or downpours that flood your basement’. I tried to go with the flow as much as I could and not complain when the Paul McCartney concert I was supposed to attend with my daughter was canceled. My son looked for creative solutions to ‘attend’ graduation parties seeing as how he suddenly appeared to have passed all his exams one Tuesday in March, without having had to take them. I saw him in the distance sitting on the grass with four friends in the park, celebrating (at ample distance from one another) and was proud that he was taking it all so well.

So, like De Martelaere recommends and just like everyone else, we adapted rather than resist. I took my yoga classes via a livestream on a mat on my bedroom floor, and the coffee I used to drink with my sister after our weekly class was shared via FaceTime instead. It was actually a pretty funny alternative, and she showed me the progress on her kitchen remodeling project. We had giggle fits because we fiddle with our hair the exact same way; video calls force you to look in a mirror the whole time. My niece, who is studying in Amsterdam and normally joins us for dinner once a week, was also sort of at the table with us thanks to FaceTime.

STORYTELLING

Stoic philosopher Seneca was a big help to me. The basic premise of Stoicism is to try not to worry too much about things you have no control over. Concentrate on your attitude and how you deal with events, things you do have control over. I naturally follow the Dutch national health service’s advice—I had eczema on my hands from all the handwashing at the start of this—but I also try to see the positive in the situation, such as my children sending a card to their grandfather and grandmothers without me asking them to. The short springtime walks through the park, with its flowering trees in lavish bloom, in the middle of the day with my daughter (“I would actually have a free period at school right now”). Texting with a friend who’s a nurse working on a coronavirus ward and who hadn’t lost her sense of humor (“Did you know that, when you get a hot flash in all that protective clothing, your glasses even fog up?”)

Friendships with neighbors even seemed to intensify. Every now and then, I sat in the spring sun with my neighbor, an empty bench between us. I ate meals I never tried before because popular ingredients such as pasta and rice had been bought out by stockpilers.



A moving photo from the newspaper showing a 70-year-old woman telling the neighborhood children stories every afternoon from her garden, her audience sitting breathlessly as they listened to her from the appropriate distance on stools and chairs they brought from home, hangs on the wall behind my desk. The little notes in my stairwell with offers to do the grocery shopping for anyone who’s unable to cheered me up no end too. And Instagram also really bolstered me: The beautiful illustrations shared to comfort others, the initiatives that I saw other people taking and the glimpses into the lives of friends and colleagues I found myself missing. And I realized how full my life normally is. If I’m being completely honest, I was actually relieved somehow to have a quieter social life. I was incredibly disappointed that I couldn’t go to my camper trailer at the seaside with the beautiful weather we were

1. Messages chalked on the sidewalk by children telling their grandparents how much they miss them.
2. Enjoying each other’s company at a safe distance.
3. Front page news: ‘This year’s final exams will not be taking place’.
4. A sign of love and support for the healthcare workers.
5. Caroline’s niece joins her for dinner via FaceTime.

having because the campsite was closed. But according to the Stoics, the trick is to focus on what I still can do. So I decided to fix up my two balconies, a true luxury in the city, and filled them with plants so that I could sit out there and read a book. And I followed the action in the nest boxes on a popular website that posted announcements like ‘Breaking news: second kestrel egg spotted!’ to get that feeling of enjoying nature. >

**‘FEELING AND SEEING WHAT
REALLY MATTERS IN OUR LIFE MAY BE
THE POSITIVE SIDE OF THIS CRISIS’**

IN SEARCH OF DISTRACTIONS

Everything suddenly got more drab, however, when I heard that my brother had been admitted to hospital because he had had a high fever for eight days. A few days later, it became clear that he had been infected with COVID-19. All the doom scenarios running through my mind kept me awake at night, and I got up when the blackbirds started singing. Once again, Seneca came to mind: ‘Prepare for everything. If you take coincidence and fate into account and don’t believe that you are immune to bad luck and misery, you will never be disappointed’. I’m not entirely sure if that was what I wanted to hear right at that moment. When a newsletter from my former mindfulness teacher Margôt van Stee landed in my inbox later that week, I latched onto her insights so that my feelings and emotions didn’t get the better of me. ‘Intense emotions can easily make you their plaything,’ she wrote. ‘It’s easy to overidentify, and the convergence of your emotions can make it seem like this is all there is to life.’

What could I do about that? I tried to be aware of what I was focusing my attention on, for example. ‘Are you focusing on how soft your cat’s fur feels in your hands or the blossoms in the trees?’ Van Stee wrote. ‘Or are you already lying in the intensive care ward in your imagination? People can easily get caught up in their rich imaginations without realizing that this consists of fantasies that play a large part in determining our emotions and behavior.’

Van Stee also recommended that I look for distractions when the emotions strike. So, I worked on a jigsaw puzzle in the evenings with my husband and children, and bought wool to crochet a blanket in a pattern I hadn’t worked with yet. The more my brain was distracted, the better—and while other people stockpiled food, I hoarded paint supplies to use during my color meditation sessions. We had movie nights

(“Stop standing so close together!” I wanted to scream at all the actors). ‘The flames of fear are fanned by disaster scenarios,’ wrote Van Stee. ‘By moving our focus from our minds to our bodies, we can stop fueling the fire and calm our stress system. The calmer your body, the cooler your head and the wiser the choices you make.’ This is why I tried a meditation session given by the Center for Mindfulness via Zoom, and aside from the fact that it calmed me down a bit, I discovered something else: I felt solidarity and connection from all the faces I saw in the app of the other people joining in.

And yet, the line I referred to from Seneca (‘Don’t think you’re immune to bad luck and misery’) kept running through my mind. Perhaps Seneca also meant that we prefer to think we’re invincible because this is what we need to survive. Sometimes we also need to be brave enough to face the reality that we are vulnerable and that we can die. Feeling and seeing what really matters in our life may be the positive side of this crisis. A messy house, a beaten-up old bench: none of it matters. The numerous lovely messages of sympathy about my brother mattered all the more. Just like the sense of community plus the realization that there are professions we really can’t live without.

Seneca might also say that we must accept the fate that befalls us, and until then, keep your eyes open to all the beauty that surrounds you. Even though I realized how hard it must be when disaster strikes, there was fortunately still a lot of good happening around me, such as the news that, after one week in the hospital, my brother was being discharged and could continue his recovery at home. He was out of danger and fate had smiled upon him. And then there was also the text message I got from Angie: ‘Life in Beijing is becoming quite normal again’. Hopefully it won’t be too long before that this the case here in the Netherlands, and in the rest of the world too. ●

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY **CAROLINE BUIJS**

