Is Anyone Else Just Barely Functioning Right Now?

Life is strange right now. How you feel is not.

By Carolyn L. Todd
Like most of us, I've spent the past two weeks or so—is that it?—glued to my screens, unable to escape the gravity of the COVID-19 black hole. The surreal headlines, the climbing numbers, the horrifying frontline dispatches—first from thousands of miles away, in Italy, now ever closer to home here in New York City.

When I'm not doing that, I'm watching everybody else and how they're dealing with all of this right now, utterly mystified as to how in the hell they're doing it.

It being: the earnest optimism, the rigorous self-care, the overnight reinvention of their daily routine, the graceful settling into their new normal. The creative socializing, the witty memes, the gratitude lists, the dedicated at-home workouts. The powerful, compassionate, brilliant journalism my peers are churning out. The general appearance of doing pretty okay.

This is all both beautiful and baffling to me. The ingenuity and strength—where are they getting it? Why can't I find mine? (Am I pessimistic? Are they naive?) Shouldn't I too be finding silver linings and ways to thrive, to make the most of the situation, to rise to the occasion, instead of just getting by?

Except then I remember something: That the “occasion” is a global pandemic. That to just get by is actually enough right now. And to be not doing okay is normal and natural and not a problem.

So here is how I have been doing.

I've been waking up feeling paralyzed. Overwhelmed. Helpless. I've been going to bed disappointed by lack of productivity and optimism that day and hoping to wake up feeling different (more sanguine or bad-ass or something).

Self-care routines—not so much, honestly. I haven't been live-streaming workouts and getting in the best shape of my life. I've actually been sitting on my butt all day. I've slacked off on my daily meditation. I have not been motivated to use the time saved not commuting to take up knitting or bread baking. I haven't Marie Kondo'd my bedroom, or done quarintinis with friends over FaceTime. (I have been scrolling through Instagram watching other people doing these things, and wondering what's wrong with me that I cannot.)

Instead of diligently limiting my news updates to hourly intervals or curated newsletters, I've been frantically flipping through the permanently open tabs on my laptop and refreshing the feeds on my phone every few minutes. (What will go to shit next?)

Work-wise, I've been doing what feels like more or less the bare minimum and having a hell of a time concentrating.
Food? I’m not getting creative with a can of chickpeas (despite having written this last week) or sticking to three square meals a day. I’m spooning peanut butter into my mouth at odd intervals and working alarmingly quickly through the one-pound bar of chocolate from Trader Joe’s that was supposed to last a couple of weeks.

Oh, and the existential crises, you guys! Ever-widening cracks are exposing the most ugly and shameful parts of our supposedly very civilized societies. The existential questions always percolating in the back of my mind, the ones that come to a simmer whenever my anxiety or depression burners get turned up—those are now at a furious boil (and being joined by some fun new pandemic-specific ones).

You know the ones. Questions like: Why are we here? How is society so effed up? How did we not prepare for this? (Seriously, people?) Why didn’t we listen to the experts who were sounding the alarm for years? Do we even have a shot at stopping climate change if this is how we meet a pandemic? Is this regular life now? Why do we work 40 hours a week? What am I even doing with my time on earth? What’s next? When?

I had my first teletherapy session a couple of days ago. (It was weird at first, and then surprisingly fine.) We talked a lot about the mismatch between how I’m feeling and how the people around me are acting. (Also the moody ~inner teenager energy~ I’ve got going on this week: When you’re a teenager, the world is ending and no one else gets it.)

Some other fortuitous things that happened over the past couple of days, while I was not busy “making the most” of things as they are right now:

A tiny bit of grudging self-compassion, spurred by the Ten Percent Happier podcast episode titled “Kryptonite for the Inner Critic.” (Listen.)

A good rooftop cry. (Highly recommend.)

A FaceTime with my boss’s boss where I admitted I wasn’t doing great. (Also weird at first, and then fine.)

A 2 a.m. reacquaintance with some classic existential-crisis literature: The Age of Anxiety by British spiritual philosopher Alan Watts. (Read it.)

A frank conversation with my sister/roommate about how her aggressively cheery disposition has been particularly hard to be around this week. (She got it.)

Seven honest minutes of mindfulness meditation. (Finally.)
Those things, and just some time, have let me stumble back upon a very small, very simple, very valuable truth that I have lost and found, forgotten and remembered, a thousand times before: There is no such thing as “should feel.” Put another way, in Watts's words: “There are no wrong feelings.” Not ever, and perhaps especially not right now.

Reminding myself of this when I don’t like how I am feeling, when I think it “should” be different: This is the most honest and important form of self-care I am practicing right now. And this is okay.

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- When It Comes to the Coronavirus, We're All in This Together
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