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University of Maine Community Pieces_Nothing is something

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Thursday & Friday, April 9-10, 2020 – Nothing is something

When I began this journal I thought I would be overflowing with material and time to write. The world's growing crisis spread even to Maine with the University's order on March 12 for students not to return from spring break and for faculty to prepare to teach remotely when classes resumed. To my surprise, the desire to write about myself and my circumstances evaporated after the first two entries. It wasn't really because I was suddenly busy figuring out how to revise my two courses humanely for students scattered across New England and beyond, or because I was teaching my husband how to record lectures to post on YouTube. (Oh, the language and shouting from his study!) Otherwise, with no child at home (my grown daughter is living with her father in Virginia), I had no one tugging at my time. A couple trips out for groceries took longer than usual, and I cleaned the house some when we decided to ask the woman who usually cleans for us to stay away. Hardly a strain.

Most of the past four weeks are a vacant blur, like driving through a silent snow storm so thick in the air that you can't make out the landscape, and the heavy flakes dashing into the headlights and up into the darkness make you feel like you're hurtling into time yet will never reach your destination. The days have become featureless. I am not bored. There is plenty to do, between teaching, research, cooking, going on walks, and taking a daily yoga class by Zoom from a studio in Charlottesville, VA. My husband and I get along very well. We both enjoy having the liberty to work at home. The days are frictionless, with no frisson, no surprise, except for the still-slightly-shocking news reports of distant tragedies and rolling mistakes, lies, and earnest effort from various people in government. Only when someone I know and care for materializes in a black Zoom square on my computer screen do I really perk up. Hello! It's you! It seems a little miracle when my students show up for class. We huddle together, gazing or looking askance, if shy, listening, saying a few words, remembering what class is. An oasis of contact.

The Danish prime minister said this week that her country is walking a tightrope. Stand still, she said, and we will fall off. Resume activity too fast and we'll fall off, too. During lockdown, when we must work from home if we can and avoid all social contact if we can, the pace of life is slow motion, as if we have all become Marcel Marceau pretending to walk. Except that his pantomimes had more tension, more resistance, than many of us feel. We have gone slack, victims of enervation. Students tell me their sleeping habits are shot to hell with no morning classes to get up for. I used to swing from one meeting or class or hallway conversation to another like a kid on the monkey bars. Now most exchanges are planned in advance, through touchless media. Has the air in Italy gone still as all those hand-waving people talk through tiny screens? The late-night comedians – Stephen Colbert, Seth Myers, Trevor Noah – deliver flat monologues from anonymous rooms in their homes, staring into the videocam. They pause as they always did to let the jokes register, but without audience response the pauses are too long, the silence too conspicuous. I haven't chuckled once since they went under house arrest.

All of us who are safe and healthy and have plenty of food in store are sitting in a waiting room with no idea when we will be released or when something dangerous will strike us or someone we know.

One of my nephews in London without doubt was ill with Covid-19 about three weeks ago – he had the high fever, crippling headache for days, dry cough, trouble breathing. His mother, my sister, returned with her husband from a six-week sojourn in Argentina and came down with seeming symptoms a few days later. Her doctor gave her the malaria drug cocktail (hydroxychloroquine + an antibiotic) that Trump has been promoting. She self-isolated in her bedroom for a fortnight and now feels fine. Another nephew in Chicago probably has it but can't get a test because he's not terribly ill. So my family's

running at about the average for people who live in areas with relatively high exposure. Our great worry is the family matriarch, my mother, Ruth, who is 95, living in a retirement community in Evanston. She fell badly 16 days ago, bashed her face, broke her left collar bone and a bone in her left hand. In and out of the Northwestern Hospital ER twice in two days, she was so disoriented that she didn't even realize she had broken bones, nor did the first ER doctors, her bruised face and dementia were such distractions. When my sister called from London with the news, my world jolted to a halt. Work slid off the table in an instant, and since then has seemed rather less important than before. Mom is well cared for in the nursing facility at her place. She has let go the anger and paranoia that at first had her clawing at the sling on her left arm, demanding to go home. Neither she nor my sister Mary, in loco parentis in Highland Park, has shown any symptoms of the coronavirus. But they might as well be on the moon.