

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #12:  
Lessons of a Flat Tire  
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

AUGUST 20, 2020 — On short little street in the old suburbs of a well-to-do township, at the end of a cul de sac that slops down to a creek that rages after storms but otherwise is a series of quiet pools where minnows skirt from here to there, sits a house. My name is on the deed to the house and the land upon which it sits. You can say I own the property, but I know it owns me.

One night last summer, as I pulled the car into the garage after a walk in the local nature preserve, I saw the right rear tire was almost flat. I had heard a light noise when I was driving, a noise I knew I needed to check out once I got to the house, and there was the source. The noise did not sound, nor the car drive, like a tire low on air, but the evidence said otherwise.

I walked up the street around the curve to Bill's house, identical to mine, all having been built in 1954, the year I was born, and surely close to the year he also was born, his gray hair and the age of his grown children say. He is a math teacher, but he is also one of those men who has lots of tools.

Did he have an air compressor? Yes, he had two.

He had me drive back to his house, because the better air compressor, and the one he knew he could easily put his hands on in a garage full of tools, so full no car had been parked there for years, was a large piece of equipment, not portable. I did as he asked, and he filled my tire. Likely a slow leak, he said.

Would the tire be flat in the morning? Come back and I will fill it again, he said. Instead I called Della, my friend who lives nearby. Could she run me up to the auto place right then and then bring me back? I could leave the car for my mechanic to look at in the morning while catching a ride with her in the morning to downtown where I needed to be. Yes, she could.

And so on the most lovely of summer evenings, as the sun turned the sky all the shades of rose that can only be found in God's pallet, we left my car in the lot of a closed auto shop.

The life I am living this summer is so different from last summer's. Last summer, spur of the moment calls could be made for casual excursions or run arounds, all executed with little thought. Now every trip is carefully considered. Do I really need to make this run? Can I push this errand off? For example, can I go to the bank next week instead of this week *and* next week? I keep a supply of masks in the car in the off chance I drive off without one. Mostly, I stay home. That doesn't mean I never step outside my front door. On the contrary, I am outside three or four times a day. I pull weeds in the flower beds. I drop off a jar of my homemade three bean salad for my neighbor. (Both single women, we share food we make with the other.) I chat with the man up street as his six-year-old zooms back and forth on his new two-wheel bike. Neighbors and I used to stand next to each other as we talked. Now face to face conversations six to eight apart no longer seem strange. Indeed, it is seen as a courtesy.

I walk up the street and around the bend to visit the old man who sits outside on his porch on summer evenings. Some evenings I circle all the way around the road until I am at the back side of the woods that border my property. On one recent night, I followed the path through the woods to the creek. There on the opposite side sat a fawn, watching me carefully, not moving from the spot that her mother had left her—as long as I stayed on my side of the creek. Which I did.

Writing all of this, I realize, despite my weariness with all things pandemic and the necessary restrictions we are asked to follow to limit the spread of COVID-19, I have a very rich and full life right at the end of a cul de sac.

I know as I sense the coming of fall, and look to the colder weather of winter, wandering outside as I chat on the phone or settling down on the front porch in the evenings to read a book will end, and that I don't relish. I will have to find ways beyond ZOOM to stay connected to others. Because staying connected is what human beings do. Yes, time alone is important—for contemplation, for our mental health, for our own growth. But we are social creatures and need to be with others.

In the Christian Bible, the writer of 1 Peter calls human beings “living stones.” (1 Peter 2:5) And I see now that my neighbors have become the living stones of my life in ways that my beloved family and close friends who do not live nearby cannot be right now. My neighbors are the ones that are helping me day to day through the pandemic. Together we form bridges and pathways and places of shelter that serve us all, cemented together as we are by a geography of place.

Pandemic or not, we need our neighborhoods and all that they have to offer. In them we find a membership that can be claimed during the flat tires of our lives, as much as when the skies are rosy, a membership, as notes the characters of Wendell Berry's novels, that says these are my people. This is my home. Here I belong.