

## **Dispatch from the Pandemic #1: In Search of Goodness**

by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer

APRIL 6, 2020 — This first dispatch from the pandemic holds up the goodness that is to be found in each and every day. I credit my neighbor, a retired nurse, a widow just a few years older than I, for putting forth the term *goodness*. She and I have begun a practice of sharing the goodness we find in each day.

Sometimes the goodness is as small as the delicate Spring Beauties popping in my side yard, wildflowers that I have never before seen in my, admittedly, weedy lawn. Sometimes the goodness is as majestic as the cooper's hawk nesting in the woods bordering my neighbor's backyard. Other times it is an email, a phone call, an unexpected offer of help. Sometimes it is even found in our screw-ups, as happened with me last week. But first, let me tell you how I got to this point.

I was working at a client's office on March 12 when Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine announced the closing of the schools. I listened to the news conference with my client. The announcement was not unexpected, yet it brought it all home to me: COVID-19 is real.

When I left my client late that day, I knew I would not be returning soon. I headed straight to Kroger's, filled my cart, and then drove home. Except for a couple more trips to the bank, to the post office, to Walgreens and back to Kroger's, I haven't left the house except to wander in the woods that borders my property.

I had work to do, both paid work for clients and my own creative writing projects. I had food. I had woods with a creek where I began picking up the trash that rushed in after each heavy rain as a type of meditation practice. My inner hermit was happy.

So I settled into the pandemic contently. Yes, I felt for—and covered in prayer during my morning meditations—all those suffering financially, those who were infected and at risk of becoming seriously ill, those who did not have the resources I have—a home, savings, food. And I tried to do my part to be of assistance. I volunteered for my church to make phone calls to check in on our more vulnerable members. I wrote and mailed checks to organizations in need of support.

But mostly, I relished the time. The slowing down. There was no temptation to go anywhere. My inner hermit was content.

Then the cracks began to form. First, financial worries surfaced as I saw my self-funded retirement fund sink lower and lower with the stock market. Then those worries gave away to concerns for the well-being of people I loved. I have four siblings, all married with grown children who now have children of their own. Many of them are able to work from home, but not all. My worries for those still venturing out into the world cut deep into my heart. Losing any one of them would be a sorrow I do not want to face.

My blissful hermit became consumed with fears.

Yes, I did all the healthy things that such a time demands, starting my mornings and evenings with meditation and prayer, trying to maintain a schedule, eating healthy, getting exercise, limiting my consumption of media reports, talking to family and friends, laughing at so many of the silly memes and stories flooding the internet as people across the land attempted to cope.

And still I hurt. A conversation with an associate about my fears devolved into a political spat. I know better than to go there. How had that happened? Was there something here for me to learn beyond tolerance and acceptance? I felt my angels were calling me into something deeper. Then my blissful hermit decided to violate the governor's order to stay at home and walked out. I was in this alone. And, yes, I am blessed with more than my share of family and friends, people who love me that I can call any time. But some journeys we simply have to take by ourselves.

When we are in pain, when I am in pain, I want to look for an exit as quickly as possible. Sometimes that is with a pill when I feel a migraine coming on. And that is a response that I am comfortable with. Sometimes it is a decision to take steps to remedy a difficult situation, whether it is seeking out appropriate resources or advice, or being open to an uncomfortable conversation. Other times, the way is not so clear.

Author Glennon Doyle has learned to embrace pain as the teacher it is: "Come in. Sit down with me. And don't leave until you've taught me what I need to know."<sup>1</sup> What was I to learn in my current situation, particularly as it related to the associate I argued with?

My tendency is when something is off kilter to rush in and try to make it right, often by explaining and apologizing. You know, the anti-apology: I was out of line, but it was your fault. It didn't help that I fact checked some of what my associate was saying, and he was wrong. How I wanted to send him those links to prove me right. But I choose to sink into the spirit of the times to slow down, do nothing, wait. That is often not an easy thing for me to do.

I didn't know what, but there was more I was to learn here.

Slowly through the next few days, in part from my daily readings—as if each passage were written just for me—I came to see that I need to trust myself *and* let go of self-righteousness. I realized that there is a balance between listening within and being open to the ways of others. I have not achieved that balance. Instead, I swing from one extreme to the other. When insecure, I run around looking for a guru. When feeling confidence, no one else knows what they are talking about—unless they agree with me.

I carried on with the pain. In one of his Daily Mediations, the Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr says that rather than seeing pain as something we must change, perhaps we need to recognize it as a doorway. He quotes author Eckhart Tolle: "You do not need to be a Christian to understand the deep universal truth that is contained in symbolic form in the image of the cross."<sup>2</sup>

Before such transformative images, the worst things can become the best things," writes Rohr.<sup>3</sup>

I don't have this nailed down. But I have time in this period of isolation to simply be with my questions, learn my lessons. In time, my hermit may just move back in. And that will be a goodness.

<sup>1</sup> Glennon Doyle, *Love Warrior* (Flatiron Books: 2016), 201.

<sup>2</sup> Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks* (New World Library: 2003), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, Daily Meditations: April 3, 2020 (<https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations>).