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ESSAY

How Rituals and Focus Can Turn Isolation Into a Time for Growth

As the author learned caring for his ailing wife, a well-ordered day with close attention to mundane tasks can let us endure with purpose



The author and his late wife Joan, circa 2000.

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By Arthur Kleinman

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These harrowing times are taking an emotional toll, even on those of us lucky enough to be hunkering down in our own homes. Our new reality—disrupted lives, fears of infection, worries about loved ones, the loneliness that can come with prolonged isolation—brings to the surface disorganizing feelings, from panic to despair, that a busy life might keep at bay. But there are ways to make this period of self-quarantine not only endurable but rewarding.

William James, the great philosopher and psychologist, observed that people are collections of habits but that we can rid ourselves of those that don't serve us well. He counseled us not to "sit all day in a moping posture, sigh and reply to everything with a dismal voice." New habits can carry us ahead in an organized way, letting us heighten our sense of control over our days and nights and keep disabling feelings in check. We can focus more on the small moments that

comprise our lives, becoming more *present* and endowing ordinary routine with deep emotional investment.

I had the opportunity—which, at the time, felt like a horrendous misfortune—to put that wisdom to the test as the primary family caregiver during my wife Joan’s 10-year struggle with Alzheimer’s disease. The long decline brought by a neurodegenerative disease creates a kind of slow-motion calamity. Life loses rhythm, direction, definition.

We created a mood of anticipation rather than paralysis.

Joan and I banished the feeling that we had fallen into limbo by reconstructing our daily activities. By celebrating shared experiences and intensifying attention to mundane tasks, we filled those moments with passion and awareness. Exercise, cooking, eating, reading, work and even watching the news became more deliberate components of our daily ritual, giving us happy moments to look forward to, creating a mood of anticipation rather than paralysis. In a time of randomness and uncertainty, it made us feel proactive instead of reactive.

Joan is gone now. My job is no longer to care for her but to practice self-care. I am 79 and entering my fifth week of social separation. I am hale and healthy, although I have well-controlled asthma and hypertension. All this puts me in a high-risk category, making self-isolation a must.

The wisdom that I acquired giving care to Joan helps me cope with the solitude. The threat of feeling vulnerable and defeated is ever-present, but I know that I can manage it by organizing my day around highly ritualized activities and giving myself over to them.

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I rise early and work out for two hours. After making breakfast, washing up and doing household chores, I sit down to write—both my regular academic work and now a diary of this new plague. I slow down for lunch, preparing a proper meal that I enjoy at leisure—a ritual I learned while caring for Joan. After lunch, I take a short walk and return to my academic work. I reserve the end of the day for my deepest pleasure, reading.

In the evening, I catch up on chores, accompanied by the TV news—but I strictly limit how much I watch and read about the pandemic to only what seems most informative and personally useful. I prepare my dinner, which I again take time to enjoy. After a book, a movie or a TV show, I take myself off to bed, suffusing even washing up with an ordered, ritualized quality.

I have also learned how important it is to be surrounded by whatever brings us joy. Music had been a great love of Joan's and mine—a source of comfort and sanctuary during her illness. Today, in isolation, I hardly ever feel alone: The sounds of aria and orchestra, violin and piano fill my empty house.

Life-enhancing rituals allow me to find and create joy.

The habits I developed during Joan's illness fundamentally changed me. They transform daily living into a chain of life-enhancing rituals that allow me to find and create joy, even when sheltering in place.

We can all learn how to endure with purpose and make this a period of emotional and moral transformation. A plague, as Albert Camus knew, is the moment to ask what life is for. The response to Covid-19 suggests one answer: care for yourself and others. So take a breath and take the time to change the daily rituals that make up life. Throw yourself into them as if your life were at stake, which it is.

—Dr. Kleinman teaches psychiatry, anthropology and social medicine at Harvard University and is the author, most recently, of “The Soul of Care: The Moral Education of a Husband and a Doctor” (Viking).

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