

# Spilling the Mind's Work

## Harvesting Coexistence and Creative Survival During the Pandemic: Spring 2020–Spring 2022

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*Months of pause and effect disturb my mind's work. As the coronavirus steals bits and pieces of lives, is it possible to grasp chaotic waves that redefine memory, place, and time?*

With the pandemic's intrusion into the global community, solitude is both friend and foe to many. As the health crisis brings strange inner responses, more than acknowledging and longing defined actions and inactions. My own spirit fed me a mixture of melancholy and an intense need to escape the grip of the sinister virus. Relentless welling of emotions fused with the question: What possibly could emerge through the threshold of this pivotal point in human history? The mind's work began spilling a monologue about confusion, illusion, reality, and time through storytelling. As manifested by the pandemic, my mind began to peek glacially and persistently into my inner life, an inner life usually plagued by introspection.

While gardening and walking became more than usual companions, little was able to soothe the inner turmoil unleashed. Weeks into lockdown I thought of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. His graceful language kept nudging the synapses, taking sides with our human inventiveness. Because he often reflected on how solitude can encourage the creative process, retrieving numerous volumes of his works brought me a level of comfort and pause. Still, what possibly could feed my own creativity in the midst of an all-encompassing crisis or two or three?

For much of my adulthood I have been a steward of the land and a seasonal forager of plant materials. As the pandemic grew, my collection expanded with fury. My indoor garden became a

vision of how Mother Nature edges herself into the shadows of the best and worst of times, how she quiets high anxiety and the chatter in my head. As the months transcended inner and outer boundaries, the media expanded its coverage about the healing and spiritual powers of the natural world. But I didn't need a plague to inform me about her influence and omnificence; most of my days have been spent hiking, walking, birding, wilding and re-wilding my half acre, advocating for native plants, reducing lawns, building habitats, and using ecological and sustainable methods to coexist with the Earth. Much of my time is also spent residing in interior spaces—emotional and physical rooms, where inspiration and transformation is influenced by Mother Nature's bounty. Now a state of fragility blurred time's passage and stirred uncertainty.

Questions never cease, continuing for as long as my mind fulfills and spills its duties. Perspective shifts. Risky behavior halts. Life is in limbo; life seems stalled. The longing for the crisis to end is palpable; the longing becomes the focus.

On this dimly lit morning I am reminded that my introversion has been a compass point to guide my life of semi-solitude, working to pull back from the surface and use the veil to discover, re-imagine, and re-enforce my selfhood. But the boundaries of the pandemic sway as I try, really try, to adjust. I feel as though I am a flower caught in a fierce storm. Petals wind-swept and torn into pieces, wildly unreachable, tossing and sinking. Reactions by extroverts are more aggressive. Responses are similar to a child's game of dodge ball, swiftly avoiding being chosen as the target and yet needing the interaction that is missing. As we became fragile and emotionally wrought, tensions grew day by day. Inner landscapes become a haven of retreat. Some are cautious to admit emotional strife; some band together sharing angst or possibilities; some adjust with strength of will and perseverance. How to bounce back from shape-shifting news?

While the pandemic's torrents raged, my anxious determination reached for solace in places familiar and stunningly comforting. Time kept me fixated and troubled as much as any other part of a wider response to the nonstop health emergency. The slow movement—the apparent interruption, coined the *Anthropause*—was an incentive to notice even as I was sure that I hadn't discovered inner tools to manage the unimaginable (possibly another spillover from non-human to human or a leak from a lab). Surprisingly, the disquiet created the quiet needed to enter a new phase of creativity.

Image 1.  
"The Glow of Spring"



As spring and summer composed stories, my deep immersion into nature widened my path inward. The idea of inner transformation began to feel possible. My indoor and outdoor gardens were shaping various narratives that began to forge a theme. Unknowingly, I was exploring ways to tolerate the dark veil of 2020, 2021, and into 2022. Now I was foraging anew my inner garden, solidifying that one small seed can hold the universe in its soul and rescue me for seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years.

I began to notice how the Japanese garden scissors, which I've been using for more than forty years, were becoming an extension of what was necessary. Each day they rest in my hand as I begin the search. What will lure my creative spirit now that the seasons are bursting boundaries to open limitless choices: a geranium's purple-red patina, a black-stemmed rose-tinted hydrangea's bough, multiple deep-pink petals of a zinnia, the architecture of a wild indigo's leaf, the aromatic wisps of dill weed, the silky surface of a dainty white cosmos. Or fallen leaves transforming in successive stages of coloration and decomposition. Or plants shedding their garments as branches expose angles and shapes. Deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction became spiritual themes,

awakening sparks within. My photographic lens was stilling remnants of nature in my mind and reality.

*Human history is built on storytelling.*

To percolate a story is to acknowledge one of our species' unique characteristics: the combination of creating and recreating memory, place, and time. Rarely has there been a confluence of such universally experienced events that most of us want to erase from the human story. But these narratives are integral to how we grow as a species, how we prove our ingenuity in such difficulty, how we learn from adversity, how we accept or reject crushing emotional and physical blows—and how we move into the next stage of existence. As the planet's health and environmental, political, and social crises spread with super velocity, devastation rose and fell within the collective conscious and unconscious. Humans shared and are sharing a common thread of awareness and participation, yet each of us is individually entrenched. Responses bridge the past to the present where most are unprepared for such life-altering global events invading our sanctuaries. Everyone has had bits and pieces of their lives taken, lost in the miasma. Effects will be years in discovery and recovery. And in these historic pivots everyone's story is worthy of an oral and a written record: the story of survival through struggle, perseverance, and acceptance. Or anger and discontinuity. Or discovery and joy. Or empathy and sympathy.

**Winter 2020–Spring 2021**

*How a connection was made between seasonal sway, storytelling, and my shadowy response to life interruptus.*

Unsurprisingly, even in the face of eco-anxiety and the pandemic, my gardens provided a spiritual oasis and sanctuary. The tame and uncultivated alter, drift, and transform my gardens, providing a space for momentary exuberance. Regardless of the season and its rhythm, each vessel of fresh or fallen or decomposed plant materials competes for my attention.

As winter approaches, seasonal drift sets in motion darker and colder days. Some non-human creatures hibernate or migrate south, but the virus moves without a care for disruption locally or globally. Disconnection from one season becomes connection to another. The vision of multiple hues slips into memory as reduction in light and temperature fashions yet another pause. The stage is set; wintering my outdoor spaces proves sustaining beyond

its past role. A life-affirming philosophy is deepened, lifting and reducing the emotional overload. Nature's poetic touch unconsciously excavates my own rhythmic response through my tool kit. I work, work, work more furiously image-making and tinkering with visual storytelling. The iPhone, my lens of choice, and the digital darkroom allow for instinctual stilling, reinventing and reinterpreting. And each season becomes an emotional grotto for quiet and solace from the constant inner and outer chatter.

Then I see—*really see*—that my physical living area is transformed beyond anything foreseen; it becomes my sketchbook, palette, archive, and studio. As I spend a portion of each day noticing various elements of the seasons, my intuition guides me to build and grow a collection to dry and savor nature's metamorphosis. Foraging, drying, and staging became reliable and steady saviors. The camera's eye is my companion to create a collage or portrait or still life. I experiment with straight pins to design and secure the materials. For a few images they become a symbol of humanity's continual assault on the planet and, in turn, on human and non-human species. Each pin is an accumulation of years, decades, centuries, eons of abuse. To misread our interference is to be complicit in the demise of the climate, species, habitat reduction, and resources. Each pin pierces the earth and the pain rises skyward.

After gathering hundreds of fragments I ponder how the

Image 2.  
"Ode to Trees"



*Confluence*

collection has grown against pandemic time. From the shadows of a plague the architecture of a spent flower or cluster of a season's seeds or decaying leaves become anew with meaning. Photographs reinterpret and reveal part of their stories and mine. I wonder how to decode all that has transpired, realizing that the subconscious has been working fierce overtime to survive this apocalypse.

*Nature rescues the mind's wanderings.*

*"To enjoy life's immensity, you do not need many things." —Ryokan (1758-1831), Japanese poet*

In chilling isolation a ritual of past decades emerges with vigor: collecting jewels of each season's production. I've been drying flowers and other plant materials for decades, watching as the last phase of existence transforms with unforeseen and startling visual appeal. But during this bizarrely strange and eerie time, my tradition became an obsession, where observing, rescuing, and preserving a small bit of nature reinforced life's continuance as human deaths mount. Even as each fragment represents phases of a season's lifecycle, the creative process stretches its endurance. My outdoor and indoor gardens provide a myriad of choices, even creating my own parallel universe.

I've learned to see the exterior land through the frame of the camera's eye and my heart's pulsing. As the camera frames my

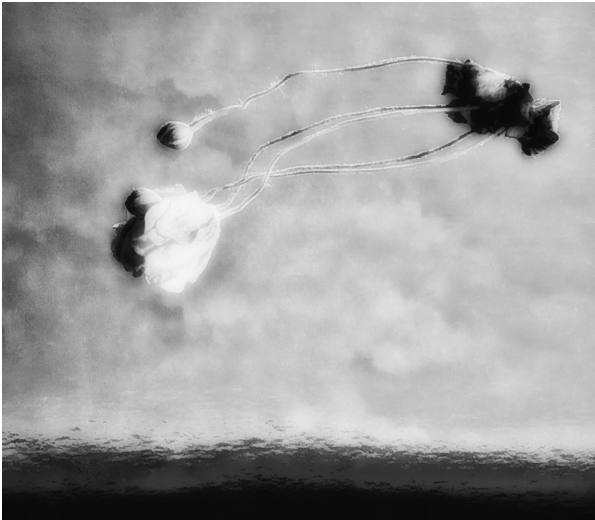


Image 3.  
"Photomontage  
of a Native  
Anemone"

inner and outer universe, the natural world is a platform for coexistence, synchronicity, and noticing. To see what is usually unseen is to be drawn into exploration and even creative risky thinking. But now I am fully aware that to engage with creativity also requires deeper feeling and intentional listening; each of the senses contains multitudes that add to the wellspring within us.

Humans are seekers, and I spent the pandemic entangled in the depth and breath of the natural world. Nature and I became co-conspirators as visual storytellers. Self-expression had not paused. It eased past my awareness and hid, gathering time to incubate a response. The collection of nature's progeny extended life and at the same time shadowed decomposition. My vulnerability was mirrored by dehydration of a leaf, scattering of seeds, and decay of roots. Specific actions were working to keep me emotionally afloat. Nature's magnetism drew me closer to writers whose works are immersed in the natural world. Reading and re-reading the familiar and new intensified: Thoreau and his need for simplicity along with his discovery of seed dispersal; Barry Lopez and his visceral descriptions of the Arctic; Mary Austin's writings about spiritual ecology; Mary Oliver's gentle, poignant, and heartfelt poetry about the wild; Robert McFarlane's works about explorations in the natural world; David Whyte's images and words mirroring nature's mysteries; and Brenda Ueland's spiritual approach to writing. They rescued me from a chasm. Suddenly, my own fragile fragments were being threaded through an evolving inner lens. The restrictions of the pandemic's limitations became spaces for discovery and deeper spirituality.

### Summer 2021–Spring 2022

*As I tend my garden, I mend my swollen heart and spiritual center. Maple leaves and seeds tumbled onto the path. They remind me that shifts in nature are steppingstones to escape the invisible disrupter.*

*“After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, love, and so on—what remains? ... Nature remains... the trees, fields, the changes of seasons.”—Walt Whitman, from his diary.*

On my daily walks reverence appears. As I approach the creek, which is protected by the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, my senses are alert for wildlife: spritely diving birds, quick-moving fish, bare or leafed willows, stone sculptures heaped against



Image 4.  
"Still Life with Roses"

embankments, echoes of small roaring waterfalls, ducks in pairs or groups diving and preening, slowly wading herons, glorious shadows drifting across the forest floor, sunlight climbing trees, wild bamboo clinging to wooded hillsides, clumps of leaves floating with the current. Discovery is framed by my inner voice screaming: stop, notice, and see, really see. I spy on dry and living remnants, realizing the preciousness of this ritual and tradition. Its meaning is multi-layered and profoundly touches my core. But I need not discover some gem to be influenced and seduced by what is before me. Truly, being there is enough. I feel kinship and reciprocity. Of course, nature bestows much more than I could ever gift her; there is no bartering, only gratitude and stewardship. Mostly these are journeys of observation, silence, and solitude. Healing and meditation. Suddenly, I am calmer. Emboldened. Uplifted. Tears of promise rise. The visual dominates and suspends time. Senses heighten, mood lightens, thoughts expand.

Each of us has a timestamp of progress that is realized with memories of buds opening, trees blossoming, bees darting, leaves floating, clouds billowing, animals romping. Covid-19 might persist for the rest of my days, but I can immerse myself in other dimensions, on other roads to explore and wander, on building memories through my image-making.



*“The land urges us to come around to an understanding of ourselves.” —Barry Lopez, Arctic Dreams (1986)*

Dry, pressed, or fresh specimens remind me of the universe’s gifts. Their curious and vulnerable afterlife tempts my sensibilities. As I arrange them, their metamorphosis glacially and magically explodes over time, until their presence appears to be more than ephemera and marginalia. An emotive exhibition of nature’s prowess rests before me, annotating this upside-down unparalleled world of 2020–2022. Suddenly, their physicality shifts between individualization to collective mesmerization.

Then I began retrieving bits and pieces of myself. An online twelve-week course, “The Artist’s Way,” written by artistic polymath Julia Cameron in 1992 and taught globally for more than twenty-five years by numerous educators, became a path to the unexpected. To share virtual discussions of disruption and struggle with other creative individuals is sublime, life-affirming. Each member of the group is on a journey to reclaim their creative soul, to stir, maintain, or acknowledge that part of identity. This global community encourages and supports without criticism or judgment. The congeniality of participants in the workshop brought synchronicity as well as epiphanies. Months of the program’s after-effects prove surprising and substantial. Insights appear in various forms. Discoveries abound. Joy surfaces. Its glacial bursts of insights incited a second go-round of the program, which built more community and rewards.

*The pandemic solidified parts of my True North.*

The dried and pressed plant collection is a time capsule of my creative persistence during the plague. Additionally, at first light my mind spills flashes of thoughts onto white spaces. This ritual eases me into the day’s work, but it also acts as a written archive. As I wake, alerts come in tender audible patterns, notable signs that life continues in spite of outside forces. Light enters. Birds serenade. Animals scurry across the roof. Then words steer my inner compass. Words secure my aliveness. I record thoughts that infiltrate the interior landscape: a sentence, three, paragraphs, pages. This cognitive off-loading clears my headspace, momentarily freeing this inner room to be refilled.



Image 5.  
“Nesting in my Sanctuary”

Frequently, I stop to praise those who give so much of themselves, and my staying at home does not feel a contribution to the greater good. Desperately, I try to pull away from technology, its relentless chatter and noise. Walk. Read. Garden. Cook. Dialogue. Imagine. Worry. Question. Tinker. Photograph. Write. Process. Edit. Write. Photograph. Tinker. Post lots of “Please Vote” postcards. I grab every bit of support that powers positive thinking through inner narrative threads and human connections. Family and friends are lifelines. Most importantly, writing my thoughts has been a source of survival throughout my entire adulthood. While it leads to a stilling of the mind, it also acts as listener and self-reflector.

The bookends of a life continue to migrate in depth and weight. The imprint from joy to distress, angst to exuberance, and acceleration to almost freeze-frame ignited ideas to reimagine my photographic image making. Without my conscious awareness the hard work was percolating behind the scenes. A new body of work inserted itself into the dark crevices. My subconscious lit sparks—sparks ignited by the climate emergency, a divisive political landscape, and global health crisis. A space of rebirth became a living, breathing place for emotional wealth and personal expansion.

Apparently, my most important task has been filling my heart’s negative spaces and unrest; this task has been achieved intuitively and in shadow. My indoor non-living garden became a reminder and symbol of my philosophical fortress and roadmap born in late 1970s: *creative survival*. Over pandemic time I created photographs through postprocessing such as blended compositions, giving

Image 6.  
"Spring Magnolia Blossoms"



renewal to the slow motion of a specimen's patina: the metamorphosis grazing daily. I was doing and barely noticing the meaning. I created images sourced from my studio garden floor. My home had unknowingly been a lifeline, simultaneously seducing my creativity.

While I imagined small droplets evaporating and rising into the air from each plant material, images emerged where the imagination was churning and humming. These botanical portraits burst the seams of my thoughts. As a humanist and naturalist, I was bemused by my own actions. I was startled by the array of optimism that became an extension of myself, and how it reflected part of who I am in this moment of catastrophic upheaval. I had become more of the natural world than ever in a time when the planet's non-human animals were blossoming from the effects of the Anthropause, allowing them to exhale temporarily and reclaim their land. As wild animals roamed urban areas, I longed for the human animal to realize how our intervention had stolen their habitats. Unfortunately, this step forward was mostly erased with time's passage.

### *Harvesting Coexistence and Creative Survival*

The rhythm of a global health emergency is out of step with our notion of time, memory, and place. Everything has been put in a queue to be tested and placed in a microscope for interpretation, misinterpretation, or no examination at all. And it will take deep

analysis and insight to see where we flourished, maintained, or let the human species crumble.

The measure of a life redesigns itself through agency, tackling the winds of uncertainty. I float across time, harnessing determination, fragility, reflection, and survival to compete for memory's storytelling.

Nature reminds me that nothing is insignificant. Nothing is isolated from the rhythm of anything else. Connecting to the natural world is connecting to myself. Nature becomes my eyes, my inner curiosity heightened by our companionship.

*Reflection. Reverence. Release.*

To navigate the twenty-first century as a soul on the hunt for my voice, I walk a labyrinth infused with nature's influence. This essay examines this influence as a tool to survive the pandemic's rage and also delve deeper and deeper into layers of selfhood.

Tales of my mind's work are stored across my sanctuary's indoor garden. The entire space absorbed the trauma of pandemic time, as if osmosis has rendered its power over an invisible threat. I lean against this past, taking lessons and accepting the saturation of loss (time, momentum, concentration, rhythm) and gain (perception, perspective, solitude, insight, new community).

As nature moved further and further into my home, she demonstrated how my *Weltanschauung* (personal philosophy) is inextricably interwoven with the larger trajectory of the universe. Symbiosis is the pinnacle of *creative survival* where the creative process can be a path to see the world with open and closed eyes. Creativity can be part of everyday living, demystifying its usual place on a pedestal. After countless hours of pandemic time in my sanctuary, the space still has something to teach me, still opening my vision for expansion.

Surprisingly, the coronavirus instigated my inner lens, my inner life, to perform tortoise-like progress. The result is a body of photographs that map meaning and purpose when it seemed implausible or improbable to be productive. Nature's power to heal inspires images that conjure variations on revelry, surprise, joy, sorrow, mystery, and wonder. This journey is an ongoing process to harvest seeds of self-expression and coexist with the language of the natural world. Mostly, it is a journey to learn how my True North embodies and champions nature's mighty voice.