

The Crooked Tree: How to stay well in the wake of Covid-19

by Sara Waymont

If you've never heard Tom Waits tell the story of the crooked tree, then you have missed something remarkable. So that you understand that we are all now just as twisted as each other, I will retell it for you here:

In the forest there was a crooked tree and a straight tree. Every day, the straight tree would say to the crooked tree, "Look at me... I'm tall and I'm straight and I'm handsome. Look at you... you're all crooked and bent over. No one wants to look at you." And they grew up in that forest together.

And then, one day, the loggers came and they saw the crooked tree and the straight tree and they said; "Just cut down all the straight trees and leave the rest." So the loggers turned all the straight trees into lumber and toothpicks and paper.

And the crooked tree is still there, growing stronger and stranger every day.'

I live with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, PoTS and Mast Cell Activation Syndrome. I have been that crooked tree for a long time now; unable to fully take part in everyday life, growing in my own wonky way somewhere deep in the shadows. I can't eat anything other than oats, sweet potatoes, dairy and meat. I take 15+ tablets every day just so that I can eat this limited range of foods without my face swelling up like a balloon. I'm at risk of spontaneous anaphylaxis. My joints dislocate daily. My back is damaged. I can't breathe properly and I suffer from chronic fatigue and pain. I'm not eligible for PIP or any other state benefit. I am thirty three years old.

Five years ago my life changed significantly. I went from being fit and active, a member of the UK reserve forces who could run for miles and still hold down a full-time civilian career as a teacher, to someone who could barely leave the house. Anaphylaxis followed knee dislocation, followed back injury and slowly, but surely, my world crumbled.

I had been strong, I had been successful, I had been growing tall and straight and then I became suddenly and impossibly vulnerable; a gnarled and warped sapling trying desperately just to stand against the wind.

And that struggle now belongs to you too.

You see, Coronavirus may well be akin to a terrible flu (causing respiratory distress and potential organ failure), but what it really is, more important than the physical effects it has, is fear. All of you strong, tall trees are finally learning how it feels to hear the chainsaw whirring or to feel your roots twisting.

Ask not for whom the arborists come, they come for thee.

Illness is a great leveller. To a certain extent, yes it does certainly matter whether you are rich or poor during this pandemic; the more money you have the better health care you can purchase and the less the financial strain of the inevitable global shut-down. But what matters most is

how you choose to weather the storm. You can no longer trust that your body will be healthy and strong. It isn't safe to go about your usual business, when an invisible killer lurks in every crowd, lingers on every surface. You are just starting to get a taste of the life that I, and many others like me, lead every single day. The disabled and the chronically sick are already well versed in a lesson that you are just starting to learn; when you cannot trust the integrity of your own body, nowhere is safe.

It's not all doom and gloom, though. On the flip side, you also discover this; every single day that your roots continue to cling to the soil, however tenuously, is a most precious gift.

Because of my compromised immune system and general poor health, I am already in self-isolation, but, for me, this doesn't feel an awful lot different to the life that I normally live. The only big change for me has been that I can't go to work while this virus is raging.

Mentally, this is hard.

The last five years have been a struggle for me. Despite being qualified to MA level and requesting no time off sick, I've been fired three times by employers after my disability came to light. I've lived through the uncertainty of being a self-employed yoga teacher and I've only recently found a job in a school that I really love and whose staff understand all of my issues and are sympathetic to my needs. Being house-bound once more is akin to climbing back into a previously shed skin; it feels tight and uncomfortable and, sadly, all too familiar.

But here's the thing, I've learned to thrive in spite of the discomfort and, in the testing days and weeks to come, so can you! The world has and will change still further in the days, weeks and months ahead. People are being forced to disengage from the rhetoric of consumerism and the falsehood of social media. If you can't go out and spend your money on the latest designer gear, then boast about it on Instagram, what are you supposed to do?

The answer is this: connection.

Not with the outside world, but with yourself. When was the last time you really tuned into your own mind? Listened to what you actually thought, wanted and needed, rather than what society around you demanded?

Isolation does not have to mean the diminishing of the human soul. It can become a conduit for self-development and growth. A time for peace and reflection and expansion. Those of us who live small and crooked lives already know that there is still a way for our leaves to feel the warmth of the sun and for our fruits to grow.

Fear and anxiety exist within the mind. Whatever you focus your attention on grows. This time of national and global emergency can be a chance for us all to press pause on the urgency of our lives and reassess what it means to be human in the twenty first century. Just as those who live a monastic life retreat from the world in order to understand the truth of their own nature, so too the current crisis may be crucible for you to re-evaluate your own existence.

Welcome in the vulnerability of being human. Embrace the crookedness of your own existence. Face the Covid-19 pandemic with an attitude of curiosity and self-exploration. When you come out again on the other side, the world may not be as dramatically different as we fear, but you just might.

Practices for Cultivating Curiosity

When we are stressed or traumatised, we lack curiosity. Darwin identified the ‘curiosity muscle’ (the sternocleidomastoid muscle down the side of the neck) as early as 1869. Traumatized and terrified people look down, not up. Their shoulders tense and their heads droop. The longer we stay in this posture, the worse we are likely to feel. So, it is important during these times when our access to the usual external stimulus is limited, that we make time to extensively activate our curiosity muscle and challenge the brain.

Postures to include in your daily practice:

- Sphinx and Seal, with head elevated, not drooping.
- Any strong back-bend that has the advantage of allowing the neck to open (e.g. Camel).
- Seated twists, such as Deer or Marichyasana C.
- Any *asana* that leads to right and left brain stimulation (e.g. Sun Salutations, stepping back on opposite legs, Half Locust pose, alternating both legs and arms as a variation)

Other practices that can help:

- Drawing and doodling; particularly swapping from your ‘right’ hand to your ‘wrong’ hand (e.g. if I am right handed I will try drawing with my left), which makes the brain really engage and focus on the process at hand.
- Crafting; knitting, crocheting, embroidery, collage. Any practice that engages the hands will engage the brain, as the largest part of the motor-homunculus is dedicated to control of fine motor-skills in the fingers. There are plenty of tutorials on YouTube that you can follow.
- Listening to music; make yourself a play list to stimulate the senses. Challenge yourself to listen to music that you wouldn’t usually find appealing and that makes you feel strong visceral sensations, whether positive or negative, to explore new feelings.

Practices for Reflection

You probably think that the practice of journaling has been massively over-stated, but, trust me, it hasn’t. It depends *why* and *how* you journal. If your average entry is just ‘Dear diary, today I sat in front of Netflix again and panicked about how much bog roll I have left...’, then you aren’t going to obtain much benefit. However, if your entries include open and honest access to your truest thoughts and feelings, then you will be able to identify patterns of negative self-talk, as well as unrealised hopes for the future.

Some exercises you might like to try include:

- Draw a picture of you living your best life. Doodle and note down all the little details that make this existence significant and special for you; who are you with? What are you doing? Where are you? What does your face look like? Your home?
- Write down your worst fear. You might surprise yourself when you start to unpick the reasoning behind this terror.
- Make a list of all the things that you would still like to do or achieve.
- Make a list of all the things that you have already done and achieved; compare it with the list above.

- Make a list of everything that you are grateful for and see if you can develop a *mantra* for your daily life (e.g. “For the roof over my head and the food in my belly, I am grateful.” Or, my personal favourite; “May I be always where I am supposed to be.”)
- Take a line for a walk; allow your pen to simply wander about the page and then see what shapes you can identify within the scribble. Why have you identified these? What do they mean to you?

Practices for Expansion

Backbends and *pranayama* practices are excellent for stimulating the Vagus nerve and improving vagal tone. This, in turn, helps to regulate our response to stress, decreases heart rate, lowers blood pressure and inflammation, all of which ensure that the body is as healthy as possible.

Beneficial postures include:

- Supported back-bend over a bolster, with the bolster running parallel to the spine (legs could be in butterfly or straight).
- Sphinx and Seal; both postures compress the lumbar spine and can offer relief from long days of sitting if you are working from home.
- Camel pose (be careful of dropping the head too far back or going too deep if this is not in your usual practice).
- A gentle flow using Sun Salutations to fully mobilise the spine.
- Cat-Cow practised mindfully, really utilising the full movement of the vertebrae.

Breathing exercises you could try:

- Alternate nostril breathing; counting the breaths on each side provides right and left brain stimulation and harmonisation.
- Bhramari Breath, which is incredibly soothing to the nervous system.
- The 7:11 or ‘Panic Breath’; inhale for a count of seven and exhale for a count of eleven. The longer exhales stimulate the rest and restore function of the parasympathetic nervous system.
- The coherent breath pattern of 6 seconds inhale/6 seconds exhale (as long as this does not cause any strain or agitation).

Yoga Nidra can also be a fantastic practice for expanding into one’s own mental space. Beware, however, that if you are carrying any form of trauma or psychosis, this practice may not be suitable for you, as it can lead to a worsening of symptoms.

Sara Waymont is a trained TRiM practitioner and yoga teacher, specialising in supporting people who are living with chronic stress and trauma. She has written *Yoga, PTSD and Me* – a guide to support practitioners in self-managing stress and trauma they may face.

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