

I go down to the shore



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A few months ago I found one of my favorite poems I have ever read. “I Go Down to the Shore” by Mary Oliver. It goes: “I go down to the shore in the morning, And depending on the hour the waves, Are rolling in or moving out, And I say, oh, I am miserable, What shall- What should I do? And the sea says, In its lovely voice: Excuse me. I have work to do.”

May has come and gone. I want to say it feels like yesterday was April, but it doesn't. Yesterday doesn't feel like anything, really. Anything other than just that... yesterday. But today, as I sit writing this, I feel desperately aware of my place in time. In this precarious spot, dangling on the hands of a clock, watching the seconds drift by and by and dreading the passing of the day or - god forbid - the week. I've felt this way for a while. Many of my friends have noticed my desperate attempts to schedule coffee dates with each of

them, trying to cling onto the small amount of time I still have with them. Most of them are leaving, going to school in California or Washington. If I'm lucky, they're staying in state, still three or four hours away. My days seem to be rushing by, and every canceled hangout or afternoon I spend sitting in my house feels like a missed opportunity, like wasted time. But today I went on a walk.

The air, even as I sit here writing, is pungent with after-rain. It's my favorite time, my favorite smell, my favorite feeling. The plants are green, and feel like they are silently singing. The sky is at times both blue and grey, comfortably overcast yet still heartwarming. The dirt, not quite mud, is still tactile under my boots. The birds are singing, screaming a beautiful song, leaping and diving through the air like acrobats. My dog, Zoe, adorning a brand new haircut, is about as happy as can be. Spring is here. Weird to be saying that in May, right? Often spring is marked by a series of events, signifiers, and a definite start. Where cold fades into crisp and snow turns to rain. But this year spring has felt uncertain. Just as autumn did last year. The world has been temperamental, and those signifiers have become muddy. We've had weeks where rain turns to

snow, where Hawaiian shirts turn to big jackets, and where I go from air conditioning to heat. Time has unfolded methodically. Instead of its usual carpet rolling, time has felt like a folded up piece of paper, always changing, unfolding in strange new directions and ferocities, with creases and folds stuck everywhere. And with this the passing of time has felt almost menacing. It feels like time is banging me around in a tupperware like a clove of garlic, and I'm desperately clinging to my peel.

I often feel like going outside when I get this feeling. The world is huge, and its forces are powerful. Too powerful to comprehend, let alone control. And sometimes it feels like it's crashing over me. Like circumstance has taken the oars from my hands and I'm left to crash against the black rocks of sadness. And nature helps. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because nature is uniquely ever-changing. And in that way it can be uniquely terrifying. We can look at Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* where nature's uncertainty is demonic and crushing, symbolized as a killer whale, always avoiding capture. Or we can look at Albert Camus, who said the world is absurd, unable to ever be understood or tamed, and trying too is our biggest fault. That we must rebel against it,

or it'll be the cause of much dread.

But at some point, I think the idea that the world is uncaring isn't necessarily true. We are always interdependent with the world. We are made out of the earth, always grounded to it, dependent on it. But we also give the earth meaning and purpose. Without us, the world would be nothing more than Mars or Saturn. And we have changed it, and it has changed us. It has shaped all of us fundamentally. We don't exist independent of the seasons, of time, of the earth, of history. We are nature, and we need not be indifferent to ourselves, to others, or to the world at large. This is our home. And everyone is a part of our family.

But that idea that haunted Melville and Camus really comforts me. Like Mary Oliver, I like the fact that the world marches on without me, that our planet will continue to orbit the sun, that the tides will continue to crash, and the plants will continue a cycle of life-death-rebirth. I like the perspective it provides. Of course, there's the reassuring feeling that my problems are both incredibly valid and reasonable, yet also somewhat insignificant when it comes to the rest of the world. It's also reassuring to realize that malicious forces aren't to do with my problems. Unlike what I've dealt with for so many years, these friends leaving isn't because they don't

like me. They're just moving with time, following the creek in the woods leading them to happy and prosperous lakes. It's also important in realizing how everyone struggles with time unfolding precariously, with temperamental weather. And with it comes a reminder that these bonds are enduring, that these friendships are strong, and these people actually care about me. And the feeling that these relationships aren't over, even if they're moving to Seattle, and in a year I could be in Chicago. As Johnny Cash puts it, “We'll meet again. I don't know where, and I don't know when. But I know we'll meet again, some sunny day.”

I look up. I can see my favorite walking place. Back where my grandparents live. Where the trees are green, the grass is long, and the air is pungent with moist dew. Where the cool, dry breeze of the mountain mixes with the rain. I step with my big, clumsy feet in my big, clumsy boots, and I hear the crunch of branches and brush of grass against my jeans. Suddenly, I feel unbelievably connected to the world. To the planet, to the creeks, to the lakes, and, most of all, to all the people in the world. I remember just why I keep living. As John Green says, “Humans are nothing if not wildly, utterly, dependent.” And like the ocean says, in its lovely voice, “we have work to do.”

Where we go from here

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Advisor

I read a recent article in Time Magazine about the high school experience this past year titled “What We've Lost”. Here are a few things COVID has taken from the traditional high school experience: graduations, standard high school sports, face-to-face schooling (for some), prom (for some), small talk at the locker, and consistency. This year I've read more student essays about mental health issues than I ever have before. When I've talked to students about their lives this past year, there's no denying we're a changed bunch. We're anxious, disengaged, discontent and languishing. I say “we” because here at the high school we're a community, and we're in it together: students, teachers, admin, janitors, our lunch ladies. It's

a domino effect, this anxiousness that surrounds us. But, we're surviving, and if we put a bright light on it, might I argue thriving? As the school year comes to an end, I wonder, too, who will we become after this year? So, instead of focusing on what we've lost, let's look at what we've gained.

A Stronger Appreciation for Hugs:

A common COVID phrase: Is it okay if I hug you? I remember the first time our English department was together after being vaccinated. One of us was having a day. Sounds mushy maybe, but we gave each other a nice, big, heartfelt hug - and there was something so normal and lovely about that hug. It's not about the hug, really. It's about the sense of community, of togetherness, of connection that we've missed. My co-worker, Britt Searles, wrote

about the shock of the school year in an essay for McSweeney's that I think echoes how we felt at the beginning of the school year. I've never taken for granted my English team, but I sure missed the consistency of that connection. I think this Covid experience has tested us all (teachers and students) in a way that we've had to reach out to each other in different ways and be vulnerable, even if that's not our inherit style.

A Stronger Sense of Self:

A common COVID phrase: How was your quarantine? Nothing helps you examine your values like hours to yourself. I had a student write about how Covid has helped her to find a stronger sense of self - to find what she wants to do with her future, not what her family or society wants her to do. Maybe, just maybe, we've learned to

be quiet with ourselves and listen. Personally, slowing down has empowered the introvert in me. Social pressures to attend this or that stalled during COVID, and I realized how refreshing it was to not feel the need to hang out in big groups. It's not my style, really. And, that's okay. I've dug deeper into my values to realize spending time with my family, playing Catan with my close friends, and reading is how I like to spend a Friday.

We're Stronger Than We Think:

I've seen students and teachers overcome navigating new learning platforms, block schedules, online to in person to online again, and sports seasons complete in three weeks. If there's been anything consistent, it's the inconsistency. While it's made us anxious, it's also made us stronger, more resilient. It's pretty incredible to watch as a teacher. Students are finding, in my eyes, strength they didn't

know they had. At times, too, I think students feel thankful to be in person, to have more normalcy than many students throughout the country, world. To be somewhat protected by our warm, small mountain community. While we've had the time to inspect our values, we've also looked outside ourselves to see the bigger picture. We grapple with our experience while what surrounds us is civil and political unrest. We sense the chaos. We're finding ways to deal. We're finding ways to talk about that which unsettles us.

There's no doubt we're ready for this school year to end, but I hope we can take a moment to look within and outside ourselves and realize what we've gained. I think we've become more resilient, connected and grounded - at least that's what I'll carry with me. That's the story I'll tell of who we'll become after this school year.