15

Documenting Our Solastalgia: A New Landscape

Maggie Christensen

As 4Cs week (March 25–28, 2020) progressed and so did news of the pandemic, I found myself working during our second week of "spring break," which was designed to give faculty time to prepare for the unprecedented move to remote learning. Situated in the middle of the country, we had the benefit of observing from a safe distance the effects of the virus in more densely populated areas. We were well-prepared and actively trying to "flatten the curve," we hoped. During this week, the gravity of the pandemic began to sink in with me as I began the journey from disbelief and shock, toward grief—and then fear. That week the US hit a major milestone: over 100,000 known COVID-19 cases, more than anywhere else in the world. We were all still getting used to isolation, listening to daily briefings from officials, and waiting for the next shoe to drop; we knew it was supposed to get worse before the situation could improve. Two months later, we would reach the grim mark of 100,000 deaths.

Obediently, I remained at home, at the same desk and chair, with the same students and faculty—but everything felt different. My graduate students, several of whom are themselves teachers, struggled to express their feelings as they experienced the by-now familiar symptoms: fatigue, lack of motivation, inability to focus. One local high-school teacher, weighed down by events, sent me this email, representative of so many others that week:

> I feel I need to tell you that I am struggling quite a lot mentally and emotionally with everything that is going on. I'm sure you feel that way, as well. I feel overwhelmed, buried, and like I have no routine or control over anything. I've tried to research, but my mind just gets filled with other distractions and thoughts. . . . I'm just trying to be transparent here. I want to do well, but I feel like I'm spinning out a bit and I feel overwhelmed. I'll do my best, but right now, [the project] most definitely won't be where

> it should be. Sometimes I feel as if a weight has been placed on my chest. Is it just me? Others seem to be dealing with this just fine. . . . I suppose I wasn't built for coping with global pandemic.

I replied supportively, I hope. None of us is built for pandemic. A general malaise seemed to have settled over the whole city, expressed so effectively by my student. We are all #AloneTogether, which is not exactly what Sherry Turkle had in mind when she wrote a book with the same title. Sitting at home alone on the day I was supposed to be presenting at 4Cs, reading this student's earnest email, a wave of profound loss and sadness overcame me, a longing for life to return to the way it used to be. The landscape had indeed changed, perhaps irrevocably.

As I sought to comprehend the changing landscape of my teaching, working, and living, the term "solastalgia" seemed appropriate to try to name what I was experiencing. Generally used in reference to climate change, solastalgia is a neologism coined in 2003 by Glenn Albrecht, an environmental philosopher and retired professor of sustainability in Australia, to capture the feelings of loss and grief when one's home region is altered by climatic or environmental devastation. Albrecht defines solastalgia as "an emplaced or existential melancholia experienced with the negative transformation (desolation) of a loved home environment." Albrecht explains how he developed the term:

> Solastalgia has its origins in the concepts of "solace" and "desolation". Solace has meanings connected to the alleviation of distress or to the provision of comfort or consolation in the face of distressing events. Desolation has meanings connected to abandonment and loneliness. The suffix -algia has connotations of pain or suffering. Hence, solastalgia is a form of "homesickness" like that experienced with traditionally defined nostalgia, except that the victim has not left their home or home environment. Solastalgia, simply put, is "the homesickness you have when you are still at home." (para.8)

In my case, the "distressing events" caused by the pandemic, while not necessarily impacting the physical environment, nonetheless profoundly affected a different kind of landscape: my teaching, working, and living environment. Sheltering in place, I was "homesick," longing for my familiar worlds and routines which were replaced by a gnawing sense of uncertainty and fear. Like many of my colleagues and students, I was experiencing solastalgia.

Beyond the daily interactions on campus with students, faculty, and staff in classes, meetings, and ubiquitous hallway conversations, I also missed the important milestones, moments that enrich a semester, giving my job texture and purpose beyond the classroom. I felt nostalgic as the day for each event passed by, practically unnoticed: 4Cs, the incoming graduate teaching assistants gathering, the department honors ceremony, the defenses and capstone meetings. I acknowledged each of these familiar touchstones as they came, non-events now beyond our dramatically reduced world. The sense of solastalgia pervaded my days: I kept saying, "Normally, I would be doing such-and such," until these comparisons with "normal" have finally given way to a recognition that things will never be the same. And that realization hit me hard as I experienced frustration, loss, and grief.

Among communities that experience solastalgia, the dramatic change and prevalent uncertainty in a once predictable environment can be especially unsettling. On Friday afternoon of 4Cs week, I ventured out to campus to drop off some canned and dry goods for the food bank drive and also pick up some books and scan an article. Campus was eerily quiet, even for spring break, and it felt odd to be physically out of my house: everything was both familiar and unfamiliar. A sense of nostalgia swept over me as I surveyed the buildings (some old, some new) and considered my more than two decades here—all the people, all those memories. Then a vague fear crept in: what will the university be like after all this? What if we cannot or do not return? As I looked around the empty campus, this wave of solastalgia overcame me. The sun had returned, the air smelled like spring, but not a soul was to be seen. The landscape had changed, even though every building and tree appeared right where they always were. I know we are flattening the curve, doing what's necessary, but it feels disjointed—and jarring.

No one was in my building or the English Department to bring me back to "reality" in that moment, so I wrote to my students that evening, encouraging them to connect and check in, to write and seek hope.

One of my greatest joys as a teacher is listening to students process ideas for projects, often not yet fully baked, but full of promise and hope. That kind of uncertainty resembles a journey I take with students as they embark on a research project: they have a germ of an idea, but don't quite know where they will end up. Students often

look to me for guidance, and in almost all cases I'm confident we can deliver them safely to their destination, generally having learned something through the experience. Another kind of uncertainty lurks, though, as we try to function and find a "new normal" in these unusual times: no one knows what will happen, and when they look to me for guidance, I do not have much to offer; I feel powerless. Many students and faculty are dealing with personal loss and incredibly difficult circumstances, as well. How do I balance these two very different kinds of uncertainty?

Much of the existential distress presented by COVID-19 left me feeling powerless and unproductive during 4Cs week. I was fascinated by my need (and my simultaneous awareness of that need) to attempt to grasp some sort of control when I was essentially powerless—most notably by cleaning up my desk and organizing my workspace. My thinking was that if I cleared the space, I would somehow clear my mind, but that action was futile. I found myself far more preoccupied with planning my next outing, and I sorely missed the days when going to the grocery store or campus wasn't such an event. On Friday of 4Cs week, I wrote, "The cautious venture out into the community feels very odd, scheduled, and intentional, compared to my 'regular' comings and goings, in which I often found myself popping in and out of stores or other businesses several times every day. Certainly, I am careful and deliberate in planning in ways that I never have before."

On Saturday I was supposed to moderate a panel at 4Cs, and my flight home would leave shortly after that. I remember being slightly worried about the quick turnaround time to catch the flight. I even checked the time from the hotel to the MKE airport to calculate the latest possible time I could leave the conference. How quaint all those plans seem now!

On Saturday evening during 4Cs week, in response to the question "What did you accomplish?" I wrote:

> For the fourth day in a row, this question nags at me—as if I must always be able to list my accomplishments, like a line on the CV. Earlier in the week I took great comfort in this question: it reminded me to take stock of all that I am doing amidst all the uncertainty and fretting. Today—perhaps because it's Saturday—the question feels more like a weight: what if my accomplishments today were not quantifiable? I curled my elderly

mother's hair for her and rubbed lotion on her dry feet; I gave my daughter some respite from her busy 3-year-old; I reassured a student that she would be okay in her comp class.

In my fatigue from Saturday evening's writing, I wondered if I was doing enough.

Solastalgia accounts for collective distress, but also—importantly—collective comfort, or solace, for the pain and uncertainty. Albrecht writes, "With a new . . . language to describe and 're-place' our emotions and feelings, powerful transformative forces are unleashed. Solastalgia is fixated on the melancholic, but it is also a foundation for action that will negate it" (para. 16). The pandemic has starkly reminded me that my job is less about grading and more about encouraging and comforting, both students AND faculty. In my role, I can be that transformative force.

How many emails have I answered from worried faculty who wonder what to do about the student who was doing fine in class until March and now they haven't heard from them? (Too many to count.) I try to answer each email patiently and with respect. I know my Dean of Students must cringe every time she gets a forwarded email from me: "Here are two more students we're concerned about. Please have your staff try to do a wellness check." We may not ever know what happened to them, even if the staff is able to connect with the student.

And being able to help students with their concerns is indeed a blessing. As always, I try to respond to emergent situations. I know in the coming weeks we will have plenty of students expressing concern about their work/school balance. And I will try to deal with each of these cases with sensitivity and support. In one situation from Saturday of 4Cs week, the student works in a grocery store and had been asked to increase her shifts to *60 hours per week* since she remains healthy. Not surprisingly, she feels overwhelmed and unable to keep up with her Comp II work. I connected with the student as well as her instructor, trying to provide options for completion of course and reassurance. I wonder, though, how many students never reach out and ask for help.

As we scramble to prepare for fall, the uncertainty mounts: how will our first-year graduate TAs learn to teach writing in this environment? I made the difficult decision to move them all to "remote learning" for fall. This option seems to me to offer the most flexibility, given

the uncertainty. We have this summer to prepare these newest writing faculty for the road ahead, but this arrangement is certainly not what they signed up for.

I'm reminded how quickly life circumstances change—this time not just an individual circumstance, but on a widespread, community (and world-wide) basis. And how quickly we adapt to new norms, even as our memories or bodies resist. I'm reminded, too, about the power of spring, not just weather-wise (cold and stormy one day, sunny and warm the next), but also in its hope and promise of new life. In isolation, we desire to be part of something bigger, something more meaningful than ourselves. In this new normal, solastalgia encourages us to slow down and take stock, pay more attention to the simple everyday things we used to take for granted: going to the store, reaching out to a friend, playing a game. These prosaic activities turn out to engage the connections in life that matter. I believe that naming and defining our experiences with the pandemic will provide hope to find our way forward as we face even more challenging times.

On the Saturday of 4Cs week, my plan was a walk in the sunny morning. As we made our way to the (still open) park, my 3-year-old granddaughter—running with glee—tripped on the sidewalk and tumbled down, scraping her knees and elbow, and she cried inconsolably for her mommy. She couldn't be sidetracked back into the park scenario, so we turned around and hobbled home. In response to the child's insistence on seeing the doctor, my clever daughter wondered aloud if instead we should try to call the doctor. That day, she earned the Academy Award for "Best Performance in a Fake Telephone Call," in which she dialed the phone, waited on hold for the doctor, then told the doctor about her child's fall, asking for advice. After answering some additional clarifying questions from the "doctor," my daughter was relieved to report that her child did not, in fact, need to have a limb removed, nor did she even need to visit the doctor, but instead should apply the Elsa Band-aids and receive periodic snuggles. The child, satisfied, resumed her day, and all was well. For a moment, the pandemic cloud over all of us lifted, and sunshine poured in.

In that one 4Cs week, our weather moved from tentative spring back to winter, and finally landed on something quite close to summer—a typical lurching spring in Nebraska. Nature renews and transforms itself; ironically, the earth is healing right now because of the reduced emissions from human activity. My tulips have come and

gone; they opened in glorious colors—yellow, orange, and red—and now are drying out. That week our magnolia tree did not bloom due to the timing of three days of hard frost; the buds were just coming out, and then all progress stopped. Some of the buds have fallen to the ground as hard brown clumps, but most cling to the tree which looks like a skeleton, and the green leaves are just starting to fill in the emptiness. Right now it is about 50–50, but I know eventually the leaves will win out, and next year the magnolia will bloom with exceptional brilliance. In a similar way, solastalgia's collective comfort will guide us from our currently unfamiliar and uncertain terrain into a new, transformed landscape. Hope returns through cycles, not necessarily through closure. And we have much more work to do.

Special thanks to Dr. Lisa Knopp, who introduced me to the term "solastalgia."

WORK CITED

Albrecht, Glenn. "The Age of Solastalgia." *The Conversation.* 7 August 2012, https://theconversation.com/the-age-of-solastalgia-8337.