



From Solitude to Solidarity

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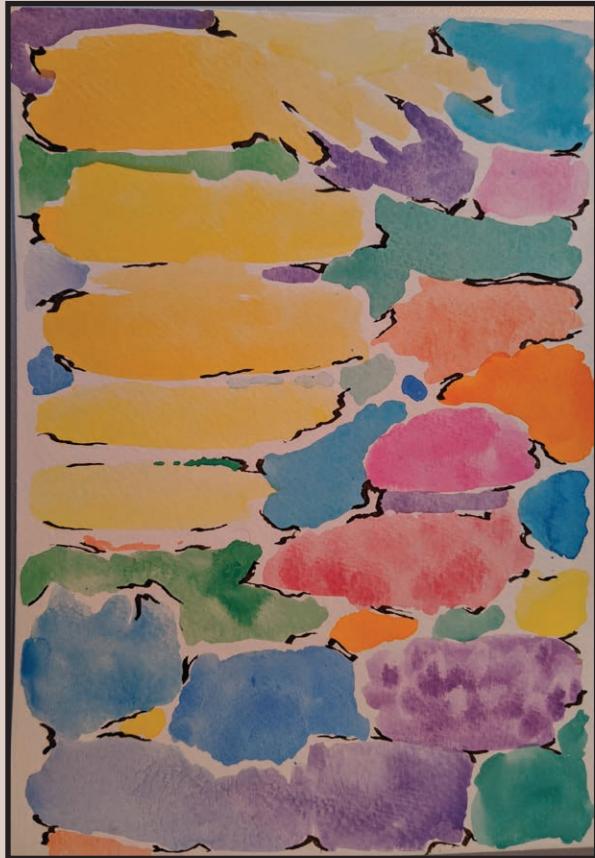
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Lucy Bartholomew

Figure 1. *Human Reunion*. Watercolor meditation by the author during quarantine in April 2020.

I was across the ocean when the world order shifted. A group of students, colleagues, and I were exploring the singular natural world of western Australia. We were in a wildlife preserve studying ancient carvings of the Darkinjung people,¹ kangaroos leisurely watching from the forest edge, when our phones lit up. School systems in our home state had announced an extension of spring break due to the invisible spread of a deadly virus.

As the week progressed, my anxiety grew while I attempted good cheer for my group. International news reports of deaths and infection rates blared in the breakfast room. Tourist sites grew empty. The flight home was packed with stranded and stressed travelers. We returned to a changed world that was evolving quickly into a way of life that was haunting and isolated.

Figure 2. *We Are All Connected*. Watercolor meditation by the author during quarantine in April 2020.



Once home, I was required by my university to quarantine for 14 days. Ultimately, that quarantine stretched into months. I gazed for hours at global maps and graphs of the spreading virus, a visual expression of personal loss and heartbreak. Online meetings took over the days as we speculated nervously about what would happen and how to adapt. I hosted class sessions where anxious students

appeared in tiny squares on my screen. They privately emailed to share sad news about losing their jobs, places to live, their health, and about caring for relatives. Asynchronous instruction seemed the least stressful for them; I dropped penalties for late work and made encouragement my primary instructional goal.

To be isolated while constantly connected is an anomaly of this moment in time. My students and I—we missed each other, we missed our discussions about artwork and artists, we missed the very work that we often lament. We missed normalcy. I found I was only good for 2 or 3 hours of “work” per day before I was overwhelmed, exhausted, and emotionally drained. It was as if a fog had descended around me, even inside my mind, making it hard to concentrate.

I recall an intensely personal moment during an online faculty meeting when I first realized the physical toll of isolation. As I sat listening, I felt anxiety rising inside, from my belly to my chest: My heart speeding up in a kind of hot nervousness. Why should I feel this way? The discussion topic was not upsetting. My colleagues were showing great care for our students and each other. Was it because I could not make eye contact with people, even if their cameras were on? The shared uncertainty of the future? Or because my body was always aware that it was sitting alone at a desk, not in a room with other humans, and thus the tragedy and underlying fears were never fully forgotten?

Then came another moment early in April when I realized that we would not return to “normal.” The semester as I had known it was gone. I felt the weight of hope for prior routines like an oversized pack on my back; I physically shifted my shoulders as I visualized shaking it loose and walking away. My inner voice woke up to say: *It's over, we are not going back to that. Move forward.*

In the spring of 2020, I was responsible for supervising 15 student teachers in 30 art classrooms across the region. Halfway through the semester, schools closed their buildings, and they were cut off from nearly everything. State requirements for certification were now impossible to fulfill, and they were thrown into anxiety over graduation. Thousands of student and mentor teachers across the country faced this same dilemma. Gradually, we were able to connect using an assortment of distance-learning platforms. I realized that they were now required to teach in ways that *we never trained them to do*, in a setting for which no one was prepared. In over 20 years of teaching, elementary through college, I have never had a supervisor prepare me for distance learning in case of a pandemic, or even for 1 week of weather closures. Never. The cold reality is that our education system was not ready, teachers were not ready, and families were not ready either.

And yet the impossible has happened. School buildings closed, but learning and creativity continued. I sat at that desk researching methodologies and online resources; we shared ideas and workshopped to solve problems. We marveled at the global network of educators inventing new online pedagogy. The National Art Education Association’s Collaborate platform lit up with vigorous discussion, resource sharing, and support. We put our

best ideas together to generate immediate and creative pedagogy using a curriculum developed in response to shared needs.

As artists, we live intentionally with creativity. We are immersed in creative thinking; it is as intrinsic as breathing. As artist–educators, we share an approach to living and teaching where we flex those creative muscles regularly, skills that uniquely prepared us for the challenges of this season. We visualize, theorize, and evaluate many potential solutions. Without (much) fear, we dive in and test-drive the most promising options. If it does not work, we know how to reevaluate, adapt, or change our ideas. We teach our students these universal skills, now survival skills, as we are propelled into an era of historic changes and shifting power structures.

We are all connected. The Eora people (Indigenous in Sydney, Australia) maintain a deep awareness of our interconnectedness: water and sky, sea turtle and land, air and human. During this season, I visualized these connections through watercolor meditations of organic shapes and spontaneous color gradations (Figures 1 and 2). Pen and brush became conduits for meandering contemplation of relationships with my students, with their future students, with an invisible organism, with my beloved family and friends, and with my human family the world over.

The paradox of isolation and existential fear is a reflection and heightened awareness of what we value, particularly relationships and the precious worth of our communities. Artists the world over offered an incredibly generous outpouring of art, dance, and music online. Art education colleagues shared strategies and support, shrinking physical distances and overcoming isolation. By summer, these human connections fueled a rising tide of unity for racial justice against police brutality and deeply embedded institutional racism. Outdoor rallies voiced a global shout for freedom from *every corner of the planet*. Physical isolation yielded to global camaraderie, flipping the narrative of fear and replacing it with shared humanity, empathy, and solidarity. ■

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Endnote

¹ Our guide began with a verbal acknowledgment of unceded territory belonging to the coastal Darkinjung and inland Darkinyung, the Indigenous people who populated that area and created the carvings. Such statements demonstrate antiracism and are becoming a standard practice of global cultural competency through naming the specific Indigenous culture(s) and acknowledging the use of unceded territory acquired through colonization and exploitation.