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"Unexpected Gifts: Life With MS During a Pandemic" by Nora Pierson (Class of 2000)

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Documenting Bowdoin and Covid-19:
“Unexpected Gifts – Life with MS During a Pandemic”
By: Nora Pierson, Class of 2000

For a while now people have been telling me that someday I will have experience to share that can help others. I assumed that meant talking to someone newly diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis -- not a pandemic. But as has been pointed out to me, having MS, I am somewhat familiar already with what we are all going through. For example:

- Lockdown. I've been self-quarantined for over a year, wishing I could go to events, parties, concerts, restaurants. . . but not being able to.
- Fear of Getting Sick. I've had to live every day wondering if today is the day I lose my eyesight or my ability to walk.
- Financial Fears. Will I be able to work again? How long is this going to go on? I don't want to keep begging for help. How will I ever survive like this?
- Comparing Myself to Others. When isolated, much of one's social interactions end up being on Facebook. Which can be hard -- Am I doing enough? Should my house be cleaner? Why aren't I reading? Why aren't I using this time more productively? How come so-and-so seems to have it all together? Should I be learning how to bake bread from scratch?
- Wishing Others Would Do More. I post constantly about the challenges I face with MS. Why aren't more people shocked that there is still no cause or cure? Why aren't more people invested in learning how to help? I'm sure when we see photos of people having parties right now, we want to yell at the screen and tell them to "Go Home! We must flatten the curve." Or, "How can she really be saying that wearing a mask is a conspiracy?" But the truth is, no matter how often I post about Covid-19 -- or MS -- it doesn't really do that much. It is more for me to feel like I'm an advocate and that I have a voice.
- Friends. In times of difficulty we often discover who our friends are. It can be a painful reality. I have been surprised on my journey how many friends have disappeared. But I also have been utterly amazed by those who have come out of the woodwork to support me.
- Grief. I have had to grieve over the person I once was, and over the things I can't do. And now on top of that, many of us are grieving over the tremendous loss of life all around us.

All of this comes to mind especially surrounding my twenty year Bowdoin Reunion. I booked my hotel room months ago. I have been excited about returning to Maine and seeing all my friends for years now. But the reality is, I was also scared. Sure there are the usual fears with a reunion, for example:

- "Am I accomplished enough?"
- "Am I hot enough?"
- "Do I make enough money?"

- “Will I tell them that I’m divorced twice, with no kids, as I meet their beautiful wife and family?”
- “Will they remember who I am?”
- “Will any of my old crew be there?”

But with a chronic illness comes many more fears:

- “Will I be able to walk the campus as I used to?”
- “Will I be able to afford the registration fee and hotel charges?”
- “Will I mess up words when trying to talk to people?”
- “Will I have to use my cane and explain why?”
- “Will I have to pretend to be well?”
- “Will I get the usual ‘but you look great’ comments?”
- “Will I be in too much pain to participate in the activities?”
- “Will I have to tell investment bankers and neuroscientists that most days all I do is watch Netflix?”

So when the reunion was cancelled due to Covid-19, there was a part of me that was relieved. I so wanted to sit in Smith Union, to walk the quad, to see Hyde and Boody Street - - To re-live my “glory days.” But, the reality is, a zoom reunion is already a challenge enough for me these days.

One thing that is great about the pandemic, for me, is how I don’t feel as alone in my isolation. Despite living alone in the woods (aside from my five pets), through social media I see that others are going through similar struggles now. There are more opportunities to experience things -- like our zoom reunion, or this writing project, the Haunted Bowdoin Tour, or art shows and online concerts -- events that I couldn’t go to before. I have also found that people are working harder to connect with each other. I am talking more regularly to Bowdoin alumni and other friends. People have reached out to me that I haven’t heard from in years. Just today, the Miscellania and Meddiebempsters members, from my day, started talking about doing a zoom reunion concert!

Having MS, being self-quarantined, and then the pandemic on top of it all, has forced me to slow down. I had always been someone who was constantly doing things. Now I spend most days sitting at home. While this is in part a negative, it has forced me to face certain feelings that I had always been running from by being busy. This past year I have also been single for the first time. So I am fully alone with my thoughts. Most of the time that is a bad neighborhood for me to be hanging out in. But I also have had to deepen my abilities to heal.

Probably my favorite “gift” from all of this has been my internal badass. For most of my life I was always so concerned with what others thought of me. I lived in fear and was always people pleasing. Now, I just don’t give a F#*0%. This is me. Either you like me or you don’t. Some of my new sense of self has also come from physical pain. Pain, whether physical or emotional, hardens a person.

As with most people, the upcoming reunion of course made me ponder, “what have I done with my life.” Shortly after graduating, the Bowdoin Magazine wrote an amazing article about my acting career. Since then I have had numerous careers, goals, and projects, but currently don’t have any. Which is really hard for me. I have always been someone with

goals I was striving for. I think I'm still grieving over the loss of the person I was. And I'm fearful of where MS will take me. So it is hard to plan for the future. I've been in survival mode. But, as with the "unexpected gifts," all of this is forcing me to look at what I really want from life. I would imagine that many people during the pandemic are going through a similar process. People have lost jobs, careers, businesses, and the lives of loved ones. . . and then have to question what it is they really want out of this life.

In her poem, "The Summer Day," Mary Oliver wrote: "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day. Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

I hope that this is just the start. The start of more Bowdoin zoom sessions. The start of more connections with Bowdoin friends. The start of more introspection. The start of more kindness and authenticity. The start of more community. All things that I undoubtedly learned how to do at Bowdoin.