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“Isolation offered its own form of companionship.”
— Jhumpa Lahiri

**WHAT’S INSIDE?**

**Editor’s Letter** 4
**The Hermit**
**GoSeeDo** 5
Winter Carnival, Scribente Maternum, The Dot
**Tapestry** 6-7
Finding Joy & Inspiration in a Pandemic

**Art of Living**
- **KT Taylor** 8
- **Snoti Jappah** 15
- **Abby Sunde** 19
- **Connie Chang** 26

**Ages & Stages** 9
Belonging to the World
**Health** 10-11
Dr. Julie Amaon of Just the Pill
**Intergenerational** 16-18
Reducing Gender-Based Violence
**Bookshelf** 20-21
Finding Wholeness in Fragments, Again
**Op-Ed** 24
Social Isolation: A Welcome Intervention
**In The News** 25
Asian American Visibility, Insurrection in D.C.
**Sexuality** 27
Future Design: Intimacies

**SPECIALTY GUIDES**
**Camp & Kids Guide** 12-14
Work, Motherhood, & Pandemic
**Money & Business Guide** 22-23
A New Financial Ecosystem
**Pets Guide** 28-29
The Call of the Wild
**Classifieds** 30

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Minnesota Women’s Press has been sharing the stories of women since 1985, as one of the longest continuously published feminist platforms in the country. It is distributed free at 500 locations.

Our mission: Amplify and inspire, with personal stories and action steps, the voice, vision, and leadership of powerful, everyday, women.

Our vision: We all are parts of a greater whole. Our stronger future will be built from the collective energy of people who shift narratives to effect change.

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The Hermit
by Lydia Moran

The other day I was shuffling around Loring Park in Minneapolis. Waning sunlight glinted through the fence surrounding the tennis court, lighting a rainbow array of lost winter accessories strung through the chain link.

In an attempt to shake off sitting-inside-all-day jitters, I threw on a podcast that has guided me throughout quarantine, “Tarot for the End of Times.” Host Sarah Cargill mixes storytelling and analysis of the set of cards called the Major Arcana, which represent life’s big themes and lessons.

The Hermit card pictures a lone hooded figure carrying a lantern, and Cargill explains that it signifies the cultivation of reflective, medicinal solitude. Time away from people has me thinking a lot about both the benefits and harm of being alone. Through Tarot, I have learned how to ask questions of my needs and fears, rather than bottle up emotion.

“If loneliness is the poison extracted from grief that brews in the gaps that separate us from the core of who we are, then solitude is the antidote that is unearthed when we decide to reach our hands deep into the dirt to connect with the root of the matter,” Cargill says.

Rather than shy away from the ramifications of social isolation, this issue offers a look at the spectrum of experiences people of marginalized genders are navigating while sheltering in place. Contributors juggle work and caregiving, experience divorce, abuse, grief, and unexpected bright spots.

Through self-reflection and compassion for others’ experiences, we light a lantern to guide this period of loneliness.
Through February 8 — Winter Carnival

The 135th annual Saint Paul Winter Carnival offers dozens of free events such as an ice fishing tournament, snow sculpture competition, and scavenger hunt. Most events take place in downtown Saint Paul as well as at the Minnesota State Fairgrounds. Free. wintercarnival.com

February 6, 13, 20, 27 — Scribente Maternum

This virtual writing retreat is specifically designed for parents in the maternal role. Participants create space for creativity, connection, and care. Guest speakers include Nora McInerney, Maria Broom, M.M. DeVoe, and Karen Houppert. $297. Funding assistance is available to people from the global majority, people with disabilities, and anyone experiencing financial hardship. tinyurl.com/Scribente

February 7 — Urban Expedition to Ghana

For the month of February, the Landmark Center’s “Urban Expedition” series explores crafts, exhibits, music, dance, and food from Ghana. Other Virtual Urban Expeditions include Spain (March 7), Iran (March 21), and Laos (April 11).

“Each season is a wonderful showcase of the diversity in the Twin Cities community,” said Judy Brooks, Community Programs Director. “As the pandemic continues and families are continuing to stay home, we hope the virtual events give them an afternoon of at-home adventures.”

Each Virtual Urban Expedition will be available online for one month. Free. landmarkcenter.org/urban-expedition

February 12 - April 15 — “The Dot”

Vashti insists she is not an artist and draws a single dot to prove it. But when Vashti’s teacher frames the dot and hangs it up, the disgruntled student begins a journey of creative self-discovery. This virtual performance includes archival footage of Stages Theatre Company’s production of “The Dot,” art kit supplies, an online art gallery, and a live virtual dance class with performers and instructors. Appropriate for ages four and up. $50. stagestheatre.org/the-dot

February 24 — Heid Erdrich, “Little Big Bully”

Heid Erdich’s new book offers personal myth, Native contexts, and allegories driven by women’s resistance to narcissists, stalkers, and harassers. History, ecosystem collapse, and the present epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous relatives underlie these poems. Erdrich will discuss her work at this virtual reading series. Free. 7pm. thefriends.org/fireside

Ongoing — NAMI Support Groups

The National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) offers free online peer support groups for adults and young adults living with mental illness, their families, friends, partners, as well as parents of children and teens. Led by trained peer facilitators, support groups help individuals and families learn coping skills and find strength by sharing their experiences. Free. namimn.org

More at womenspress.com/events
Sarah Streitz: Dreaming

As much of the world stands still and temperatures move us inside, hunkered down and waiting, I am grateful for the simple routines that structure the day. Steeping tea in the dark morning hours. Watching the sun rise and set from the warmth of my up-on-a-hill house. Discovering an unfamiliar grocery store. The aromatic explosion of the evening meal’s spices as they sizzle in the oil of a cast iron skillet. The way a jasmine plant, brought inside for winter, stands out against a white wall. A portrait I painted of an admired musician anchored behind it; the yellow, the green, the white, together like a garden’s promise of perennial renewal.

I released my third studio record, “Cut Flowers,” in early October. With no gigs to promote it, I am making videos of several of its songs using my cheap Android phone. Creating in new ways inspires me. So do the old family photos I dig through in hopes of finding one to replicate on an empty canvas. Listening to old records in my basement. Discovering new music on my daily walks. And dreaming of other places — places of hope, beauty, and vibrant culture, places away from the clutter and sounds of our technology-centered world, where new ideas, fresh thoughts, and new routines could be established.

Margaret Hasse and Sharon DeMark: Shelter

During the distress of pandemic, political unrest, and grievous social injustices, we sought to inspire each other while isolated at home.

Margaret initiated a proposal: would Sharon paint an image while Margaret wrote a poem about something each considered a comfort or safe harbor? Might we then exchange the two pieces for response: a poem for the painting, and a painting for the poem?

Our first pieces confirmed our affinity as we had both gravitated to the natural world as refuge. Sharon had painted a tree’s canopy; Margaret wrote a poem about a bird’s nest.

We went on to explore a range of sheltering things from the built world, such as house, hut, and porch, as well as whimsical or metaphoric shelters, such as art, books, and a hug.

Margaret realized that what we were doing might speak to many people who, like us, were seeking refuge and solace during the pandemic. Once the book was published, it gained a life of its own. We are experiencing a widening circle of joy and gratification through book events, readings, and people who receive solace from the project. Through our collaboration, we have grown in gratitude for beloved people and things where shelter is sought and found.
Andria Fagge’Tt: Positivity

I have found joy and inspiration in the power of positivity. Growing up, my parents challenged my siblings and me to always find something good in tough situations. Having an optimistic outlook on life helped shape who I am. Now I remind myself that “every day may not be good, but there is something good in every day.”

At the start of 2020, my husband decided to divorce me and left. My new challenges encompass quarantine, unemployment, and being a single mom. It can be easy to run with negativity and allow irksome feelings to move into and crowd my “space.” In the winter months, negativity coupled with the world crisis can be stressful, heavy, and lonely. I did not want that for my life, my son, or my family.

With the pandemic, I became intentional about planning my daily and weekly schedules. My son and I have dress-up days, arts and crafts, trying new recipes, and spontaneous dance parties. I find joy in being able to be in the yard to get fresh air and am creatively utilizing all areas in my home so we are not confined to one space all day. I find there is something “good” in each day.

Kelley Skumautz: Embodiment

A new smile was on my face in late 2020 as I took the last steps of separation from a stale and soulless marriage and a business endeavor that had also seen brighter days. Recently, I rounded out eight years in recovery. The new design for living that I have learned is inspired by the peaceful easiness of the average day and spontaneous bursts of joy felt in the whole body. So much of me had been dulled by substances for so long. I now feel embodied in the groundedness of my feet on the earth, the helping of others with my hands, the beat of love in my heart, and both the stillness and vitality that comes from dance, belly-laughter, sex, yoga, play, and sports. I feel alive and fully accessible again. I am grateful for the inspirations that come from a higher power — which I think of as “perfect justice” — carried to me by wonderful people and community and also sometimes by the wind.

Submit to March Issue: Transforming Justice

What does “transforming justice” mean to you? Send up to 250 words by February 10 to editor@womenspress.com
Artists Respond: Combating Social Isolation
series reported by Lydia Moran

This winter, Springboard for the Arts launched Artists Respond: Combating Social Isolation. With support from Springboard through funding from the Kresge Foundation and the Blandin Foundation, 89 artists from around Minnesota created projects that connect those most vulnerable in the pandemic. Minnesota Women’s Press spoke with four of these creatives about the inspiration behind their projects, and how they are hoping to transform a difficult situation with art and community.

KT TAYLOR: A PENPAL ZINE FOR RURAL QUEERS

I had a survey open where anyone could send in a letter as if they were writing it to a friend or stranger who is a rural queer person. I read through all those wonderful letters, created original art to accompany them, and put them together in a zine. People can request copies for free.

I identify as a lesbian and I also identify as nonbinary. I grew up in a really small town in rural Idaho and I was in high school before I met another person who was queer. I had this feeling of isolation, like I was the only person in 100 miles who was the way I was. When you watch movies and TV shows — now that there is starting to be more queer representation — they are still focused on this specific urban experience, which is not the whole picture.

I studied history in undergrad, and did research on rural queer communities and the way that loneliness and isolation can impact them in greater percentages than urban queer communities. My senior year of undergrad I discovered this book called “Boys of Boise,” about the persecution of gay men in Boise, Idaho, in the 1950s. I was shocked because I had never seen my state in any sort of queer history. Since then, I strive to bring forward the visibility of rural queer people.

Almost all of the letters in the zine have some instance of the phrase “you don’t know me, I don’t know you, but I love you”— this idea that you can care for someone and support someone without even knowing them. That is so important now in COVID-19 times when it is harder to connect with people.

Living in a rural area is not by nature conflicting with being queer. They do not have to be opposing forces and they are often not. I struggled with that isolation, but I also love being from a small town and I am really grateful for that.

During the uprisings, I found a lot of power in public art, protest art, and political art. This time has been unpredictable, and people are listening to a lot of different things because so much is happening. That has really opened up the opportunity for artists to make art about the world we can imagine. I never thought directly about combating social isolation before we were experiencing it on a global level. This focus on connectivity and imagining futures has changed my art and will continue to change it for years to come.

Details: linktr.ee/NotAlone

Having the time to be alone with myself and be introspective was really hard and intimidating at first, but I am trying to take some time to reflect on where I am at emotionally each day and be grateful for my ability to feel whatever I am feeling.
I have been a widow living alone for nearly ten years. Now in my 70s, older and weathered, I have learned a thing or two about isolation and its seeming opposite: connection within the world. I say “seeming.”

The year 2020 put a new twist on the meanings of isolation and connection. It introduced isolation as a necessity for wellbeing, as well as cause for mental suffering.


A few days later at dawn, I stood in a long line of elderlies, each with a mask standing six feet apart. We waited to be allowed in the supermarket one by one, only to find empty shelves. I came home with a rationed bottle of sanitizer.

By December, more than 350,000 in the U.S. had died because of the pandemic. Most of them died in isolation without the physical presence of their family or friends to hold their hands or to kiss goodbye. Loved ones kept vigil at a distance, feeling helpless and hollow. Meanwhile countless others endured the unpleasant but less lethal symptoms of COVID-19, alone at home.

Before the pandemic, research showed social isolation to be the biggest predictor of mortality, more than lack of exercise or a poor diet. ‘If you want to live long, do not live isolated,’ the scientists suggested. Now isolation is key to a longer life.

The impact of social isolation lands differently, depending on an individual’s inner and outer resources, privileges, and living circumstances. Social isolation has broken marriages in some cases and in others created more solid relationships. Simple comforts — hugs, tea with friends — have been minimized. Counseling and support groups are in the form of a cold, flat screen.

Carrie, who lost her wife to terminal cancer shortly before the pandemic, felt a need to be alone after her partner’s death. She went to the cabin in the Northwoods that they built together and spent three months in isolation. She told me it was an excruciatingly painful time. The solitude was a long, dark tunnel she had to go through to touch the light at the other end. But she knew that it was the right thing to do to honor her grief and their love, and to wait for an emergence of the meaning of life without her wife.

When isolation is intentional, we may feel alone but not lonely. Many, including myself, cherish alone time as a prerequisite to relating to the outer world with authenticity and clarity. I feel deeply for those to whom social isolation was not a choice but a predicament. Or worse, a verdict — which is the case for some elderlies in nursing homes, single people estranged from family and community, the imprisoned, the undocumented in hiding. The pandemic made challenging situations more difficult.

I know something about the pain of feeling abandoned. The isolation can activate shame, anger, grief about not belonging, and the fear of not being wanted.

I am old enough to be able to look back at those moments of my own desolation and know in my heart that there was something larger — a giant net of interconnection — that always held me.

No matter how alone we feel, we are intricately and inexplicably a part of the world. I love the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh’s reminder that a paper is made of all non-paper elements: trees, sunshine, rain, workers. In that way I am made of all non-me elements.

In my older age, I can clearly see how I am made of you all, and the trees, the four-legged, the bees, the stars.

Isolation and connection are not separate, nor are they opposites. Inside the isolation is an indelible seed for connection and relatedness. Inside the connection is a longing for a solitary space to discern the ground of our being. It is like the Yin and Yang symbol in which seeming opposites enable one to deepen and nurture the other.

Kyoko Katayama (she/her) is a retired psychotherapist of 35 years. She published a chapbook of poetry and visual art, “Wings above the Sea: A story and images of loss and transformation.” Kyoko is also a death educator and teacher at Common Ground Meditation Center.
Editor's note: On January 12, 2021, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against mailing medication abortion pill. Our interview with Just the Pill, weeks prior to this decision, follows.

You have decided to terminate an unplanned pregnancy. You realize the nearest clinic has stopped providing abortions because of a lack of trained physicians in your rural area. The next nearest clinic is a three-hour drive away, and you juggle work and caring for children. Maybe it is winter, and dangerous conditions will increase travel time. Or perhaps you risk exposure to a pandemic while accessing needed reproductive care.

In July 2020, the American Civil Liberties Union used these barriers to reproductive healthcare as motivation for filing a lawsuit against the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to remove restrictions placed on mifepristone, a medication taken to end a pregnancy.

When the abortion pill came on the market in 2000, the FDA placed a risk evaluation mitigation strategy (REMS) that requires the drug to be taken in a physician’s presence. When mail orders of the abortion pill were legal, states like Minnesota — that do not require an ultrasound before pregnancy is terminated and do allow telemedicine for abortion care — could access a no-touch protocol for medication abortion and contraception.

Minnesota Women’s Press spoke with Dr. Julie Amaon, medical director of Just the Pill, about her work to create a pay-as-you-can model offering reproductive care via phone and online appointments, as well as medications delivered to homes.

Q: Tell us about your background in medicine and what led you to pursue reproductive care.

I came to medicine a little late in life, but my foray into reproductive health started early. I am from Austin, Texas, originally and did a variety of things after college, [including] opening a women’s wellness center and working as a personal trainer. Eventually I worked as a reproductive health specialist at Planned Parenthood for a year. That was around the time the Texas legislature took family planning money away from Planned Parenthood and gave it to crisis pregnancy centers.

Later I ran the North Austin Planned Parenthood and was the clinic manager for four years. I went back to medical school at 35, knowing that I wanted to provide abortion care.

I graduated in the middle of a pandemic and got hooked up with our executive director from Just the Pill. I jumped on in July and we started seeing patients in October.

Q: What services [before the SCOTUS ruling] were you able to provide?

Contraception and medication abortion. We are raising funds to start offering mobile clinic services in rural areas to do gender-affirming care, IUD insertion, Nexplanon insertions, in-clinic procedures, and other primary care offerings.

Q: What is the state of abortion providers in Minnesota?

Minnesota only has five abortion providers, three of which are in the Twin Cities, one is in Duluth, and one is in Rochester. There is a Planned Parenthood in Moorhead, but they had to [cease] their abortion services because they couldn’t get providers to fly out there. The only clinic in South Dakota was shut down for a while and is now only open once a month. On the western side of the state, there was practically no access. [With mail orders, women in rural areas] under ten weeks of pregnancy can get the healthcare they need in their home.
Q: You mentioned how Texas funded crisis pregnancy centers. Minnesota has those as well. Can you talk about what crisis pregnancy centers are?
There are 97 crisis pregnancy centers in the state, which is crazy compared to five abortion providers. They are basically unlicensed medical offices. They do not have to have a medical director, they do not have to have a doctor on site. They sometimes place themselves next to abortion providers and advertise themselves as somewhere to talk about your options, except they try to convince you to continue the pregnancy. They are misinforming women.

Q: What has the stigma been around reproductive care?
The Hyde Amendment that was passed in 1976 took away federal funding for abortions. That is when hospitals and other general clinics stopped providing abortion care. So, abortion care has been forced into particular clinics, like the Planned Parenthoods and other independent providers. It is something that could be taught in medical school and residency for multiple specialties — it does not have to be just OB-GYN. But because of the REMS [criteria], primary care clinics can’t call medication abortion pills into a pharmacy like other drugs; they have to store it on site, they have to have an agreement with the manufacturer, and they have to have the patient sign an agreement.

I think because of the stigma around it, a lot of doctors are not comfortable going to their clinic organization [and saying] “I want to offer this.” A landlord could find out; clinics have lost their rentals. Some doctors have been let go because of that. Because of the stigma, even in the medical community, abortion care doesn’t happen very often in primary care, which is unfortunate.

You build a relationship with your primary care physician, but they have to send you to someone you don’t know [for an abortion], at a clinic you’re not familiar with, and you may have to go through protestors. I am always surprised by people in the medical field who understand the science behind it and still don’t want to offer this service for people.

Q: In the 1990s, Minnesota Women’s Press reported on abortion rights. One pro-choice woman was quoted saying taking care of one’s reproductive needs was once common knowledge, and now there is separation between people and their bodies. What are your thoughts on that?
A movie we watched at one of my reproductive health access meetings was called “Belly of the Beast,” about forced sterilization in California prisons, most recently in 2013. We were discussing in the meeting how the medical community in general has controlled women’s fertility. It is outrageous.

Q: Your website mentions compassion and respect. Can you talk about why you place emphasis on that approach?
Since we are doing this no-touch mode, we want our patients to know that we are trusting them to know their bodies. We are coming to them without judgement, and with compassion and understanding that patients know what is best for them, and we are just helping them get what they need.

There are other telehealth-only models, and some brick-and-mortar clinics are offering [mail orders] as well. Nationally, I have heard us called disruptors, because we are disrupting the traditional flow of how abortion care happens. Just because abortion is legal and Roe v Wade has not been overturned does not mean that access is [happening]. I think this is the wave of the future.

Q: In the wake of the Supreme Court ruling, how has your work pivoted?
I had to call patients [who had been prescribed the medication] and give them the option of a refund, to use a less effective medication regimen, or wait until our mobile clinic can get up and running and deliver their meds. We are raising funds to immediately begin operating a mobile clinic to ensure that our patients have continuity of care. We anticipate resuming telehealth visits and operating the mobile clinic in rural areas to satisfy the in-person requirement that the Supreme Court implemented in January 2021.

Details: justthepill.com
Deb Konechne is speaking into a microphone. “We are trying to work full time, while at the same time managing distance learning and teaching, emotional support, and caregiving for our children. This is an impossible situation.” It is mid-December and weak noon light casts a long shadow over the small crowd gathered in the Government Center Plaza in downtown Minneapolis.

Konechne hands off the mic and returns to the group of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) members, a trade union representing employees of Hennepin County. The women begin a chant: “working mothers need relief, extend COVID parental leave.”

In November 2020, AFSCME began calling on Hennepin County to utilize $6 million dollars of the county’s contingency funds to offer childcare leave at full pay to employees. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which extended time off at two-thirds pay to working caregivers, expired on December 31.

Konechne, a public health nurse, explains that even when federal paid leave was an option, many members could not afford to take it because losing one-third pay could mean losing housing or food. Now that the family leave is no longer an option, Hennepin County workers, who are predominantly women, are desperate.

“We are at risk of losing housing, we are at risk of our vehicles being repossessed, we are at risk of having a nervous breakdown,” AFSCME member Regina Andrews told Minnesota Women’s Press. As a single mother of three children aged nine, 14, and 15 — and a Human Services Representative with the county, Andrews cannot afford to take leave, but she is juggling an 80-hour work week and kids who are distance learning full-time.

“Do you know what it is like to sit on the phone with a person of your community and listen to their stories about how they can’t pay their bills and how they are worried because they can’t feed their children, and how you feel on the other end of the phone when you are [experiencing] the same thing?” Andrews says. “We love the people we serve. But [it is hard when you are] in the same boat that they are in.”

Andrews is working from home and is glued to the computer from 8:15am to 4:45pm, with one half-hour and two 15-minute breaks daily. An extra ten minutes away from calls means she drains limited paid time off.

She says childcare leave at full pay would make an enormous difference. “It would give us that option to take a couple hours to deal with our children and their school work, deal with our mental health, and maybe have a quick moment to wash dishes or throw a load in the laundry — things that are thrown to the wayside right now.”

Mental health challenges are exacerbated for many parents, who are simultaneously supporting children dealing with depression.
and loneliness themselves. “We will do anything for our kids, that is why we continue to put our self-care to the side to take care of them,” Andrews says. “[County officials] treat us as if we have an issue with caring for our kids, that we should be strong enough to figure this out.

“I don’t know how much longer [workers] are going to be able to do it, but what other choices do they have? None.”

A Federal Issue?

AFSCME members say the response from Hennepin County, which did not respond to a request for comment on this story, has been dismissive. Commissioners did not entertain paid leave in the county budget proposal. One reason given for that is the belief that this is a federal issue.

As of October 2020, there were 2.2 million fewer adult women in the labor force than in October 2019. According to the National Women’s Law Center, in September 2020, 865,000 women left the workforce, which was four times the rate of men.

More brutal is the fact that women have been on track to make substantial gains in the workforce, outnumbering male workers for a brief period through February 2020. But the pandemic has put female employment back a few decades — to 1988 levels.

The federal $900-billion relief package passed in December includes $10 billion for child care, $13 billion for nutritional benefits, and tax credits to employers that offer paid sick and family leave. But many believe that is a weak stand-in for the expired paid leave mandates. Is it enough?

Victoria Snow of Andover does not think so. “The federal government should have stepped in a long time ago,” she says. Snow is a mother of four children — ages one, five, eight, and 10. She was employed as a certified nursing assistant in two assisted living facilities before the pandemic hit.

“Early on, I had a few of my residents pass away due to the virus. I could not be there because their entire memory care building was full of COVID-19,” Snow says. “[At] my second job we were getting tested every week. It was scaring me.”

Snow has only worked one shift since July to protect her son who is immunocompromised. Now she homeschools her children with the help of her husband while attending virtual nursing school part-time.

Lack of safe and steady work has put financial strain on her family. “We have had to go on food stamps, we have had to get medical [coverage] through the state,” Snow says. “In my perfect world, people would listen to the science of what is happening right now to keep our most vulnerable alive.”

Social Support

Before the pandemic, Snow met up with other homeschooling families. She says differing views on masks led her to cut ties with those social support systems. Within Snow’s extended family as well, there are differing views on the existence of the pandemic. That and distancing from her at-risk mother and sister have meant she misses daily support from family.

“Having experience with the vulnerable — it is not worth putting other people at risk,” Snow says. “It is really tough to see people who ignore or deny that this is a real thing. My dad is one of those people, so we have not been around him.

“I never saw myself as a political person until the pandemic began,” Snow continues. “I have had hard conversations with people I know about why we are not seeing [them] because we care about them and we care about our family.”

Annie Goodman gave birth to her first child in July. Like Snow, she is distancing from family support to protect her newborn. “Becoming a new mother, it shook me,” she says. “I grew up across the street from my grandparents. There was always someone to keep an eye on me. Without the free labor of your family, I do not know how people do it.”

Goodman owns the family store where she witnessed her mother work during her childhood. After giving birth, she kept the business closed until the end of August to take one month of maternity leave. Goodman says the store does well in proportion to the time she has to work, which is not a lot. She cares for her child while her husband — also a business owner — works from home.

“Language surrounding openings, closings, hours, curbside pickup — retail is all being done so differently. My role becomes increasingly more important,” Goodman says. “When my baby naps, I try to get work done. I usually start around 4:30 or 5pm, and work as long as I am able to.”

Continued on next page
In March, Goodman felt panic because of the little information available on COVID-19’s risk to children and pregnant women. She scrambled to research birthing centers and at-home births. During the last week in June, hospital restrictions loosened and Goodman’s husband was able to be in the room when she gave birth. She was COVID-19-tested in the midst of contractions, and was able to be maskless during labor. She says the hospital portion of the experience was expected. What was different than she had imagined after giving birth to her first child, was the empty house she returned to.

“The thing that we missed out on was anyone visiting us in the hospital, anyone being there when we got home with the baby,” Goodman says. She also mourns the part of being a new mom that involves other mothers, in classes or through reconnecting with friends who are parents. “But I feel I lucked out, it was good timing.”

Act of Creativity

For someone who changed the trajectory of her career to address the needs of working women, Alex West Steinman knows what happens when parents are not offered the support they need.

“Work and childcare have been on women for most of eternity,” Steinman says, “so right now we are seeing that play out with women leaving the workforce. Many of our members took a survey in the fall and 52 percent of entrepreneurs who are parents are doing less paid work — but all of them are doing more work.”

Steinman is founder and CEO of The Coven, a membership-based coworking space focused on providing women and nonbinary people a “sense of safety and bravery to step into their economic power,” she says. When the pandemic hit, Steinman’s children, ages four and six, began virtual PreK while Steinman continued to work full-time in addition to picking up freelance projects to supplement the family’s income while her husband job-hunted.

“I own a very successful business, he owns a very successful business, but nothing that is bringing in any income for us,” Steinman says. “We have to weigh the pros and cons of does he step out of the workforce and focus on the children, or do we try to pick up more work?” People are grappling with a lot of decisions that they were not having to make before.”

One of the unexpected bright spots of the pandemic for Steinman has been the opportunity to participate more fully in her children’s education. She feels lucky, too, to be able to form a learning pod with another family in her Plymouth neighborhood. She says the community that has arisen from pod learning and other types of support systems might help society reimagine parenting.

“If the government is not going to provide the funding and support that is needed, we are the only ones that are able to support ourselves,” Steinman says. “Families were communal in the past. I hope that this is something we take away [from the pandemic] — how can we lend support to one another?”

Steinman emphasizes that many of the failing systems in the U.S. — healthcare, transportation, safe and affordable housing — are deeply intertwined with how this country treats its mothers.

“We do not have systems in place to make sure that, at birth, our kids, our women — particularly women of color, Black women — have the support that they need,” Steinman says. “Parenthood is an act of creativity; you are literally creating life. In our capitalistic society, we are creating the next workforce. Without the support to do so, we are continuing the cycles that we know are oppressive for many. We have to get ourselves off of that hamster wheel.”

Alex West Steinman with her family

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SNOTI JAPPAH, 
CREATING A SING-ALONG

I am making a musical performance focused on mental health and wellness that will make people happy, help them relax, and think positively about the situation we are in right now. The pre-recorded performance will be delivered to a women’s shelter, Home Free Community Programming, for women who deal with domestic violence and abuse. The women there [have already suffered] abuse and then to [combine that] with what is happening right now is a lot to deal with. I can use my art to create something that will help them cope.

I am singing with some incorporation of poetry and visuals. I wrote 100 percent of the songs and lyrics. It is going to be something that they can sing to. I incorporated the lyrics [as text] so they can see what I am saying.

Most times I do live performances at different venues. Now I do performances online, which is a whole new way of discovering my art. I am actively writing music since I can’t go and record right now.

We are blessed to be in a generation when we have access to digital content. I am thankful that there are avenues I can utilize — my social media pages and sending performances through different entities so people can have them whenever they have a break or need entertainment.

Social isolation is something that has made me dive into my creativity because I have to figure ways around building connections with my fan base. Connecting to my creativity has helped me to cope because it makes the time go smoother, even as I am feeling locked in the house and down on myself. Music has always been a way I have connected with other people when I feel alone.

I want the women who watch my performance to know that no matter what the situation is, there is always someone who is going through the same thing as you, somewhere. You cannot be together now physically, but you are not alone. This [time] is something that is going to pass over and we are going to be okay. I want people to feel comforted, at ease, and uplifted. I want to bring them joy.

Details: snotimusic.com, @snotimusic

I think one of the best things to do is meditate. It centers you. Meditation reminds me of what is important, and that is my mental health and overall health.
Minnesota Women’s Press is launching a series of intergenerational conversations with women who have been engaged in long-standing issues — reflections from elders and new leaders about how the work is evolving, what the solutions are, and what readers can do. This is the first in that series, focused on the issue of gender-based violence as led by the Latinx team of Casa de Esperanza. Find the video discussion at [womenspress.com](http://womenspress.com) with Sarahi Mateo, shelter manager of El Refugio; Nallely Castro Montoya, leader of Casa de Esperanza’s youth engagement program; and Sandy Vargas, Casa board chair and long-time advocate.

Casa de Esperanza: Reducing Gender-Based Violence
An edited conversation moderated by Cristina Escobar

Nallely Castro Montoya and Sarahi Mateo
Q: The pandemic leads to greater isolation. Abuse and domestic violence tend to isolate survivors. How has the pandemic impacted what you see?

Mateo: At first it was difficult to learn how to offer our services remotely. The number of calls on our crisis line increased threefold — more people looking for resources, orders for protection, seeking shelter, information about our programs. We had to partner with other shelters because we did not have enough space.

More youth are also witnessing abuse at homes. One called the crisis line when police were at the home. [Sometimes] partners are assaulted when children are away at school. Now more of them are witnessing the abuse. It is heartbreaking to hear that. What effect will this have on those children, normalizing this behavior?

Vargas: Staying at home, not able to leave, [and financial pressures], increases the inclination toward violence. We sent some people to hotels because there was no remaining shelter space for them to go. That is a very isolating experience, not being in your own home.

Minnesota is at the bottom nationally for Latinx graduation. It is such a shame, as a rich state, that we cannot get an educational system that meets the needs of our community. Kids are doing homework on phones. That is very isolating for parents, knowing your child is not getting anywhere close to the type of education you would love to have for them.

Q: There is ongoing work to do around masculinity. Is the engagement of men and boys in these conversations working?

Montoya: It starts with building rapport, trust, making everyone feel welcome and involved, creating safe spaces defined by them. Our Masculinity Circles talk about male privilege, challenging norms, traditional masculinity. It is not about shame, but dismantling what they have learned, based on values — the positive and negative traits of masculinity. Some openly share they have been survivors of assault.

Mateo: It is about learning about choices, what is right and not. No one wants to break up families, have people get arrested, have children taken away. It is about not assuming people will leave abusive partners. In families, that also includes [different cultural training], such as not serving men meals first — making all things equal for females and males.

Vargas: I am the oldest of eight. My four brothers were with me for the holidays. I asked them to pitch in. It is about talking to my nephew about how he treats women. It is also about the different expectations that comes from Catholicism — girls are pious, boys can do whatever they want. We have to put a stop to that.

Q: Have we seen changes in the stigma surrounding reporting abuse?

Mateo: The stigma persists in [the decision around] whether to come forward or not. If there is a removal of the partner from the home, it is also removing everything that comes with it: an in-law who helps watch the kids, financial support. Many do not want to get involved in the criminal system, being questioned by police about document status. They see situations when a partner is put into ICE custody and deported, leaving family here without financial support, which is not serving justice.

Vargas: There is a huge amount of shame that victims feel, which is what the system has done over a long period of time, heaped on women in particular. It was not that long ago people asked, ‘what did women do to bring it on?’ We want our families to stay together — we just want the domestic violence to go away. Currently the system makes us choose between one or the other. Casa de Esperanza is working with community experiences to create thought processes around a middle ground and new policy at the highest levels.

Continued on next page
Q: What should the role of police be?

**Vargas:** We know the images of police in people’s minds, acting in the wrong way against men of color in particular. There is a lot of fear that it might happen to someone we love, even though they might be an abuser. There is starting to be more push to get different kinds of professionals involved in the conversation during a crisis. Who is the better resource than police to intervene?

**Montoya:** We still need more training to help police talk to survivors. In one case, an officer ended the interview [with a young woman abused by a neighbor], “now you know not to talk to strangers.” This led to more shame felt by the youth who then believed it was her fault.

**Mateo:** Not all contact with police has been negative. But many participants feel intimidated when they call, about their documented status, the language barrier. Sometimes children in the family have to be used as interpreters, and listening to that kind of report can have a terrible impact. In four cases this year, women were arrested as the aggressor; the police only heard the men’s side because the women needed an interpreter and there was none.

When people call our crisis line, we inform them about their rights to have an interpreter, that they are not required to let police know about documentation status.

Q: What are the priorities needed in policy and systems change?

**Mateo:** We need an increase in transitional housing funds. Helping to cover rent allows those we serve to take care of mental health and children, move from shelter back into community.

**Montoya:** There are challenges from the backlog of documentation requests, waiting years. Before the pandemic, we also were working with schools around student awareness related to assault or abuse. There is a policy against teachers perpetrating sexual relationships on students, but no policies when students are sexually assaulting other students — there is an assumption that it doesn’t happen, but it does.

**Vargas:** If people don’t have resources, there are not a lot of options, and that is when things get out of hand. Thankfully, Casa de Esperanza was recently honored by getting a big grant from MacKenzie Scott [the 2nd wealthiest woman in the world as of December 2020], who saw the breakthrough work we were doing. Not many grants go to organizations led by people of color. We invite everyone to join us in making sure we can create a world, a country, a community that lives in prosperity without violence — link arms with these amazing women.

Details: Casa de Esperanza’s crisis line is bilingual, available 24 hours a day, and open to any callers. 651-772-1611

Readers can support reauthorization of the Violence Against Women’s Act, which supports prevention programs. It offers flexible funding that can include conversations about dating violence and healthy relationships, mental health support, and substance abuse resources. Casa de Esperanza has emerged as a national organization that is also moving into international work with partners.
The 50 Native Strong Home Art Kits are for Saint Paul Native youth in third through sixth grades. The Department of Indian Work, a program of Interfaith Action of Greater St. Paul, was kind enough to work with me and help distribute the kits to families they serve through their Native American food shelf and Native after-school program.

There are two lessons and two projects within the kit. One project is to make a Native Strong keychain, which includes a lesson on resilience and to serve as a reminder of who we are and who we come from.

One of the ways to deal with tough times is to grow the resilience that we all have inside of us. In the kits, I include a few points about things we can do and remember that are important. Especially in Native culture, trying to find the funny side of situations can help us cope. Humor is a very large part of Native culture, and that connection to culture is so important.

The second project is making a Medicine Wheel — a symbol that is common in a lot of Native American tribes. The teachings of it vary from nation to nation. I do not dive into all of the potential teachings of the Medicine Wheel, because the youth that are receiving these kits come from various tribes and nations. The Medicine Wheel serves as a reminder that we are all connected, we are all related, and that we all have some of these teachings. [The youth] know that their art kit is the same as 49 others and that they are all doing this project together, creating a sense of community while apart.

I used to work at the Department of Indian Work (DIW). A number of the families that are going to be receiving the kits are ones I know personally. When I saw a [Springboard Center for the Arts] call for art, I thought, “I need to make something for the families at DIW.”

Making art is often a personal and vulnerable practice, even if it is doodling on the side of a notebook. The experiences of 2020, from the pandemic to George Floyd, have brought up so many raw emotions. It has made art feel more necessary than ever as a means of connection and processing.

If I am overwhelmed I will play hooky from my art studio and go hike. In the absence of being around other people we can at least find some comfort in the presence of nature.
Content warning: the following contains mention of childhood sexual abuse.

Four days after the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States, my newborn granddaughter sighed softly under my chin as I received an email offering publication of the book I had been writing most of my life, a memoir in fragments, “The Part That Burns.” Six days later, I listened to the announcement of a global emergency.

My book would be born in a time of sickness and death, fear and fury, isolation and collapse. Hardly what I had expected. As I say in the memoir, “Expectations can be slippery.”

Through its fragmented and elliptical form, my memoir explores brokenness to find wholeness and illuminates the painful effects of childhood sexual abuse. My stepfather molested me for six years starting when I was about four. He also was violent, and his abuse cast a long shadow. That shadow became especially deep when I became a mother myself.

Thankfully, the physical and emotional intensity of motherhood also offered an opportunity to heal through loving and caring for my children. I was able to slowly reclaim my body and become more wholly myself, while recognizing that some wounds never entirely disappear.

“You can tear something apart,” my younger self says in the book, “and it will still be torn and whole. There is no other way.”

Although I briefly tested a more linear, chronological structure for my book, I knew almost from the start that my story would work best in a fragmented form that mimicked the way trauma spirals through our lives. I already loved fragmented book structures long before I wrote my own. But during the pandemic I began seeing even more potential in fragments, particularly as they reflect the innately feminist act of finding the whole in the part.

From its inception, this pandemic exacerbated cracks in every system. I, like many writers, found it difficult to read, let alone write, under such circumstances. Art asks us to open ourselves to the unknown, self-revelation, and the risk of failure. How could I calm my nerves enough for that kind of vulnerability?

Once again, I found my answer in fragments. Maybe because fragments convey meaning differently — less directly than longer chronological works with beginnings, middles, and ends. Fragments mirror something important about this
collective shattering, which is that every piece of the whole is crucial.

Paradoxically — because fragments arrive at their meaning indirectly — they also require meticulous attention from both writers and readers. The poet Marie Howe said, “This might be the most difficult task for us in postmodern life: not to look away from what is actually happening. To look long enough so that we can look through it, like a window.”

Opening this window felt worth the risk of vulnerability. I found myself nourished by tiny works. These compact creations demanded unflinching observation of the inner and outer world. They demanded to be built one careful word at a time.

As the pandemic pushed my reading and writing into smaller containers, it also pushed my teaching in that direction. I imagined creating a writing space with gentle expectations — no advance reading, no pressure to produce. The result was a virtual writing workshop called “Writing in the Dark: Survival Strategies for Creating in Uncertain Times.”

Almost 150 writers have gathered in nine sessions, and the workshop continues in 2021. Participants have said they were able to write artfully about things they have never been able to write about before — a mother’s suicide, the death of a child. Ultimately, the capacity to change our quality of seeing is the most pressing call to action of our time.

Jeannine Ouellette’s memoir, “The Part That Burns,” is available from Split/Lip Press. She teaches writing through the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop and through the independent writing program she founded, Elephant Rock. She is working on her first novel.

For those interested in delving into wholeness through flash and fragments, here are some of the extraordinary writers I have been reading this year:

“Safekeeping,” by Abigail Thomas
This gorgeous memoir in fragments is a triumph of language and observation, an ode to forgiveness. I find this book more inspiring and comforting with every read.

“Sing to It and Collected Stories,”
by Amy Hempel
Hempl is a genius of the flash form. Her powerful work, electric in its language and stunning in its capacity to spot universal truth in the minutest detail, falls somewhere between short story and poem.

“Solutions and Other Problems,”
by Allie Brosh
Like countless others, I have waited years for this sequel to Brosh’s groundbreaking and hilarious memoir, “Hyperbole & a Half.” Brosh peels back the layers of her most painful experiences during her long hiatus while still making us laugh.

“Parable of the Sower,”
by Octavia Butler
This one is not technically a fragmented work, but Butler is one of the most prescient voices for our times, as her fiction foretells future directions for both the United States and humanity. Fiction also allowed Butler to imagine an alternative future for herself — a brighter and more expansive one — than what was expected. That is the kind of example we need now, and always.
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When Anisha Murphy was growing up, her heroine was the TV character Clair Huxtable, a corporate attorney and feminist family woman raising five kids — one of television’s first working moms.

Murphy was inspired to go to law school. While at Hamline University, in 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot in Florida while walking home from a store. He was shot by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman who thought he looked “suspicious,” and who later claimed self-defense. There was no criminal charge until national media pressure about racial profiling led to a trial, which ended in an acquittal.

The case convinced Murphy that she wanted to go into law — not for corporate work, but to help “change systems for Black and brown communities.” She went to work on behalf of the unhoused, youth, and public policy with the Children’s Defense Fund.

At that time, Murphy says, society was still putting band-aids over wounds rather than moving the needle in meaningful ways. Coming from an entrepreneurial family, she realized that economic development might be the key. Seeing that business owners were not seeking out legal advice because of a disconnect and distrust, Murphy developed a program for entrepreneurs, especially for people of color, as a program director with the Northside Economic Opportunity Network in North Minneapolis. She created Just Law LLC in 2019.

“I believe economic development is a gateway toward leveling the economic playing field for people of color and women,” says Murphy. “It allows both groups equal and fair access to capital, housing, jobs, and overall opportunity by focusing on innovation, skills, and infrastructure, as well as economic growth.”

Murphy saw the difficulty entrepreneurs of color had in getting business capital — investments, grants, loans. She stepped in to work with organizations like the Metropolitan Economic Development Association, Latino Economic Development Center, and Neighborhood Development Center to work at the local level.

“To address barriers to accessing capital, you have to take an enhanced ecosystem approach,” Murphy says. “It’s about finding innovative solutions.”

Now Director of Community Advancement with Community Reinvestment Fund, USA (CRF), Murphy’s mission is to connect small businesses with lending capital and consulting services.

“Often times systems — financial systems, educational systems, or political systems — are designed and pushed on communities, which has never worked. We want to jointly design lending products that meet the needs of the communities in which we serve.”

She stepped into her role a few months before the pandemic hit locally. Much of her time so far has been spent helping small business owners get Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans and recovery funds. Those who do not have the immediate access to computer technology, are targets of predatory lending practices, and do not have the people power to run a business and prepare for the paperwork-heavy loan process.

CRF partnered with local community organizations to provide 131 PPP loans totaling more than $9.6 million in the Twin Cities; 42 percent went to businesses owned by women and people of color.

Murphy intends to be a change agent that helps the financial industry figure out “how to do things differently. There is systemic racism in lending practices. We can make things more responsive and equitable.”
My husband and I met at the University of Minnesota while in graduate school a decade ago. When the opportunity to return to our educational home surfaced, we hesitated but eventually accepted the call, landing in one of the many self-identified progressive Twin Cities communities nestled between several universities.

We moved in early July — a little more than a month after George Floyd was slowly murdered by Minneapolis police. Upon arrival, nearly every house on our block had a lawn sign professing “Black Lives Matter,” “Justice for George Floyd,” “All Are Welcome Here,” or a mix of those sentiments. The church, sitting kitty-corner from our home, showcased all three signs and a row of Adirondack chairs.

Initially, our family went for leisure strolls in the community every day. Rarely did we see folks who looked like us, but the signs were an indication that our neighbors might humanize us. Our two-year-old daughter, Ava, is especially fond of the daily walks.

The first time Ava led us to the chairs on the lawn of the church, I hesitated. Traumatized by the sometimes-fatal effects of being Black in white-dominated space, I was wary and I carried her home. Later that evening, as I watched other families sit in the chairs from my backyard, I thought maybe it was okay to sit there.

The following day, Ava led us to the church lawn. Cautiously, I allowed us to sit. A few minutes later, a white family approached us. A woman stepped forward and asked, “May I help you?”

I was dumbfounded. I could not imagine what assistance I might need as my daughter and I sang nursery rhymes on the lawn. Perhaps if she had said “Hi,” or introduced herself, but “May I help you?” was cold, formal, and boundary-setting. My retort was, “Well, this is awkward. I’m not sure how you expect me to respond. My daughter and I are sitting on what we presumed were welcoming grounds. Is that not the case?”

She tripped over her words as she said, “Yes, yes, it is.” She and her family walked to their car and drove away.

Pride kept me sitting there, but only until they were out of sight. Then I picked Ava up, held her tight, and briskly walked home. I understood what it meant: unknown Black people were not welcome there.

White liberal women often classify their microaggressions as awkward moments. That summer day, no matter the intent, the impact was racially disenfranchising. Microaggressions are instances of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group. I believe most of my neighbors, self-identified liberals, are not intentional in their microaggressions. But the very fact that they identify as liberal often creates a barrier for accountability and repairing harm. When allyship is claimed, it is nearly impossible to address missteps and discrimination.

For weeks, Ava cried when led away from the church. At two, her racialized conditioning has begun. I wish she had more time.

Between COVID-19, the racial climate, and winter, my experiences of isolation are exacerbated. Still, I have no desire to interact with those who treat me as an outsider. Oddly enough, the mask mandate is a welcome intervention in an exhausting performance of white pacification. I don’t have to engage in as many dehumanizing conversations, and with our nanny facilitating Ava’s daily walks, I have outsourced some of my discomfort.

I have to perform a lot less. But many lower-income essential workers are people of color with limited access to quality healthcare and the burden of existing in white spaces. It is exhausting to be Black in “nice,” white, liberal Minnesota.

Seven months after relocating, significantly fewer Black Lives Matter signs appear on neighboring lawns. Although they never guaranteed humanization, the signs represented inclusive possibilities. Their casual removal implies disposability of black bodies and highlights the meaninglessness of this whole allyship performance from the start.

Chelda Smith (she/her) is a diversity, equity, and inclusion expert with over 15 years of justice-oriented experience.
Asian American Visibility

The Council for Asian American Leaders released a 2021 report, “Redefining Wealth Through Communal and Cultural Assets,” reporting: “When data on Asian Minnesotans are lumped together, it creates a monolithic picture of the population that further drives and perpetuates the invisibility of this community.”

The report is designed to provide deeper understanding of unique economic challenges and community assets across 10 different Asian Minnesota groups by looking at seven data points — geographic distribution, population growth, general demographics, employment, income and poverty, housing, and wealth building.

Source: caalmn.org

Reaction Time

How law enforcement responded to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, and the fates of those attempting to overthrow democracy, will be revealed over time. One thing that was quickly apparent, was the difference between law enforcement reaction to the violent insurrection compared to other protests. There were 61 arrests made by Capitol police on January 6.

In contrast, CNN listed many protests in D.C. with higher one-day arrests:

- 133 LGBTQ+ activists, October 8, 2019
- 147 climate change protesters, January 10, 2020
- 181 Obamacare supporters, September 25, 2017
- 217 inauguration protesters, January 20, 2017
- 316 Black Lives Matter protesters, June 1, 2020
- 302 Brett Kavanaugh opponents, October 4, 2018
- 372 Keystone pipeline protesters, March 2, 2014
- 400+ ‘Democracy Spring’ activists, April 11, 2016
- 575 immigration policy protesters, June 28, 2018
- 12,000+ Vietnam War opponents, May 1, 1971

Sources: “On These Nine Days,” CNN, January 12 2021; “Go After the Troublemakers,” Reveal, November 1, 2020
We are an all-transgender, people of color-led, 100 percent homebrewed, Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) livestreamed campaign set in an original noncolonial, anti-orientalist world. Basically, we are a theatrical production — a blend of improv-based play and D&D for a live-streamed audience. I am the Game Master, the person who runs the game and the executive producer behind the show.

Like any other creative or artistic practice, the world of tabletop actual play livestreaming is dominated by white, cisgender, and male voices. When people who are not in the community think of D&D, there is still a stereotypical image of the nerdy white boy in his mom’s basement. I believe the world of gaming is diversifying. That means the faces of players and those behind the scenes are changing, as well as the kinds of stories people are interested in telling.

The normative narrative in D&D is that a group of skilled adventurers go out into the “uncharted wilderness” and kill monsters, grabbing treasure from their dead bodies and conquering an area for their lord’s domain. Modern D&D audiences are less interested in that narrative. We are interested in interrogating what it means to inflict violence on other people in a gaming setting and thinking critically about the setting we are playing in — so it is not a generic Western-European Game of Thrones situation.

My community was very intentional about building a world together that is rooted in Asian American and Pacific Islander mythology. I am drawing on my own experiences as a Chinese American person to build certain parts of this world.

We are not going out into the wilderness and killing evil races. [Rather] something is happening in this world that is causing our players to want to go out and fight back against forces of violence that seek to harm those they care about.

It is rare to see trans characters and players in this medium, so we are trying to tell stories that resonate with trans people. We recently did a fundraising drive for TIGERRRS, which provides resources for trans and intersex youth and adults, with a 12-hour marathon stream.

We are isolated right now, but even without the pandemic it can be hard for trans people and people of color to find community, especially within a gaming context. The game gives us something to look forward to with creativity to collaborate together. It has been good for our mental and emotional health to tell a story with other people.

Details: TransplanarRPG airs every Saturday at 3pm CT on twitch.tv/transplanarrpg.

Something that has helped me stay centered is listening to podcasts: Magnus Archives (horror, modern fantasy) and Old Gods of Appalachia (history). My video game recommendations are Hades, Celeste (trans developer and characters), Animal Crossing, Skyrim, and Sims 4.
Imagine standing at touching distance from a stranger. Imagine pressing your palm against theirs. You do not ask them where they have been or when they have most recently washed their hands — you simply state your name and say, “Nice to meet you.”

The first piece in the Intimacies section of the Design for Different Futures exhibition at the Walker Art Center, which explores real and imagined designs and concepts, is a handshake. A “risk evaluation flow chart” on the floor encouraged me to think carefully about the action I was about to take. Eventually I stood in front of a plexiglass barrier through which I could see my father’s face. We could shake hands through a hole without breathing on each other.

In a dark room just beyond the barrier, screens tell a four-part story about Grindr, a location-based networking and dating application for gay, bi, trans, and queer people [“Intimate Strangers” by Andrés Jaque]. The museum’s subject matter underscores the concept of vulnerability, an integral part of discussions about sex. Talking about intimate topics on the internet makes us vulnerable to strangers. I should know. When I chronicled my own journey through grief, I committed an act of trust by telling my innermost stories, and readers responded in kind.

In the same way, Grindr creates a platform for people to be vulnerable with each other. One of the exhibit components tells the story of two refugees from Syria. Both are gay men who faced challenges on their journeys to Europe. Through Grindr, they accessed resources by connecting with other gay men in refugee camps. Using the app was a risk, but in their case it built community.

Sex From a Distance

The pandemic has forced many human interactions from real life to online. In our digitized world, it makes sense that we move sex online, too.

Outside of the side room in the museum are display cases. In one, a jumble of technology hangs from the wall. It takes a second look to notice the curves of a pair of dildos.

The “Onyx2 and Pearl2 Couples Set” by designer Kiiroo are two pieces of a set, one a dildo vibrator and the other a fleshlight-style sheath. Using Bluetooth the devices send and receive movements and gestures, increasing possibilities “for internet-enabled sexual interactions between physically distant partners.” Even before COVID-19, I can think of times such an item would have been worth the investment.

Additional adult toys with adaptability to different genitalia are displayed below a headset and phone [“POC + Headset for Neurodildo” by EMOTIV]. Neurodildos create sexual experiences for people who are limited in their mobility. A headband reads brain waves to control a vibrator. Through technology we can become sex cyborgs. Which, honestly, sounds like fun. Knowing about Zoom mishaps, I wonder, “What is the vibrator equivalent of being stuck on mute?”

Intimacy, in the context of this exhibit, ranges from a handshake to community-building via a hookup app, to a mental hand job. The displays encouraged me to ask questions I would be asking regardless of this pandemic, but more relevant as we avoid skin-to-skin contact and promote social distancing. Do I trust this new person enough to actually touch them? Enough to send a naked picture? Enough to tell them where I am?

Can the trust we build through talking about sex form a relationship deep enough to bridge the isolation?

Details: Design for Different Futures runs until April 11 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.
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By the time I was five years old, I knew I wanted to be a veterinarian. As a child, I talked my non-animal-loving parents into allowing dogs, cats, rabbits, rats, and fish to join our family.

In seventh grade, I started shadowing a veterinarian to see how to apply scientific knowledge to improve animal and human lives. In high school, I was part of a project with the Department of Natural Resources, researching porcupines. Every other week, instead of going to class, I spent the day setting traps, collaring porcupines, and tracking them with radio telemetry in order to better understand their ecology.

During my higher education, I started to do disease surveillance research with bats, track red-tailed hawks, and research the health of urban foxes and coyotes. I worked with eagles, owls, hawks, foxes, raccoons, rabbits, squirrels, swans, ducks, geese, opossums, turtles, snakes, frogs, and more.

Wildlife patients do not understand that we are there to help them, and we cannot comfort them like pets. Being in captivity is inherently stressful and scary for our patients, so it is important to do what we can to shorten their stay with us. Rehabilitated patients are released back to their territory once they are ready to survive again in the wild. It is also our duty to determine who has a low chance of survival and to relieve their suffering.

I have developed a passion for improving our capacity to provide critical care. One of the species I have focused on is red foxes with mange. Last summer, I had several fox patients that got emergency blood transfusions, IV fluids, medications, and special diets. By carefully managing these cases, I got closer to an understanding of the conditions involved. Critical mange foxes started to survive. It is this ability to learn and improve outcomes that inspires me to continue my work.

Miranda Torkelson DVM, CWR (she/her) remained at the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center as a veterinarian after completing a training program, and intends to specialize in clinical wildlife medicine.
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