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SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN A STRANGE NEW NORMAL

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By Robin Eileen Bernstein

*I never thought an invisible cosmic force could pull our strings.
Then coronavirus came along.*

On the last Wednesday of February, I awoke to an avalanche of condolences on the death of my mom.

Except my mom wasn't dead. Not yet.

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Surreal? Yes. But that morning in a pre-pandemic New York City, as I scrolled through my Twitter notifications, I didn't know that surreal was about to become our new normal.

The tweets were mostly in Spanish. "Lo siento," said one. For that I didn't need Google Translate. But for the others I did, dozens that poured in that day and the next, all a variation of: *Our deepest condolences to the distinguished ambassador Robin Bernstein and to her family for the death of her beloved mother...*

Full disclosure: I'm not an ambassador, distinguished or otherwise. But I share a first and last name (and passing resemblance) with the U.S. ambassador to the Dominican Republic, so I'm often tagged by mistake. If that's not enough, she's a Trump-appointed Republican and I'm a lifelong Democrat who wants him booted from office. While this was a level of surreal I'd come to accept, the condolences were a bridge too far. Because my mom had been admitted to the hospital three days earlier and things didn't look good.

It took but a minute to find [the obituary](#) in a Caribbean newspaper, which only deepened the eerie parallels. Both my doppelgänger's mom, 93, and my mom, 91, had just celebrated birthdays in February, a week apart. The obit included an Alzheimer's organization for donations; my mom had dementia.

I put down my phone and exhaled. Was this a sign? Even asking felt wrong, because it was acknowledgement that real condolences might soon come my way. I shook my head as if to reject what seemed preordained.

Three days later, my mom was dead, too.

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I'm a skeptic at heart. When it comes to all things woo-woo, even one woo is too much for me. My philosophy on the supernatural and paranormal mirrors what doctors learn about making a diagnosis: when you hear hoofbeats, look for a horse, not a zebra, and definitely not a purple unicorn.

Yet if anything fell into purple unicorn territory, it was those condolence tweets. Was it synchronicity?

That was the word Carl Jung, the 20th century psychoanalyst, used for weird and mysterious events that can't otherwise be explained. The Police sang about it, twice.

I have a hard time believing that a cosmic force is pulling our strings. As someone who prefers the practical and predictable, I don't leave much room for the mystical. But what if everyone from New York to New Zealand suddenly got sucked into an unforeseen vortex that marked the end of our old normal? Can something be freaky when nothing makes sense? "It's the End of the World as We Know It," sang R.E.M., although unlike rest of the title, I don't feel fine about it. So much happened in two weeks that by mid-March I could barely recognize my own life.

My mom's passing, ironically, was my last brush with normalcy. Soon age-old customs would be kicked to the curb: sickness and death would be a solitary affair. Large funerals and rituals for the grieving? No more. I've read how some people are relieved their elderly parents had passed before this pandemic. It's odd to be thankful for death. But like so much else previously unthinkable, it makes sense now.

"I'm dying," my mom whispered to me her first night in the hospital. She knew before we did. "I want to go home," she said. Five days later she went home to her own bed, where she smiled and blew kisses at me and the hospice nurse. She passed peacefully in her sleep the next morning.

What stops me cold is the what-if. What if she'd gotten sick two weeks later? I picture her in the hospital, allowed no visitors, her confusion and agitation mounting. She'd ask for me. And I wouldn't be there. Yet this is exactly what so many have had to endure.

Is it normal to be grateful that she got sick sooner rather than later?

In our new normal, it is.

Everything was old normal on February 20, my mom's 91st birthday. That afternoon I took a bus (like many New Yorkers, I don't have a car) from Port Authority to her assisted living residence in New Jersey armed with cupcakes and a wrapped gift: a comfy nightgown. We sang Happy Birthday and she blew out a candle. Dementia was slowly robbing her mind and body, and I was determined to make it a good day.

Three days later, she spiked a fever and had trouble breathing. She ended up one step below the ICU with a wicked cough and pneumonia, symptoms that soon would scream Covid, except she tested positive for influenza. (She'd had a flu shot but I was told it may be less effective in the elderly.) I rented a car for the three-hour round trips to the hospital and back, and sometimes listened to all-news radio, where it seemed as if the only news was about the novel coronavirus. It was then that I felt the drumbeat of the approaching pandemic, faintly at first, then louder, the way the sky darkens before a storm.

I heard about towns in Italy on lock-down and a federal health official who said it's not so much *if* it will spread, but *when*. On the day I got those bizarre condolences, I heard Trump's bizarre prediction that our 15 U.S. cases would "within a couple of days...be down to close to zero." The next day he said, "like a miracle, it will disappear."

In the hospital, the drumbeat got louder, where lobby signs wanted to know if I'd recently traveled to China or had been in contact with anyone who'd been outside the U.S. A box of face masks and a shelf of latex gloves sat unattended near the nurses' station; because she had the flu, anyone in her room had to wear them. "It's upside down" said a nurse the first time I donned a blue surgical mask. The nose clip was by my chin. There was a nose clip? Yet soon I'd know all about masks—from N95s to handmade ones with a pocket for a filter. I'd wear one each time I left my apartment, not to mention buying them for my family, in tie-dye no less.

All those ominous warnings about coronavirus made me wonder, "Did mom have it?" But I never asked, and her doctors never raised it. It was possible; in [one analysis](#), nearly nine percent of those who had respiratory illnesses also had Covid, and one in five who had Covid tested positive for viruses like influenza. Doctors now think some Covid deaths in February and early March were [misidentified as flu or just pneumonia](#). Pneumonia was her official cause of death, along with cardiopulmonary arrest and multisystem organ failure. Far as I know, nobody in contact with her had Covid, unless we were asymptomatic. Regardless, I doubt she could've gotten a test back then. I may never have an answer. In our new normal, answers aren't easy to come by.

Although eventually there'd be reports of [a U.S. Covid fatality in early February](#), the first official reported U.S. death from coronavirus was on February 29—the same day my mom passed.

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Within two weeks of those Twitter condolences, events in my life seemed to spin out of control so quickly I couldn't catch my breath.

On Wednesday, March 11, after dinner with friends, I was on a train home trying to disinfect my seat with a Clorox wipe, which isn't easy with your left arm in a cast and your fingers so bruised and swollen they barely move. What happened was that the previous Saturday, a week after my mom died, after I spent hours in her apartment boxing up photos inscribed with the handwriting of the dead, I tripped over a broken sidewalk and landed in the ER with a shattered wrist, and a week later in the OR to have it reassembled with a plate and screws.

The ER had not yet become pandemic central, although I recall positioning myself as far upwind as possible from a guy on a nearby stretcher whose cough was like a series of small explosions. One week I was a visitor. The next, a patient. Neither was an ideal time to be in a hospital. Might as well fly a kite in a thunderstorm.

Two days after I broke my wrist, which nobody saw and nobody reported, I took photos of the broken sidewalk, which was auspicious timing because the next morning, March 10, I woke up to the sound of jackhammers. That sidewalk, which I learned had been a hazard for years, was mysteriously being repaired three days after I tripped on it. I'd give that the same odds as getting condolences three days before my mom died.

The next day—when I met my friends for dinner—would be the last time I'd sit inside a crowded restaurant. Instead of hugging, we bumped elbows. Life felt crazy yet manageable, but by the time I left to catch my train home, the earth had teetered off its axis. There was a news alert on my phone about—what? A European travel ban? My daughter's fiancé, a French citizen, was in France; his flight back to New York, where they shared an apartment a few blocks from me, was in three days.

Just like I did after reading those Twitter condolences, I put down my phone and exhaled. In a week's time, I buried my mother and fractured my wrist. Now my future son-in-law might not be able to come home. I felt queasy, like I was standing on shifting sand.

The train was fairly empty, so I suspended my no-calls-on-mass-transit rule to check on my daughter, who was sobbing with gasps so wrenching she couldn't speak. Clearly she'd heard the news. I overheard two passengers nearby; the words "Trump" and "Europe" came through loud and clear.

"Shh, it'll be ok," I whispered through her choked tears, as if she was still a little girl who skinned her knee. Except now I couldn't stroke her hair and hold her close. I couldn't promise that anything would be ok. I stared at my bloated purple fingers and a cold knot of fear lodged in the pit of my stomach. It dawned on me that I had absolutely no control over any of this, at all.

"I'm right here, sweetie," I murmured into the phone. Soon I wouldn't be allowed to get within six feet of her.

I went straight to her apartment and after an hour of frantic emails and texts and finally confirming that he'd be on a flight to New York, we sat silent and relieved. Finally, I asked the question we'd been dancing around for days.

"What do you want to do about your wedding?"

Her wedding was in May. In France.

She looked at me, one eyebrow arched, the answer obvious.

"What wedding?" she said dryly. As sad as a postponement would be, she now knew the date wasn't what mattered. A crisis has a way of focusing you.

That Sunday, March 15, I was to attend another wedding, my cousin's, in Brooklyn. Instead I and other would-be guests watched it via livestream, now *de rigeur* for pandemic celebrations. Then I went to New Jersey, where the assisted living residence had given me one hour to grab what I still wanted from my mom's apartment before they went on lockdown. By then, it was virtually impossible to rent a car—everyone was getting the heck outta Dodge—so my boyfriend and I traveled there and back on a near empty bus. With my arm in a cast, I needed his help. I had wrist surgery the next day, and I'd recuperate and quarantine at home in Manhattan. He'd quarantine in Brooklyn, where he lived. When we finally saw each other again in person, ten weeks later, it was on what should have been my daughter's wedding day.

There was one other event that weekend. On Saturday, March 14, my boyfriend and I celebrated my birthday in one of the few restaurants still open. There were very few diners besides us. I felt guilty, like we were doing something illicit. The waitress wore latex gloves and cheerfully placed four sugar-dusted chocolate cookies in front of me. I blew out a candle. As with my mom's birthday three weeks earlier, we were determined to make it festive. I later learned that my birthday was the same day the governor of New York announced the state's first Covid death.

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We have no idea what our new normal will be like long-term. We've always been urged to "live in the moment" but what if that's all there is? What if you can't plan ahead because the future is just a flashing neon question mark?

Time has been warped. If you're of a certain age or have a predilection for vinyl, imagine a 33 rpm record spinning at 78. Barry White sounds like Alvin and the Chipmunks. Like a world on speed, stuff I never heard of in February erupted like weeds in March: Zooming, social distancing, 7 PM cheering. By April, the pandemic had generated record unemployment and one person who lost his job, a Black man in Minneapolis, was killed in police custody in May, which sparked international protests in cities coast-to-coast, including mine. Yet while breaking news pelted us like hail, then and now, life feels lethargic. One day rolls into the next without the usual punctuation.

I'm thankful that I was able to hold my mom's bare wrinkled hand in my latex-sheathed one and remind her what a wonderful mom she was and what a beautiful legacy she was leaving, and to see, not in pixels but in the flesh, her face soften with relief. I'm thankful for the comfort of those who came to pay condolences. Yet with each consoling unmasked hug, a deadly parasite may have been hitching a ride.

As a kid, I had a recurring nightmare in which I'd be watching our black-and-white Zenith with the rabbit ear antennae and I'd click the remote once to change the channel, but the channels wouldn't stop changing. They'd flip by faster and faster, out of control, until smoke began pouring from the TV and I knew it would explode.

This spring when I'd hear the wail of ambulance sirens, my daily soundtrack, I might think for a moment it was coming from a TV show I was watching. But this was real, a mournful howl rising from a world changing faster and faster, out of control, spewing an acrid cloud of death. Unlike my childhood nightmare, there was no waking up from this.

It's no surprise that a kid who dreams of exploding televisions grows into an adult who prioritizes control. But I no longer have the luxury, or delusion, of thinking I'm the puppeteer. On February 20 I had two intact hands, my daughter's upcoming wedding, and my mother. Three weeks later: Bum hand. No wedding. No mom.

Adapting these days means accepting the inexplicable, embracing the unknowable and acknowledging that we have no clue what's around the bend. Not surprisingly, more people are reporting paranormal activity; a [New York Times article](#) suggested that in uncertain times, there's a motivation "to find meaning in chaos." It's the same impulse, by the way, that spurs the tinfoil-hat crowd to connect dots that ought not be connected, poisoning the air with viral conspiracies, taking the search for purple unicorns to frightening new dimensions.

I'm not sure I'll ever find meaning—synchronicity, if you will—in chaos. I still don't know what to make of absurdities that hit, bam-bam-bam, like falling dominoes: getting condolences three days too early, a broken sidewalk repaired three days too late, a travel ban three days before a loved one's flight home. When life as we know it is suddenly and monumentally altered, it's tempting to think that Hamlet had it right: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Maybe, but doubtful. I'm still a skeptic. Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction. When a very real pandemic can trip up an entire planet and bring it crashing to its knees, shattering norms as easily as the bones of a human wrist, well, that's surreal enough for me, thank you. I suppose if you're searching for synchronicity, or purple unicorns, or for an invisible force that's controlling us in ways we can't conceive, look no further than the brand new virus that upended the world.

Robin Eileen Bernstein is an essayist, feature writer and humorist with bylines in The New York Times, Salon, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Daily News, Newsday, Narratively, Ozy, Weekly Humorist, Next Avenue, Purple Clover and elsewhere. Her coming-of-age memoir-in-progress is about growing up in Far Rockaway, NY in the 1970s and her dream of being a drummer in a rock-n-roll band. More at robineileenbernstein.com.