

SILVER LININGS

April 2020

Written because of COVID-19

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April 16, 2020
Why A “Silver Lining?”

Today, I am starting a project that has been rolling around in my brain a bit.

I am calling it Silver Linings.

It’s just a short reflection every day about something that was good today—something that was different and only happened because we are living through this extraordinary time all together.

Today’s was a simple walk. Just a walk through what our family calls “The Loop”. My husband and I have traversed this half-mile path since we were first married. We’ve traveled it together with our first dog. Later, we ran behind two little puppies as they bounced along. We’ve seen it through winter, spring, summer and fall. It’s seen our family through the seasons of being pregnant, pushing babies in a baby jogger, watching toddlers running ahead of us, hosting teenagers who practiced golf cart driving skills, and most recently, expanding to include our boys’ significant others.

So, all in all, today’s walk could maybe be seen as not that unique. It could rightfully be viewed through the lens of “just another day”.

Except that life is significantly changed right now.

The college student who should be in his dorm condo at college—but is back home once again.

The second son, happily and gainfully employed, is now newly unemployed.

The two high schoolers—our daughter and our Spanish daughter—are in not in the high school hallways. They are sitting in the kitchen surrounded by books, computers and cell phones.

My husband’s schedule is oddly flexible, as is mine.

I come out from my home office and confirm that everyone is free for a few moments. It’s 11.30 in the morning. In April. On a Thursday.

We gather two leashes, and we set off for The Loop.

The dogs are thrilled.

The kids are talkative, laughing, sharing, jostling, joking. At my insistence, we take a selfie of us all, smashed together a bit at the bottom of our driveway, all bundled up, pausing for a moment in the odd combination of passing snowflakes and brisk April sun.

And now, I’ve documented the first of “Silver Linings.”

April 17, 2020
Virtual Learning

Today, I learned all about tectonic plates, shifting earth and underground volcanoes.

My daughter took her Zoom-based science class right outside my office door this afternoon.

Her teacher has adapted the entire class structure to the Zoom session. They started in a bit of a lecture, mainly with him talking. Still, anytime a student had a question, they could just “raise their hand” virtually. It’s a mere click of the mouse away. He would stop and answer, just like they were all sitting in the same room.

He also asked specific questions, engaging the kids in real discussion, hearing their theories as to what was happening with the earth’s shifting. He listened and repeated back, clarifying what they had said to one another.

I even heard his high school senior “teaching assistant” jump in. (She’s looking at becoming a teacher herself and is helping out in this class.) She took notes on the conversation and was posting directly into Google docs as the class progressed.

At one point, he broke the class into four groups. The discussion went on between just a few students for about ten minutes. He then brought everyone back together to compare and analyze, and to hear what was planned for after their break next week.

Back in grade school, I was often in the classroom personally for one reason or another. I never failed to be impressed by how well our teachers know the kids and how much effort they put into their jobs.

A silver lining for today? Hearing great proof that this professionalism continues through high school.

Kudos to all the staff venturing out into a brave new world of online learning!

April 18, 2020
Lacrosse Snow

Spring means lacrosse season. For our family, that has meant nine full years of attending games and practices—from the end of March all the way to the beginning of June.

Of course, that means that we will undoubtedly see all types of weather, too. We've learned to watch the weather. After one season of ridiculous temperature swings—even in one day, I even created "the lacrosse box". The plastic tote contained fleeces for everyone, umbrellas, wool hats, gloves, rain jackets, hats to keep the sun out of your eyes, sunscreen and bug repellent. The box saved us much discomfort, and became somewhat famous amongst our lacrosse family friends.

This year, there is no lacrosse.

And yes, I really do miss it.

Today, as the snow came gently down, I was snuggled up next to the fire, dry and warm with my cup of tea and morning paper. It was not "normal". I "should" have been layered up, trying to find the right angle on my umbrella.

So, OK, I'll take this one day's late spring snow during this lacrosse season with no games to attend ... and I'll turn it upside down into my silver lining for today.

April 19, 2020
Spring Starts

Today is one of those beautiful early spring days in southern Vermont. The snow melted, the grass is greener, the forsythia is blooming bright yellow and daffodils are proudly dancing in the warm breeze.

It's a pleasure to be outside on days like this.

Although wandering through the yard brings some other things into focus, too. It's hard to ignore the leaves still crowding out the roses, the chicken coop's floor, the rabbits' cages...

I start in on the chicken coop and ask son number two to bring me a different shovel. He complies, and then he surprises me by grabbing the original shovel and digging in himself.

As we are finishing the chicken coop, our Spanish daughter is finishing putting the rabbits out. (It's her favorite chore.) It's extra work to clean out the cages, but quickly done while we work together.

We are now out of chicken and rabbit food. So I call on my daughter, and we're off—with the dogs—for a quick run for supplies.

Eventually, I reach the rose bushes and those leaves. I have quite a pile built up, so I ask son number one to get a tarp. Together, we rake, pile, pull and dump.

My silver lining? I'm happy to have had the chance for each of their help today. (It might not necessarily have been theirs.)

April 20, 2020

A Meal Cooked by a Daughter

Because no one had any games or practices tonight...

Because there were no school events to attend...

And because online learning and working have been halted for the day...

We six just sat down for a meal together. It was a delightful one, too: homemade pizza and thoughtfully tossed salad—all prepared by the youngest of the group.

This is definitely not a normal occurrence here in this house.

But today, with this gift of time, our daughter decided this was her big project. She thought it all through. She checked for ingredients in the freezer and the pantry. She dug through recipes and found the instructions. With a little consultation with her parents, she proudly put two large pizzas and a huge bowl of mixed greens and veggies on the table.

And (will wonders ever cease?), with just a bit more cajoling, her brothers even tried the salad—and proclaimed it “quite good”.

She’s glowing and the family is fed.

Silver lining for today. Definitely.

April 21, 2020
Quiet Office

Today, my silver lining was the gift of time in a quieter office.

Although it frightens me (a lot, if I stop to think about it), there is a dramatic slowdown in the amount of emails, phone calls and messages—text, What’s App, Facebook, Skype and Linked In.

And those who do reach out are not demanding, but more inquisitive.

Everyone, all the way around the world, is in the same boat. There is a calmness, a resigned acceptance of the present—as long as we don’t look too far ahead and get caught up in the panic about the future.

So, for today, I can catch up on the bookkeeping that usually gets pushed back. I can think through the design of a web page without interruptions. I can plan—maybe only dream—about what I might be doing on the other side of this.

This silver lining is truly on the underside of the cloud of darkness of the doom and gloom that is threatening.

But the silver part is there, if only I look hard enough.

April 22, 2020
A New Opportunity

Today we took yet another daily walk as a family. The number of family members varies. We can't always get everyone.

This afternoon, it was just our youngest, my husband, me—and the two dogs.

It is not often that we do things with just the youngest. She does not always get the chance to hold one of the dogs' leashes, either.

I watched as she worked a bit on training one of them. She called to her and praised her when she came over excitedly. The other dog, ever jealous, came over, too, and she quickly gave her attention, too.

Then the little group set off down the trail again, both dogs' tails wagging high.

Although this is April vacation week for the high schoolers, today's happy balance of training and praise came from several weeks of practice. If she were at school every day, instead of at home taking a walk, she would not have had that confidence. And, honestly, we adults probably would not have given her the chance to show us she could do it.

Score one for the mandated togetherness time.

April 23, 2020
Zooming Friends

One word for today: friends.

During this time of social distancing, I have realized that many of my friendships have been easily sustained by the hours we all spend around our kids' activities.

But now there are no gatherings on the sidelines. There is no spontaneous bursts of laughter as we regale each other with the stories of our everyday lives. No natural checking in on how everyone is doing... no updates on what colleges the seniors are thinking of... no photos of prom photos...

After just days of this, one friend suggested that we schedule a Zoom meeting. "It will be fun just to see each other."

We have now made it a weekly appointment. Not everyone can make it every time, and that is fine. We have no agenda. Pets, children and husbands come wandering through occasionally. It's very casual—and yet very important.

Here's the fun part, which pushes it officially into the "silver lining" for me: it seems like we are somehow sharing more. If our friendships just were still just those sporadic chats whenever we ran into each other, I don't think we would be all talking at this same level.

A virtual tip of the hat to the folks at Zoom for this service!

April 24, 2020
Bonding

Today, at one point as I wandered out of my office, I wondered where our Spanish daughter was. I had not seen—or heard—her for a little bit.

Then her laughter rang out: she was in the loft above me. Playing a video game, sitting next to our oldest son while he was working on homework for college.

We didn't host any exchange students here until our oldest was off. OK. I'll be blunt: we didn't have a spare bedroom. But once he was going to live in a dorm, he was all for giving up his space here. "I'm not going to be living here. What difference does it make? Host an exchange student."

He even painted his room and set it up for "Spanish daughter #1", who arrived the fall of 2017.

So while he has been in and out, home for a weekend or a break, he's largely not been the constant "brother" to our three Spanish daughters and one Brazilian son. He has not had the daily interaction.

This particular Spanish daughter has siblings the exact ages of our two boys. She's very comfortable with them—and with her American younger sister, too, whom she sees as a bonus. It's an special gift, especially in this odd time, to hear the two of them together.

I think it is kind of a silver lining to his being home. (Although I imagine he is just being kind to not mention that he is now sharing a room with his brother...)

April 25, 2020
Special Birthday

Today is my birthday.

It's probably not a surprise if I say that I've been known to throw a spontaneous gathering or two in honor of the occasion, right?

These wing dings are never too fancy or fussy. But, pretty much always, my birthday involves some friends. Some years perhaps more than others, but still, I like to be around people today especially.

Not going to happen this year, I thought to myself this morning. No way to see people outside of the family. We had a special family supper set already. I had been looking forward to it all week. I was setting up my day around that event, actually.

Then, out of the blue, a text message dinged on my phone. "Hey, would you like to get together for a birthday walk?"

A quick flurry of messages went back and forth. Within 30 minutes, we'd found an agreeable time and set a place for four of us to gather. We often broke into groups of two, trying to maintain the guidelines of six feet apart at a minimum at all times. It was a perfect spring day, and two hours flew by. The walk left all us in a good mood.

My family completed the day with even more thoughtful ideas. One son blew leaves off the front flower garden. Another had finally hung the wooden planter boxes he'd worked on two years ago. The lovely young ladies in our lives brought gifts and one made a homemade card, complete with photos of the whole family.

Now, at the end of the day, I see that the "silver lining" today was how wrong I was about how it would be "strange birthday". I'm calling it a "special birthday" instead!

April 26, 2020
Phone Call

There is something special about college roommates. I feel like it's not an exaggeration to say we kind of saw each other become our true selves.

I feel so very fortunate that I have three such friends, and that those bonds were ever forged. Our conversations always pick up where we left off. They are never awkward, and we never, ever run out of things to share.

We live in different states now, and we don't see each other as much as we would like. It requires travel, juggling schedules, making sure family is covered and assuring work is done.

In short, seeing each other requires making time.

But suddenly, remarkably, we have the gift of time.

One of these special women reached out to me yesterday, wondering if we might have a chance to catch up today. My text back was pretty typical of anyone these days: "Yep, call whenever you want tomorrow. I'm home! :)"

This afternoon, we have spent hours—hours!—talking and catching up. It was just about as good as being there in person.

Matter of fact, I'm going to make it a point to reach out to those other two college roommates for a similar call. I'm betting they, too, have some extra time at the moment... and I think they will agree that it is a silver lining for them, too!

April 27, 2020
Puppy Training

Big news happened in February in our house: I brought home a puppy.

She's lovely, and there is much more to say about her—and I promise I will write—at a later time.

She arrived on February 20th. I had things set up to keep her occupied while I was in the office, and I had a plan for where she would be if I had to go out to run errands. We followed those ideas—and they worked well—for about three weeks.

Then, all of our schedules changed. People are suddenly, pretty much ALWAYS, at home. There is no need for her to “get used to a crate” in the car: someone holds her if she is riding along. There is no worry that she “will be lonely”; she's never alone.

Most importantly, she gets to know all of the family. Because, again, we are all... well, home.

So son number one usually does the last take-out before bed. It warms my heart to watch him scoop her up and carry her down the stairs (because “she's too tired to walk”). Son number two is teaching her how not to be scared of hats and pulled up hoodies. (This is his new favorite style while he desperately needs a haircut. It's not a bad look for him right now, honestly.)

The two daughters play with her constantly. Spanish daughter #3 has taught her a few tricks. And our youngest daughter—just today—has finally convinced the older Lab to play tug with the puppy.

My husband? Should I admit that I keep finding the puppy curled up next to him in bed? (“She was whining. She wanted up here.”)

Silver lining for all!

April 28, 2020
Special Time

One more day of shelter-in-place. One more day of kids on computers, hopefully doing their classes, and me wondering whether they really are and how much I should be watching over their shoulders. One more day of middle child waiting to go back to work. One more day of news I'd rather avoid.

I'm being pushed hard today to find the silver lining.

But then I look outside.

The sun is shining. The tulips are blooming. The daffodils are smiling. The forsythia's yellow sticks out against the bareness of the trees behind it.

Because it's not raining... because kids are home...because it's a wonderful spring day...because we are healthy...

We are home, together, with the dogs. They've been taken outside for running, puppy playtime (both dogs-age is not important for this) and to help with daily chores.

We've had our daily family walk. The Lab took advantage of the loop's water attractions and went into both her swimming holes. The Berner practiced her "mountain dogging", showing off her affinity for climbing and posing majestically on top of any pile of dirt.

The dogs do not see this as one more day of anything. They live in the moment. And they have declared this moment very good indeed.

The dogs have it: they have discovered the silver lining for us all today!

April 29, 2020
A New Light

I feel like I can write a commercial for a sponsor of a TV show:

"Tonight's supper table conversation was brought to you by COVID-19. The twists and turns of this virus' disruptions to the economy can be chronicled, and will surely be reviewed for decades to come. Watch your family discussions come alive, all inspired by this pandemic!"

Our second son started working full time in September—for his father's company (although not directly reporting to dear ol' dad). Our oldest son is studying construction management and has a keen interest in hearing about first-hand experiences.

Today, some clarity came out to explain the Paycheck Protection Program. Now, I imagine that most families' dinner table topics probably do not include this discussion. This is the program which provides funds for small businesses to pay their employees, with some funds to also pay essential costs of doing business. If you follow all the rules—which are a bit open to interpretation, but being clarified more all the time—your loan is forgiven.

We spent at least fifteen minutes on this topic. There was uniform gratitude that the government is trying to do something. Because son number two works there, he knows the other employees personally—and he likes them all. He knows the very real consequences if they can't pay their loans for their homes and their cars. Son number one is learning about business during his classes, and he, too, is acutely aware of the role small businesses play in our country.

The silver lining tonight was watching our sons see their father in a slightly different light. The menu included hamburger, potatoes, salad, mangos... and a newfound appreciation for the responsibilities of a small business owner.

April 30, 2020
Getting Back to Work

The joy of work.

Tonight's "two good things of the day" from son number two included one we used to hear often: "Work".

It's amazing how wonderfully happy I am to hear that from one of my children. Really: what more can you want than for your child to find something he enjoys doing—and gets paid to do it?

But for the last four weeks, he, too, was home. He was not happy about it (although he admits to a new appreciation for government programs like unemployment). He missed work.

A silver lining of being out of work? Appreciating getting to go "back to work"!