

March 24, 2019

Dear Student,

You haven't been on this amazing planet very long, so I think you may need a word of encouragement -- a bit of perspective. It occurred to me today that one of the earliest songs I memorized as a girl was the Temptations' 1970 hit "Ball of Confusion (That's What the World is Today)," which is basically a long, pre-rap days, rhyming list of all kinds of horrible things that were going on in the 1960s. I've lived through the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and nuclear bomb drills, a president's assassination, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the energy crisis of the 1970s, the Super Outbreak of Tornadoes on April 4, 1974, recessions, HIV/AIDS, government shutdowns, and 9/11 -- just to name some of the panicky and confusing times in the life of our nation in the past 60 years. **We got through it.** And while I will certainly caution you to follow *all* recommended precautions (I'm high-risk!), I want you to remember that humans are *extraordinarily resilient* -- and creative and brave. Instead of looking forward in fear, I suggest you look *back* to find courage and hope for days ahead.

The two generations that came before mine lived through World War II and the Great Depression, and I knew those people intimately. My uncle fought in France during the war, and just like we're all doing now, my granddaddy would scrape the bottom of a mayonnaise jar with a spatula till it was as sparkling clean as Grandmother's crystal goblets. (Those folks who came through the Great Depression did not waste *anything*. Very wise.) But it is the stories my mother tells of her family that come to mind now -- they lived through the polio epidemic before we had a vaccine.

My mother's little sister was just a tow-headed 5-year-old when she contracted polio in 1944, and my mother's family was strictly quarantined. Yes, the epidemic was during WWII, as if that wasn't stressful enough. Mother couldn't be with her little sister Sylvia for a year -- she had to peek through a window on tippy toes to get a glimpse of her sister lying flat on her back in a bed in Kosair Children's Hospital. When Sylvia came home, the once-adventurous preschooler was confined to a wheelchair -- she would never walk again.

There were no laws requiring buildings to accommodate people with disabilities at that time, even with all the war injuries. No elevators in the new high school. The principal said to my grandparents, *You'll have to homeschool her*. Undaunted, Granddaddy hired football players to carry Aunt Sylvia and her chair up and down the staircases. She graduated Valedictorian.

Granddaddy rigged the family car so Sylvia could drive with her hands. In the summer, he sent her from their home in Louisville all the way up to NYC to learn to dress herself and to care for herself independently. She could drive a car at 16 and put her wheelchair in the backseat -- *alone*.

She married a remarkable man who had also contracted polio, and she gave birth to three children and adopted a fourth child who was age 14 at the time. Aunt Sylvia earned a Masters of Music Therapy, and she worked tirelessly in her church community. She played and taught piano and sang in an achingly beautiful soprano -- she was such an accomplished woman, more so than most. She was never bitter. Never despaired. She lived a life of service. My Aunt Sylvia had the *most grateful heart* of anyone I ever knew.

I tell you all that to let you know that even in the long weeks or even months ahead, with the scary news (don't watch so much), and with staying home and missing your friends and distant family, at some point **we will get through this and come out on the other side** -- it's what our stories teach us, right? I'm teaching "The Odyssey" to my ninth graders now. A myth is *more* than a story we make up to explain the unexplainable -- I teach my students Karen Armstrong's definition: myth is something that happened and is *still* happening now. They are *true* stories -- they're not meant to be taken literally--they've always been metaphorical. She says, "[Myth is] telling us what we must do if we want to unlock the heroic potential within ourselves." Our heroes are often as flawed and as anxious as we are ourselves, yet they show us how to *survive* our deepest fears.

Like Odysseus, we suddenly find ourselves sailing on this big, leaky boat with the rest of the world, waiting for the worst of the storm, dodging temptations and dangers, at times succumbing to a whirlpool of worries. But we must hold on to faith and to each other -- from a socially acceptable distance. We *will* get to shore and back to each other one day. (*Be a Gryffindor!*)

Affectionately,
Mrs. Swann