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Equilibrium: Reflections from a College Counselor during Covid-19

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Equilibrium: Reflections from a College Counselor during Covid-19

Latin: aequi-equal libra-balance: A Well-balanced state of mind

Equilibrium as defined by Webster is “a state of balance or a stable situation where opposing forces cancel each other out and where no changes are occurring.”

My first memory of this word came the morning after my first ride on a roller coaster. I was 11, it was early June, the summer after 6th grade, 1991. My friend Lauren invited me to go to Kings Dominion as her guest. She had a season pass and hence, was seasoned in the highs, lows, ups, downs and loop-de-loops of amusement. We waited 75 minutes in a line for the newest rollercoaster, The Anaconda. I can still feel my thighs sticking together in the folds of my Umbros in the humid, Virginia air as we moved closer to the entrance. I can also feel my throat constricting as I imagine the prey feels in the grip of the anaconda. I now can name that as panic, but at the time I simply express my concerns carefully as the line moves closer and I hear the screams of those on board, “I’m really not sure if I want to do this.” Lauren assures me this is the easiest and best rollercoaster, and carelessly adds, “I chose you out of all of my friends, and if you don’t go on these roller coasters with me, it will ruin my day, and I’m not really sure I can be your friend anymore.” As a pre-adolescent pleaser, desire to be a good friend, a budding Enneagram 3, I ignored my body sensations. I stepped into the car, arranged myself on the bicycle-type seat, locked the bars over my chest, set my jaw, squeezed my eyes closed and endured the brain-rattling, body-jarring, harrowing ride. And then, I did it again and again and again. The morning after and days after that, I could barely leave my bed because I was so dizzy. The room wouldn’t stop spinning. My mom said she thought my equilibrium was “out of whack.” The state of balance, stability and security of my body was upended.

The word emerged almost 30 years later on the Friday before spring break when I sat in my office in Hoffman at 4pm with a client who was processing the receipt of the email suggesting due to Covid-19 we may not return back to school after spring break as planned. We sat in the vertigo of unknowing, security being upended, with only the equilibrium of each other’s presence in the here and now. As the week progressed and the fog got thicker, I had a similar sensation of my ride on The Anaconda...the ascent of the possibility of students returning to campus and seeing my clients in person, the peak of recognition that they would not be returning. Then, the rushing descent of the realization that I couldn’t practice if my clients were located out of state, the steep loop-de-loops of advocating for temporary licensure in different states country-wide, receiving both yeses and nos. As a department, we researched potential HIPAA compliant telehealth platforms along with every other counseling center in the country, we felt the constriction of coordinating care from afar, the squeeze of panic, the vacuuming ache of leaving clients who we cared deeply for without care, without adequate goodbyes. There was a jarring difficulty of sending emails and then retracting them and sending new ones as facts changed and new information was offered. Sometime the week after spring break, we slammed back into the dock of work, but equilibrium was still elusive. There was the high of being present with my clients albeit differently and the low of technology lagging just on the edge of a powerful emotion or revelation. My clients were so hospitable, resilient, hosting me in their spaces with grace and hope, navigating interruptions of siblings and parents, lawnmowers and dogs, power outages and spotty internet. At first, we resisted. The screen was such a barrier, timing was off, I couldn’t look them in the eye. It took work and persistence, but in the end, we decided it was better than nothing. The power of the relationship was worth it. We continued to show up for each other. The connection became our equilibrium amidst

the chaos of the changes, an act of resistance of sorts. It was a bridge to navigate the change together. We found equilibrium in the power of relationship. We named it as an anchor, a way through. It was a precious gift we were able to offer each other.

This has all felt like a grand mindfulness experiment along a continuum of what Kate Bowler names so well as a place between “what we wish for and what we fear,” a searching for the equilibrium, the now, the joys in between these two realities. I talk with my clients often about living in the land of the “both/and” ...both suffering and delight; grief and joy; woundedness and healing; fear and hope; rest and activity; loneliness and connection; now and not yet. I guess it could also be aptly named the “land of equilibrium.”

Mid-April I began to notice a smarting pain in my ears. I discovered I had small abrasions from the ill-fitting earbuds I was wearing 8 hours a day. I listen for a living. My ears emit the stories of my students to my brain and then my soul. Throughout the years, there have often been harrowing and hurtful things to hear, stories that cause my throat to close and my soul to ache, tears to brew; but my ears never hurt from the listening until now. There is significance here I cannot yet name, a connection with that place in the inner ear that creates balance for the body. I still feel the ache, even after clients have created plans and moved on for the summer; even after the beauty of graduation day dawned without the same pomp and circumstance. We ended differently than usual. I had little to give my clients as a gift to take, but blessing words. They felt so thin in the face of it all, but they embody a reality that we have access to always, a liminal space between the now and not yet...equilibrium.

I left my clients with whom I had contact with this blessing from John O’Donahue. To the clients to whom I did not get to say goodbye, and to my community, I also receive this blessing and offer it to you:

For Equilibrium

Like the joy of the sea coming home to shore,
May the relief of laughter rinse through your soul.

As the wind loves to call things to dance,
May your gravity be lightened by grace.

Like the dignity of moonlight restoring the earth,
May your thoughts incline with reverence and respect (even to yourself).

As water takes whatever shape it is in,
So free may you be about who you become.

As silence smiles on the other side of what’s said,
May your sense of irony bring perspective.

As time remains free of all that it frames,
May your mind stay clear of all its names.

May your prayer of listening deepen enough
To hear in the depths the laughter of God.

-John O’Donohue from his book, “To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings”