

Come Rain or Grime

A Story in the Time of Covid



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Published by ShamansDance Publishing & Productions

*“We as a nation must undergo
a radical revolution of values.”*

—Rev. Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Introduction

How COVID is revealing the cracks in our social structure

This fictional story takes place in New York in the time of Covid. But the story of Covid –though it has fallen upon us suddenly, creating upheaval, change and massive suffering—it did not start now. It has been building up for decades. In fact, it started when Ana moved to New York.

Whereas the virus caught us by surprise, the conditions, choices and social fissures that lead to its rapid growth and terrible impact were slow in the making.

I don't know who made up the narrative that the USA is a middle class haven. I don't know when we as a nation stopped being coherent with the spiritual and pioneering values that animated this country; the ones that allowed the pioneers to survive. Values like collaboration, neighborly kindness and respect and collective cooperation to meet life's challenges. Values like respecting all people and compassion for those who have less. And values like honesty, civic responsibility and participation in the democracy that is the foundation of this country.

I do know that this erosion was woven against the hearts of so many people: spiritual people, kind people, people who cherish these values and have suffered as they erode. And they have eroded to the point that we now need to generate public campaigns to remind people to be courteous, to leave their seat to elders and pregnant women and to act with normal civility in the train.

I do know however, that in New York where I live, the fading of these values was meticulously planned. The target were not the values, of course. The target was the land; the space where our communities lived and prospered.

The rumors came from the trenches of the urban planning field. New York was to be a model modern city with skyscrapers that gleamed in the night –their transparent windows spreading light into the street and their metallic coldness shimmering in the dark.

All the working class people in the thriving communities where young and old, poor and rich mixed –communities like the Lower East Side and East Harlem—where to move to the outskirts, so that the rich people who were bored in suburbia could return

to the boring but luxurious new apartments buildings with concierges, swimming pools, gyms and even meeting rooms.

By the 70s I knew of the plans, so I assume many others did as well. I heard it from an urban planning geek –a discontented whistle-whisperer (that I know he did not actually blow the whistle; or at least not loud enough) who would reveal the plans to anyone who asked.

And I asked. And I did believe it because I was seeing the signs.

But then, it is so hard to believe these type of news before we see the evidence. It is this difficulty with believing the tragic nature of possibility that makes it hard to prepare a nation for any harrowing change. This resistance is why still now some countries refuse to take early action before Covid strikes their citizens or to take effective action once it hits.

So yes, gentrification was coming.

And then it was here.

The values changed swiftly. The 80s span a web of lies that changed the fabric of our national narrative. I still remember the rumors spread by the Reagan administration that painted welfare as a cesspool of opportunistic good-for-nothings who were stealing the taxpayers' dollars. (After all, a big pool of unemployed factory workers was no longer needed.)

At the same time, deindustrialization and the outsourcing of entire industries to third world countries led to the demise of entire towns without alternatives for all those displaced workers. The lack of federal support for some industries also lead to their forced exodus or demise.

I watched as the American Dream from rags to riches became distorted into a derision of anyone who was struggling financially and an assumption that poor people were lazy and had no dreams or ambitions.

Instead of the inspiring story that we could rise above financial limitations and achieve financial success; we now swam against a tide of prejudice, the destruction of scholarships, the proliferation of student loans that left our young generation indebted before they even got a job and the lack of funding for *Creatives*.

The gap between the haves and have-nots widened and African-American, Puerto Ricans and Latino immigrants were hard hit. Minority women got the brunt of it.

The social and political progress we had made in the 60s and 70s eroded and reversed. This ever-widening gap generated such tension that in 2009 people claimed for a radical change in the political fabric of our country. This shout came in the form of the election of Barack Obama to the presidency.

But surrounded by conservatives, Obama could do just so much... and those who did not understand the complexities of his position, felt betrayed that they did not get their break.

The election of an African-American to power rose the shackles of the growing number of white supremacist, the ultra-conservatives and the tea party. The result was a backlash: the election (or presidency theft) of Trump to office.

Trump's election is the crowning glory in the rise of corporate oligarchy's intervention in our government.

At the beginning of the 21st Century we were convinced by the political profiteers that business people –specifically corporate moguls—were more “efficient” than political leaders who learned the ropes through holding political positions from the bottom up.

This began the trend of the profiteering politicians. Though not all business people in office have been as rampantly profiteering as Trump; the narrative blinded us to the difference of values, intentions and skills between a political leader and a corporate mogul.

It blinded us to the consequences of measuring political success by the absence or lack of profit or financial results. Profit became the target instead of people's wellbeing.

This is the backdrop against which Covid makes its terrible entrance, and it is the context that makes the USA delay essential measures for the containment of the virus—such as quarantine, lockdown and testing—resulting on massive deaths and a rising curve in the contagion.

The terror of losing profits permeates all early discourse and decisions among the upper skeleton leaders; even as the countries who had gone through the pandemic warned of the importance of early containment.

The repeated obsessions with “national economy” was absurd. “Economy is the result of people circulating money,” I thought to myself. “We can rebuild our economy, but we cannot bring back our citizens from the dead.”

It was then that I heard the subtext: “national economy” really meant “my profits.” The profiteering politicians and their buddies, —the corporate oligarchs and real estate moguls—were scared to lose their profit. They were frightened of massive withdrawal of investments on their companies. They were terrified of a halt to their production. They were horrified of consumers staying home and not buying anymore. For this men, their profit was the economy and they were terrified of losing control.

It was not until it became evident that too many people were dying and would continue to die, that the economy could not be quickly patched-up and that they may be left without consumers to buy their goods –that some leaders took action.

The president, however, kept procrastinating, denying and lying in order NOT to take action. In fact, part of the presidential briefing in 2017 warned of the possibility of a

global viral epidemic. Trump's answer was to dismantle the White House National Security Council in 2018. This agency was established after the Ebola epidemic of 2014 with the mandate to do everything possible within the vast powers and resources of the U.S. government to prepare for the next disease outbreak and prevent it from becoming an epidemic or pandemic.

Even the best leaders who have shone as example of effective response to Covid-19, failed to protect the working classes. An example is Governor Cuomo, who is in my books a hero for his amazing leadership that accomplish what seemed impossible: to eliminate the vertiginously rising curve in the spread of Covid-19 in New York.

But even Cuomo seemed to have avoided facing one of the most powerful lobbies in the USA: the real estate moguls. Even though the majority of New Yorkers pay rent, Cuomo declared a moratorium on mortgages and ignore rent fees, saying that a brief stop to evictions was enough.

That was in March 2020. It is August now and I edit this introduction Cuomo is extending a grace period to the end of this month. He keeps stretching the issue but avoids taking a position to protect the thousands of low-wage workers and unemployed people who are facing eviction. This may be a delaying tactic, but it is generating constant uncertainty and stress to thousands of working families.

Evictions, unemployment, health services, lack of money to buy food, forced exposure to the virus in low-paying jobs, lack of support for essential workers, pressure to go back to school and jobs when it is not safe and many other issues are all made worse by a divide: the ones who have the least are the most affected.

In March 2020, **Gothamist** featured an article where New Yorkers were beginning to protest.

On Sunday evening, around two dozen neighbors in a Sunset Park residential building logged onto an emergency video conference about looming rent payments. Susana Lopez, a leader of the building's tenants association and recently laid-off retail worker, began by asking how many people had lost their primary income as a result of COVID-19. More than half of those on the call said they had. Several others expected they would in the coming days.

Another resident lamented the [*maddening double-standard*](#): that property owners could take advantage of a three month mortgage forbearance, yet they were still expected to pay rent.

<https://gothamist.com/news/cuomo-rent-relief-nyc-tenants-rent-strike-coronavirus>

On April 2020 **The New York Times** Editorial Board denounced that

“Minorities are dying of Covid-19 at alarming rates. Here’s what to do about it right now....

Across the United States, black and Hispanic people suffer disproportionately from poverty, poor health care and chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension and asthma.

Now the data, when it is available, shows that black and Hispanic Americans are dying of the coronavirus disease at [rates far higher than white Americans](#).

In New York City, [Hispanic people are dying at the highest rate](#). Nearly 34 percent of the deaths in New York City are of Hispanic residents, who make up 29 percent of the population. Black New Yorkers, who represent about 22 percent of the city’s population, make up about 28 percent of the deaths.”

Yet, the problem is not only in New York. In fact, New York racial disparities appear to be less severe than those in some other cities and states.

“In Chicago, more than 70 percent of the deaths related to the coronavirus were among black residents, though black residents make up only a third of the city’s population. In Michigan, black residents make up just 14 percent of the population, but over 40 percent of the Covid-19 deaths.”

According to the same article, even the shortage of PPE products leaves the working minorities with the short-end of things.

“As masks, gloves and other protective equipment become more available, it is clear that all essential workers require them, not just emergency and medical personnel. That includes janitors, home health aides, delivery people, grocery and farm workers and sanitation workers. In New York, where the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has been accused of [failing to protect workers early on](#), the work force has high rates of illness and death. In New York City, as in many cities, much of the municipal work force is black or Hispanic.”

Finally, I had to laugh when they started giving instructions to “call your doctor” if you were infected. Most working class people do not have a private doctor since the Managed Care system was put in place in the 70s. Here’s what the NYT article reported about this.

In New York, people are dying every day in minority neighborhoods of coronavirus-like symptoms at home, in the arms of family members and paramedics. Or they are waiting in line for hours outside the emergency rooms of the city’s overwhelmed public hospitals, only to give up and return home without care. Or they try for days to get connected to a doctor through the city’s swamped 311 nonemergency line but don’t receive the help they need.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/11/opinion/coronavirus-poor-black-latino.html>

Historically, crisis like the pandemic tend to expose the fissures of a society. We are seeing the results of the widening gap between the working class and the rich, of the double standards that have been growing in a society where the leadership is focused on profits and of decades of favoring the 1% at the expense of the 99%. We are watching as elders and women get the brunt of the pressure; as immigrants are left unprotected and burdened and low-paying essential workers like delivery and maintenance risk their lives for minimum wages that do not cover their minimum survival expenses.

“Come Rain or Grime” is my perception of this –still early–time in the Covid-19 pandemic in New York through the eyes of a working woman who is now an elder and who studied hard and worked even harder to raise above poverty.

Ana is a woman who worked three jobs to raise her children as a nurse and who still in her old age faces a mountain of financial obstacles that push back her progress and the potential of her children and their children; the next generations.

Ana is a woman who finally rescinds the American Dream and decides to use her resilience on behalf of the working people.

Like the real-life Susana Lopez, she decides to take action and refuses to allow politicians to steal more from her while she is quarantined. Ana empowers herself to use the internet and its technology to make a difference.

Like many of us, Ana no longer trusts the leaders and decides to assume her creative agency on behalf of social justice and true democracy, even in the midst of this pandemic.

I wrote this story before the brutal murder of George Floyd exposed how out of control racism and bigotry are in the USA.

But that injustice is a thread in the story, a thread that keeps entangling no matter what Ana does until she stops trusting the system and takes action.

That is what happened months later as the **Black Life Matters** movement organized protests all over the country. Believed to be the largest movement in the history of the USA, it organized demonstrations where about 15 million to 26 million people in the United States participated.

So Ana is also a metaphor for our awakening. We are waking from the sleep where we were submerged during the 80s that lead to us become passive and allowing profiteering leaders to sequester our democracy. We are awakening from an even older nightmare of bigotry, racism and sexism.

After all, why do we have a mad megalomaniac for president? Because people preferred a rich and famous male bully who embodied our mirage of success even when it was obvious he lacked the most basic human values. The majority preferred this image of leadership and power instead of a qualified woman leader with experience and a proven track record of serving her country. Sexism is what brought us here.

We must now look to our hearts, to the values we learned from our mothers and grandmothers and to a future where social justice prevails if we are to create a world worth living.

Ana is an everywoman who embodies love, resilience, faith and the values she learned from her grandmother; a knowledge that humans must live in harmony with each other and with Earth Mother if we are to live at all.

I hope you enjoy this story

Maria Mar

The Dream Alchemist

Chapter 1

You are Made of Stars and Earth

Ana came to New York as a child.

She had lived in an island full of flowers and trees, where the sun caressed her every day and she could play in the ample yard and splash the water in the gentle stream with her bare feet while she laughed.

“Pachamama is your mother,” Grandma had taught her. She was a “yerbera” and she knew a lot about plants. “

You need to show your appreciation by honoring nature,” grandma said often. “She is your mother. You need to honor your mother because she loves you above all.”

“But I have a mother, and you are her mother,” little Ana had protested.

“Yes, but Pachamama is the mother of all of us,” Grandma had replied. “The mother of all humans.”

“But where is she? Who is she?” Ana had asked, whirling around, looking at everything and seeing nothing.

“She is embracing you right now,” Grandmother laughed, stopping her spinning.

“You are the one holding me!” Ana challenged, believing that her grandma was joking.

“And who is holding you by your feet?” Grandma asked. “Who is keeping you from floating away up in the sky?”

Ana had never thought about that possibility.

“Pachamama?” she ventured.

“Her magnetic embrace holds you to her bosom and she carries most of your weight in her body,” grandma said. “That’s love like no other.”

Ana kneeled down and took a handful of soil in her hands.

“It’s just dirt,” she said.

“It is soil. It is her body. It is of what you and I are made of.”

“And this?” little Ana asked, playing with the luscious branch of an old tree, using it as a curtain to play peek-a-boo.

“That is what you eat,” Grandma replied. “You eat plants and other things that come from the mother’s womb and then you become what you eat. You are made of it.”

And in this way, grandma taught little Ana about Earth Mother, about the medicine in food and in plants.

She learned that eating was a holy communion, just like when she had communion at church.

She learned that the stones were the bones of the earth and the trees her magical hair.

“Each strand of her hair is an antenna that communicates with her womb below and with the universe above. Trees connect to each other and send their love and energy to the tiny trees. They heal us and if you listen carefully, they will tell you stories and poems. Each tree also connects with many dimensions out of this earth dimension,” her grandmother taught little Ana.

“It’s like magic!” Ana clapped.

“It is magic. It is the magic of life,” grandma responded.

“Never forget this, Ana,” grandma told her. “You are made of stars and earth. You have superpowers.”

“I’m made of stars? Can I shine like one?” little Ana laughed as she opened her arms and spread her tiny legs like a star.

“You already do, bonita,” grandma said. “You already do!”

Chapter 2

“Come Rain or Grime”

So Ana grew up in “El Campo” –in the countryside of Puerto Rico, surrounded by green mountains, a rainbow of birds and a concert of songs and the brightest sky in all the world.

At least this is what she thought, though she had not gone anywhere else.

But one terrible day that same radiant sky seemed to mock her as tears rained down her cheeks.

Dad was gone.

After that things went downhill.

Her ma could not make ends meet and by the end of the year they were taking a plane to a cold land called Nueva York where her aunt lived, where she had to use a coat and where her mother would get a job in something called a factory.

Compared to her tropical island, New York was gloomy. The sun barely smiled upon the dark buildings. But the worse was when she got to *El Barrio*, the ghetto that only some years ago had been the battleground between Italians and Puerto Ricans. Soon Ana would find out that neither won.

El Barrio was so dirty!

Rats scurried everywhere. Some yards between the buildings were a giant dumping ground. Ana imagined what those tiny patches of land would look like as gardens.

“If grandma was here,” little Ana thought, “she would organize the neighborhood to honor these trees and to plant vegetables and flowers.”

She sighed. Her heart longed so much for the bright colors of Puerto Rico. She missed the trees. And above all, she missed her grandma so much that her little heart hurt in a big way.

But being a child she was resilient.

She was also happy to have a mom. Losing one parent was surely all she could bear.

“Come rain or grime,” little Ana told herself, using an idiom she had heard some neighbors saying. “As long as I’m with my mom, I’m fine.”

So she adapted and grew up fast.

She had to, as her mother worked long hours in the factory to provide for her. Ana was mainly on her own.

It would take many years for Ana to realize that he had gotten the idiom wrong, that the refrain was “Come rain or shine.”

She chuckled at her innocence, but the laughter died on her lips as she realized that as a little girl she had switch the word “shine” for what she was familiar with in her urban poverty... with grime.

At that moment Ana decided to keep her idiosyncratic version of the phrase until she made it out of poverty.

Changing that phrase in her life became her goal. One day the grime would be gone and it would shine for her.

As Ana grew up, she noticed the changes all around her.

El Barrio was getting cleaner as the rents went up.

She had never before realized that her neighborhood was dirty –not because the neighbors were poor, lazy or slob— but because the landlords refused to invest in the buildings in order to drive the tenants away so that they could then fix the buildings and rent them to the upper middle class. Even the trash collection came by less days a week. No wonder there were trash piles instead of gardens!

Gentrification opened Ana’s eyes to the hidden class wars in her new country.

She wanted more than ever to make good money so that she could live in a beautiful place and give herself and her future children all the things she lacked as she was growing up.

Seeking to improve her lot, when she graduated from high school Ana went to work in her mom’s factory –not that it belonged to her mom; but that’s how everyone described it.

Ana worked during the day and studied to be a nurse by night. She spent long hours studying to be a nurse, to then get up very early to go to the factory. Sometimes she did not sleep at all. Though she was young and strong, after a while, this took a toll. There were times when Ana thought she would not make it. She was that so tired!

But she did because she had to.

“Come rain or grime,” Ana said to herself. “I’ll be able to help my mother and give myself and my future children a better life.”

So she made it. Ana graduated as a registered nurse. When she got up to receive her diploma, her mom and aunt were there, cheering for her. Embarrassing, true; but so endearing. She felt like a queen. She’d made her family proud and now she could have a better future.

Chapter 3

The School of Hard Knocks

Ana fell in love.

Her mom and aunt went crazy and gave her the most beautiful wedding they could afford, complete with white Kala Lilies, her favorite flower because it reminded her of Frida Kahlo, the Mexican painter who had refused to stop painting because of her grave injuries and had painted her pain as an act of power.

Little did she know that her pain was about to begin.

“I never thought you’d marry a ‘gringo’ mom said jokingly. “Much less one as pale as this one.”

They would all laugh, for she was sure that her “gringo” was a good man.

And he was. At least for a while.

They had three beautiful children. Two boys and a girl.

He worked as a firefighter, and Ana was always nervous. She remembered how unexpectedly her father had died, and she tried to save every penny they could, to make sure that they would be provided.

But Tom swore that his job was safer than it looked, that he had a good insurance and they were well taken care of.

“You worry too much,” he told Ana. At his insistence they left the apartment they had rented when they married, a two-bedroom apartment in the same building as her mom, so that she took care of their children.

And they bought a house in the suburbs, which meant that Ana had to learn to drive, which she hated. But that also meant that she now had more freedom. She left the kids with mom and went to work. Then picked them up after work.

Two days a week Ana went to graduate school so she could become an Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner. She loved to help people heal, and she wanted to have as much knowledge to have the authority to do so.

Everything was going fine.

When Ana became pregnant she took a year break. She wanted to make sure that her babies received as much love as her mom and grandmother had given her.

Then she went back to work. But this work was on and off as she had her three children; so every time she went back, it took a while to get back into the flow of things and to position herself for progress.

After she had the girl, she went on the pill. Three children were enough these days if you really wanted to provide well for them.

And Bennie, the second boy was asthmatic, so there were a lot of medical bills. Plus her mother-in-law required extensive hospitalization for cancer treatment.

So it was not all a bed of roses, but Ana was a fighter, and she kept working hard even as she took care of her children and Tom's mother.

It finally paid off.

Two years later after the birth of Frida, her daughter, Ana became a Nurse Supervisor.

"I made it," Ana thought, a big smile illuminating her face on the mirror.

"It's starting to shine for you, Ana," she whispered.

Ana truly believed that life was finally shining for her....

Until her husband unexpectedly served her divorced papers.

She did not see that one coming and it knocked her off her feet.

Chapter 4

Back to El Barrio

“I do not know this man,” Ana whispered.

How could her husband change so much? She had never done anything to him, why was he so angry, so aggressive?

Perhaps she had never known him truly. How could he do this to her, to his children?

Tom took on an expensive lawyer who helped him keep most of what they had saved and invested.

When her own modest lawyer had asked, Ana had said that she expected a friendly divorce. Tom had always been kind and patient. True, he had been unfaithful and was already going out with another woman; but he had always promised that they would be taken care of.

So she and her lawyer were both shocked when her husband’s ferocious lawyer swept through, leaving her and her children with the bare minimum.

Ana lost the house; which was neither here nor there as she would not have been able to pay the mortgage and she did not want the painful memories.

Unable to pay rent anywhere else, she found herself back in *El Barrio*.

But even here rents had high-rocketed and she was unable to pay for a three-bedroom apartment. She and her kids moved to a two-bedroom apartment. The two boys slept in one room and her daughter in her room. Even then she could not make ends meet.

Luckily it was in a building close to her mom’s and Ana got lots of help from her mother to take care of the children while she worked. Her aunt was not that strong anymore, but she spoiled them too.

Regrettably, Ana was left stuck with the hospital bills... even the ones for her mother in law!

So she struggled with her new financial burdens. It was really tight, just when her heart was broken.

But Ana refused to allow her children to grow in the constant lack she had suffered, so she got a week-end job in a clinic.

Unfortunately, that raised her tax bracket and now she needed a babysitter for the week-end; to give mom a break.

What was left from her new job was still not enough. Ana was reading the writing on the wall. Scholarships had gone the way of everything else. She needed to save for her three children's college funds.

And just when she had started saving a consistent chunk, her mom decided to go back to Puerto Rico. She was tired and old and she did not want to end in one of those awful elder buildings when she had inherited grandma's house. So she went back to the island. In fact, Ana encouraged her because she did not want to trade her mother's last days of happiness for her convenience.

After all, the kids were more grown up, so once Ana left them at school, they could take a bus after classes to go to the special programs they wanted.

Tommy had been accepted in a special program for scientifically inclined students. Bennie wanted painting classes and Frida was already taking dance classes.

And their father? It was as if they were not his children. In fact, his new wife was pregnant and he acted as if he was waiting for his first born. He gave them the minimum that the court assigned and the minimum of his time.

It hurt like hell, but Ana did not want them to feel unloved, so she hid it well.

"Come rain or grime," Ana told herself. "I'll get another job in order to give my children the best."

So Ana took a night job supervising home attendants two nights a week. And now she needed to get another sitter who would pick the children from their programs, cook dinner and look after them for those two nights.

One of those nights Ana sat alone in the kitchen table, eating a late night soup. She was so tired that she could barely raise her spoon.

"What happened?" Ana asked herself.

She was working harder than her mother ever did, with more education than her mother ever had.

Though from the outside it looked like they were middle class, they really were living hand to mouth. What happened if she got sick, or worse; if she died?

How long could she keep going like this?

She could not save much at the end of the month and improving her finances by making investments was a dream that kept receding.

“No wonder there is so much depression going on,” Ana muttered at this realization.

“What a lie the American Dream is... but come rain or grime, my children will be better off than I was.”

Chapter 5

Covid Hits New York

“Come rain or grime ...” Ana says as she swings in her old rocking chair in her apartment in an elder housing.

“I did it, she lets a big sigh escape her lips. “I gave my children a good education, the best I could give them. Not only a formal education, because that’s what teachers are for, and I got the best teachers I could find and worked with them, not just ignore my children’s schooling, like some parents do. I went to as many parent-teachers meeting I could and even talked to some teachers in private.”

“But that’s not enough,” Ana says out loud. “I also taught them values, good manners and kindness. I taught them to care for others, like mom taught me and to honor Earth Mother, just as grandma taught me.”

Another sigh escapes Ana. Why is she sighing so much? It’s not like she is tired.

“Yes. I did my very best with them,” she reassures herself.

Ana keeps rocking as she takes inventory.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Tommy is a doctor, of which Ana is so proud. Her elder followed her footsteps as in the healing field. From the start, he cares for others deeply. Ana wonders if this is a trait of elder children.

“After all, I always told him that when I was not around, he was to care for this siblings. And then during the divorce, I remember when he told me that now he was the man of the house. So cute. So serious,” Ana smiles.

“Well, even if Tom was not such a good father, he did pass on to Tommy the hero’s courage and devotion. So that was also a good influence, regardless,” Ana grudgingly admits.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

“Please God, I pray for my elder, that his strong immune system and great health prevail as he faces this pandemic constantly. That the PPE products find their way to him. Keep his mind clear so that he does his best. Keep his heart clear so that he cares

his best. Keep his family healthy as they face this crisis without him. Keep the place where he is staying clean and sanitized. Keep his faith strong so that his spirit prevails,” Ana prays, then lets out another big sigh as she releases the tightness that threatens to constrict her chest.

As an experienced nurse, she recognizes the symptoms of overwhelming stress and knows the importance of consistently releasing stress in times of emergency.

How many newbies did she see fainting, failing or even fleeing because they could not handle the high stress of dealing with people’s pain and lives?

“Healing is not for the faint of heart,” Ana chuckles with that dry humor she acquired in her relationship with pain and death. “And it is healing what we do, no matter how unscientific the word seems.”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Her mind and heart turn to her second child. Yes, she recognizes the habit of going them in order of birth. But from early on, she swore to include each child as they came into the world and give them all equal attention.

“Unless they need extra attention,” Ana mutters, remembering her mother’s addendum whenever Ana shared her motherhood oath.

So, yes, Bennie. The second son and middle child. And his grandma’s favorite, whether she recognized it or not. Maybe because he was a lighthouse, a bearer of joy and a creator of beauty.

Bennie became an artist. No surprise there.

He found a good paying job as a designer for a company that designs user experiences –whatever that is, Ana recalls, still frowning because she can’t quite grasp what he does.

Or what he used to do, because he was laid out not one week into the quarantine.

Ana remembers their last Zoom meeting.

“Don’t worry ma,” Bennie said laughing. “I knew this time would come, so I’ve saved lots for it, and I’m collecting unemployment.”

“You got through finally?” Ana had asked.

“Ujum, after 4 weeks of calling every day three times a day,” Bennie laughed.

He was always laughing.

“How are you holding up?” Ana had asked, knowing that even though Bennie laughed a lot he was like a sponge, picking up emotions from all around.

“That’s how artists work, I guess,” Ana surmised.

“You know what? I’m better than I’ve been in a long time. I feel like my wings are opening, ma. I’m painting full time, and I don’t think that I’m ever going to go back to a mainstream job.”

“As long as you are happy,” Ana says. That has been her mantra with her children.

Other parents may want their “investment” in their children’s education to be returned in them having a high-paying job. Not Ana.

She worked her ass off to make sure that they had the education, resources and choices to make a better life. That’s true.

“But a better life is not always about money,” Ana says, repeating a lesson she ingrained in her children. “It is about values, about enjoying one’s life, about being a better person and about creating a better world.”

“Do you know, ma, that I transformed our living room into a studio and I’ve been recording art lessons?” Bennie reveals.

“You don’t say! That sounds exciting!” Ana encourages. “Do you have students?”

“Would you believe that I already have 50 students?” Bennie laughs. “I had to find a place to upload my classes and create the courses, but it’s paid off.”

“So you are painting and teaching?” Ana wants to understand.

“That’s the fun part, ma!” Bennie shares. “I do a painting and as I create it, I talk about what I’m doing, the media I’m using and all that stuff. I videotape it, and that’s the lesson. I’m killing two birds with one stone!”

“Don’t say that god-awful refrain!” Ana exclaims. “You know I hate it. Why would anyone want to kill a bird, much less two!”

“Well, ma, you do eat chicken,” Bennie laughs.

“Very funny,” Ana scowls, but then she joins Bennie. His joy is irresistible.

“I’m so happy with you,” Ana says, smiling. “If I have learned anything in the School of Hard Knocks is that genuine happiness is numero uno.”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Yes, Bennie is doing alright. And his boyfriend adores him. What is there not to love? Bennie is a lighthouse, a blessing born through her to light up the world.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

And Frida...

Ana's heart breaks anew.

"How many times can a heart break and still beat?" She wonders.

Her little girl, her sweet miniature grandma... Oh God, how often has Ana wondered if grandma decided to incarnate into this daughter? A *yerbera*, just like her grandma. A healer, a *bruja* and earth lover.

But her little girl —now a woman—is going through what Ana once suffered: a divorce and the ensuing grief and financial struggle.

"Why is it that women suffer the brunt of divorce, both emotionally and financially?" Ana wonders as she rocks in her rocker and looks out the window.

Frida calls her every day and her conversation is mostly about earth.

"Ma, the air is clearing in the most polluted places."

"Ma, dolphins are back playing on the shores."

"Ma, whales are singing the meridians of the ocean into alignment again."

"Ma, the ancient turtles returned to lay new eggs."

"And how are YOU doing? Frida?"

"Like a whale caught in a net, struggling to break free and reach for clean air."

"Hang in there, love. It will get better."

"Will it? I thought he loved me."

"That was a love pod seed, bonita," Ana shares. "They emerge into our heart with a passion so strong that we believe it's everlasting love. But it's just a love pod seed. It's up to us to plant it in the right soil, to water it with our loving care, to give it the light of joy, the attention and the pruning it needs. Only then does it become a tree."

"I guess that love trees are rare," Frida says bitterly. "Your love for dad did not grow into a tree either, and now I'm seeing there is so much one can give before one starts to wither."

"I'm sorry you are suffering," Ana whispers, her hand going to her heart, feeling her daughter's pain. "But it takes the devotion of two people to grow a love tree."

"But why me?" Frida asks. "Tommy has a really demanding job. They are going through hell, and they are still loving and committed to each other. Bennie and Ray are so supportive of each other. What's wrong with me?"

“There is nothing wrong with you,” Ana declares, wanting no doubt in her daughter’s heart.

“So why couldn’t I make it?” Frida asks, her voice carrying such heart-breaking query that Ana finds no answer to comfort her.

“Oh grandma,” Ana prays, “Bring into my heart the words she needs to heal and grow.”

“Ma?”

“Sometimes there are mysteries in the design of our life that cannot be revealed until later on,” Ana speaks, her words surprising her. “You can’t see them now. I can’t see them now. But years from now you may find a person that is your soulmate and realize that you had to go through this experience in order to have certain experiences and skills that will allow you to create happiness with this person.”

“I didn’t know you believed in soulmates!”

“We are soulmates, you and I. There are all kind of soulmates. My grandma and I were soulmates. All it means is that we are meant to navigate this life together as a team.”

“Well, right now I’m happy to have two roommates. They are good girlfriends.”

“I’m so glad that you are not alone through this.”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

“And now this virus,” Ana mutters, grinding her teeth.

Poor Tommy is staying in a hotel. He does not dare to go home to his family. They talk via Zoom every day, but they are suffering.

Ana remembers the days after her divorce, when the kids asked for their father every day. But this... this is so much worse.

“My brilliant baby could die. He could be infected right now,” Ana mutters. “And those profiteering politicians... they don’t care. How could it be that a country as rich as the United States cannot get enough PPE products?”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

“Bennie is quarantined with his boyfriend and I’m praying that he doesn’t get it. He has not suffered asthma since he grew up, but I don’t know how strong his lungs are.”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

“I’m glad that Frida has two roommates and they take good care of each other,” Ana continues her inventory. “But any time one goes out to buy food, they are all endangered, including their children.”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

“I miss them so much. They cannot visit me or each other. I’m glad that I have a computer and know how to use it to meet them online. But we are still struggling financially.”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

How is it possible that after all I have worked, we are not yet part of the promise of success and financial stability?”

Sure, the mayor has put a stop to evictions, but look at what he did. He put a moratorium on mortgages. That covers the high middle class who have their own houses. But he left the majority of New Yorkers —people like me and my children—who pay rent to landlords, out on a limb. In a few months, how do we come up with all those months of due rent when our income has been severely cut off? Once again, we are at the short end of things.”

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

“It never ends,” Ana mumbles as she shakes her head. “Come rain or grime, no matter how hard we work, how much we give to this country, when it is our hour of need, the men in power disregard us. It’s that greedy 1% they talk about. They are always hoarding the country’s resources.”

Ana remembers the accusations that people were hoarding toilet paper and stealing medical supplies. Some of it was true, but...

“JA!” she barks. “All those messages about ‘You should not hoard.’ What they were really saying was “YOU cannot hoard the resources before WE do.”

First they said that we did not need masks. My children exposed themselves to the killer virus, trusting our leaders. And all the while they were lying because they did not want us to have the small amount of masks available.”

Now they are announcing that we **do** need masks. They are so cynical they actually admit that we needed the masks all the time, but they lied because there were not enough masks.

What the heck are they really saying? That my children were tricked and exposed to the virus so that they could look good and had time to hoard the few masks available for themselves?"

That is the only explanation that makes sense, because all the time that devil in the white house was denying the masks and resources to the hospitals. So where were these resources going? Into the hands of the greedy 1%, that's where!

So now that they guaranteed their survival; now what? My children already exposed themselves all this time. There's no turning back the clock. Criminal liars, that's what they are!

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Rack-rack-rackatak.

Ana keeps rocking firmly and steadily. Firmly and steadily, come rain or grime, as she has worked, as she has lived. Quarantined in her tiny apartment, she goes through the beads of her rosary, praying for her children and their children. And as the beads shift through her fingers, a part of her mind goes wondering...

"When this country will truly shine a light on its people?

Chapter 6

People Vs Profits

“When this country will truly shine a light on its people?

Everywhere she sees it; the fissures of a system that was wobbling for decades. Perhaps since the time she came to New York. May be even before.

Like a river of memories, flashes of her life and the social changes she has witnessed flow through her mind.

- Breaking up extended families
- Gentrification.
- Sending elders to “special places” nursing homes, elder residents, out of sight, out of mind.
- Cutting off scholarships.
- Steep student loans.
- Deindustrialization and outsourcing to third world countries
- Dismantling of local communities
- Massive layoffs to boost investments
- Shaming women’s body to make money from fatphobia
- Dismantling of cultural meeting grounds
- Skyrocketing of rents that rose all other costs
- Isolation, depression,
- Consumerism, obsessive-compulsive reactions, multi-tasking
- Focusing on mind control vs. truly loving and healing one’s body
- The war on immigrants while at the same time depending on immigrants for the lowest paying jobs while denigrating and persecuting them
- Caging their children
- Building that dam wall and taking money from all the need of the people for that absurdity.

“Like pieces of a puzzle,” Ana mutters. “Like those drawing where you need to connect the dots to see the whole picture.”

A memory streams catches her attention.

It had been a bad year and she was tired and angry, so she made up her mind to cast her vote in order to change the inefficiency of the system. To do away with politicians who dragged their feet and supported the status quo.

“Ja! Ana lets out another bark. “I was convinced that the professional politicians were not efficient and that we needed business people to run the government efficiently. What a joke!”

“I was fooled by con artists,” Ana whispers. “These is the work of that greedy 1%, those who own the global corporations and do not care a dam about the workers or consumers. They must have paid a pretty penny to launch all these corporate moguls into office. Now they are presidents, mayors and governors. And they are the ones who delayed taking prompt action to avoid contagion.”

“How did I not see that corporate moguls worked for profits, not for people? I was taken for a ride, and now I’m paying the price. My children and their children are paying the price. These profiteering politicians are so freaking worried about ‘the economy’ that they delayed the quarantine, killing thousands of people and they still want us to go out there to work and die. But it’s not really the national economy they care about. What they care about is their profit. When will we have leaders that truly care for “we, the people’ instead of just for ‘me and my profit?’”

Ana hears her question bouncing against the walls of her lonely apartment.

As her voice reverberates in space, it dawns on her that she has to stop waiting for the leaders to change the grime into shine. That they will never do it because all they have to do is convince the workers to vote for them.

“And we keep doing it,” Ana says, stamping her flat hand against the arm of the rocking chair. “No wonder they don’t respect us. They know that they just have to throw money at a campaign, and we believe their lies.”

“So what needs to happen for this to change?” Ana asks herself. “When will the grime end and the shine begin?”

And as she asks, she hears the answer. It is **her** light that needs to shine. She needs to stand up, to speak up, to write, call, vote, do whatever is necessary for the government to get it; to get that working people matter. That they are in fact the backbone of this nation.

“I have never taken it easy,” Ana said to herself. “I have never lay down to be used as a doormat. Even in the toughest times, I’ve found a way to move forward. I worked hard to pay for my education. I worked hard to educate my children. I’ve fought for everything I have. This is no different. This is just a bigger pot to fry.”

“My mistake is that I’ve always fought alone. And while I was fighting for my family, I trusted these big honchos to fight for my nation. But why would they support the working class when they can have the working class subsidize their lush lifestyle?”

“This is not something that I can do alone,” Ana recognizes. “I need to join others. But who?”

She wasn’t an activist. she had never liked to scream and waved posters and protesting for her had seem futile. So who would support her?

“Oh, come on, you have a social media account, you ninny,” Ana tells herself. And there’s always a Google search that can help you.”

As she cheers herself up, Ana begins to pick up steam.

“I’m sure there are others who’ve seen what I am seeing, who are finally understanding that it’s up to us to choose politicians who serve us, who work FOR us, not for the rich, but for the working people.”

A string of excuses rises so powerfully within her that her rocking stopped.

“But I’m too old, but I don’t have enough money, but I’m quarantined, but I don’t know anyone.”

And then a tiny voice rose above the brouhaha of voices inside her.

“Come rain or grime,” the tiny voice said.

Just as once she had embraced this country because her mom was here, Ana now embraced this new task because her friends, her children and grandchildren, her memories and her heart belonged to this land. She would prevail.

“As long as there is an ounce of life in me, I will prevail,” Ana declares.

Chapter 7

The Covid Chrysalis

Ana leaps from the rocking chair with the impetus of a young woman. She opens the window of her apartment and sends her oath loud and clear into the universe.

She feels as if she was standing on the shoulders of her Ancestors. She feels grandma's hands on her shoulder, supporting her strength.

Ana lets her voice fly and words she has never knew she felt flow from her lips into the chilly April air.

"I will prevail until these rainy days, the tears we have shared and the faith and resilience I inherited from my Ancestors run like a river that washes away the grime of poverty and inequality, the invisible grime that sticks to our self-esteem when we are constantly told in so many ways that we do not deserve success, progress or recognition. When we are pushed to believe that we were born poor and that means that we cannot improve our condition, that we have to die poor. When we are the first ones in the front line of war, to shed our blood; but the last ones in the front line of benefits, always forgotten. I will prevail until we are recognized, honored and remunerated for the essential services, the rich culture and the love we bring to this land. Until we can all live in harmony with ourselves, with each other and with our beautiful earth."

And in the eco of her oath, a string of images flows into her heart.

Dolphins return to the shores.

Whales sing their ancient songs as they rearrange the meridians of the ocean.

Birds songs –like trilling garlands—adorn the branches of the trees that have started blooming once again.

The grime of pollution slowly lifts from the sky.

Animals in hiding come down from the mountains.

"Pachamama is healing," Ana realizes, her heart opening wide with joy.

“Earth Mother has grounded us in our room to remember our essence, to remember what is truly valuable, to slow down and become human beings again; to remember that we are made of stars and earth, that we are creatures of her womb.”

“I remember my shame when the young ones went to the white house and protested, and our leader’s response was an insult to their young brilliant minds and their human rights.”

“We did not hear the cries of the young ones when they asked us to stop destroying the world they would inherit. We did not hear the warnings from our scientists and earth keepers.”

“Not enough of us listened. Not enough of us responded. Like spoiled children, we only respond to pain and punishment and ignore our mother’s love.”

“And now Pachamama is taking matters into her own hands.”

“The world is changing... the earth is healing. We are healing. I want to be part of this change,” Ana declares as tears of joy wash away years of pain and struggle from her wrinkled face.

Just then a butterfly flies in front of her face. Her gentle wings whispering in the breeze.

“This is the Covid Chrysalis.

The old ways are dying and humans have the opportunity to die to this old world of struggle, strife and separation.

In the silence and stillness of this chrysalis, the prickly, hungry human caterpillar who devours everything in its path and dreams of flying in its bright bold colors, while it crawls trapped in the belief that it has no wings... this being can die.

Humans have been spinning compulsively in a whirlwind of compulsive buying, hoarding, having, doing –like leaves tossed about by the wind... all that is the hungry caterpillar trying to crawl its way into the sky, to eat its way into flight. All that is ready to die.

In its stead, butterfly can emerge. You can become your gifts and talents and harness them into service to humanity. You can become your potential. Embody your essence. Be your brightest. You can do what is meaningful and important to you as your contribution to life.

But you must allow the crawling, hungry caterpillar to die, all its cells turned to mush. That is the way of the chrysalis. It is the path of transformation, of death and rebirth.

You have resisted change, entrenched in your comfort zone.

Thus you have shackled yourself to the very limited, borrowed identity that you want to escape. You have resisted your growth and expansion out of fear, comfort, habit and attachment.

So now Earth Mother gifted you this chrysalis to facilitate your death and rebirth. Let your borrowed identities die. They are but rags you inherited to cover your true radiance. Let your habits go and discover the new spaces inside you wanting to be free and to expand into a new humanity.

You can reclaim community from the skeleton of isolation and find unity in all humanity, not just those in your locality. As you connect to others who are far away, you expand your sense of belonging to all humankind. As you share with others in the virtual field, you expand your sensibility to the chi field, the pure conscious energy all around you –where you can connect to others across space and even across time.

You are being wrapped in a chrysalis of stillness, introspection, love and self-care so that you can listen to the heart that guides your rebirth, to the soul that unfolds your potential and to the body that reveals your truth.

You are being remembered in your true nature.”

“Oh, yes,” Ana laughs. “I know what it is. Stars and earth.”

Chapter 8

The Light Goes On

Rrrrrriiiiiing

Darkness.

Am I dead?

Are my eyes open? Why can't I see anything?

Rrrrrriiiiiing

Darkness wraps around her in all directions, like a warm night without stars.

She feels her eyelids trembling.

So her eyes are closed.

She makes an effort to open them.

Rrrrrriiiiiing

Darkness. Even with her eyes open, there is darkness.

She feels her body.

It is curled up into fetal position.

She hears the rustling of sheets.

So she is on her bed.

How did she get here?

Rrrrrriiiiiing

She turns her body so she's lying on her back. She slowly stretches her limbs.

It's night time.

Did she fall asleep?

How did she get here?

The last thing she remembers is hollering out the window.

And the butterfly.

Rrrrrriiiiiing

Ana sits up, more alert now.

She props her pillows to hold her as she sits and reaches for the night lamp. Everything is on its place. Even in the darkness her body knows the placement of each object and the distance between them.

Her fingers seek the base of the lamp and move upwards along the small pillar, fiddling around until they find the switch. She clicks. The light goes on.

Rrrrrriiiiiing

That's a very persistent person.

"I hope it's not bad news," Ana mutters as she reaches for her land phone.

"Yes?" Her heart is thudding.

"Hi, Ana, were you screaming out of the freaking window a couple of hours ago?"

"Yes I was, Debbie, and why do you call hours later, are you suffering from delayed reactions in your old age?" Ana snaps. She loves to spar with her witty and eccentric friend.

“No, I was in the shower, so I did not hear your howls but I got three complain calls saying you had lost your marbles,” Debbie rejoins.

“No, I was simply swearing an oath to get on the case of the profiteering politicians messing with our lives,” Ana riposte.

“REALLY!!!?” Debbie almost screams in her ear. “Then you are the person I’ve been looking for.”

“Why does that sound somehow hazardous?” Ana jokes.

“It may very well be,” Debbie comes back. “But life is an adventure, and there is no adventure without risk.”

“Spit it out,” Ana replies. “I’m looking for a good fight and have no time to waste.”

“You FOUND IT!” Debbie almost screams again. Ana moves the handset away.

“What is this about?”

“Well, the tenant association has met and decided that we are going to inform our scum of a landlord that we are on a rent strike until further notice. If Cuomo does not stand for us, we’ll stand for ourselves.”

“I’m in,” Ana says.

“That was fast.”

“What is there to think about?” Ana comments. “He gets a break in the mortgages of his many buildings and we also get a break in our rent. It’s a win-win situation.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“But how are we to announce a rent strike when we can’t strike?” Ana says.

“Who says we can’t?”

“I’m not going to break the quarantine to scream as I stand close to a whole bunch of people all screaming with their mouth opened and spitting God knows what out,” Ana warns.

“We are moving the protest,” Debbie announces.

“Moving it?”

“Yes, to the virtual landscape. Have you heard about something called Zoom?”

“Oh! I love this!” Ana says. “You know that you can put a background in your Zoom meeting, right? So we can hang a banner out the window announcing the rent strike and then take a photo, then we can use that photo as our background.”

“That’s why I need you, Ana. You are a genius. You could organize a bloody war while you paint your toes!”

“I would not!” Ana feigns indignation. “You know I am a pacifist.”

“Oh, skip it! So you are in? I can count on you for the organization and the Zoom meeting?”

“I’m game,” Ana says.

“See ya.”

“See ya.”

Ana hangs up the phone and sits there, still as a tree in a windless night.

Thump. Thump. Thump-thump.

Thump. Thump. Thump-thump.

Her heart is beating with a new excitement she has not felt since... forever.

She feels a new jet of energy moving up her spine.

It’s only as her being comes alive from the inside with an unexpected vibrancy that Ana realizes that she has been folding herself up.

She has secretly been folding her energy back into some kind of pocket, as if life had been placed on hold.

Ever since she secluded herself in the apartment, wondering when she would come out and knowing she could not go out until it was safe, she thought of this seclusion as a suspension. As if she had been placed in some kind of limbo.

She felt disconnected from the world, as if she had been placed in detention.

And that had made her feel helpless.

That had made her feel that she was on her own, facing this storm alone.

As if out of sight was out of life.

Slowly, as if her face was warm wet clay molded by the hands of an invisible sculptor, a smile forms in her face.

“The light is on, Ana,” she whispers.

A new prayer she has never uttered before comes to her lips.
Ana feels the strength of her Ancestors rising in her bones.

*The rainy days have lingered.
The skies have grown dark.
Our tears have grown into a river.
And the river overflows the banks.
There is nowhere to hide,
nor do I want to stay dry
when the river is calling me to rise.*

*All that I know, all that I am,
all that I've learned
is rising; rising to the surface
of my mind and my heart.
Rising like the river.
Rising and flooding my fear,
flooding the banks of my bounds,
setting me free.*

*I am a vessel flowing in this river.
My faith is my flag.
My resilience is my rudder.
My need is my oars.
I move with the river,
rushing to my freedom
without need to row,
rushing to my destiny*

propelled by the torrent.

I am not alone.

I am connected.

Connected by love, by care, by values.

Connected by needs, by life, by fairness.

Connected in one intention,

like the countless drops

forming one stream

countless drops flowing in one direction.

Connected we gush forward

in this raging river.

No longer solitary tributaries.

Our tears have grown into a river.

And the river overflows the banks.

The river washes away the grime

of poverty and inequality.

Washes away the grime

of hoarded profits

that destroy families and planet.

Washes away

helplessness and isolation.

Connected we flow,

a raging river that opens a space

where we shine in our brilliance,

like the water drops shine

when the sun strokes them.
We shine each with our gifts,
We shine each with our truth,
with our voice and our presence;
young and old together
clearing the space for human harmony
for true democracy
for social justice.
For the potential we all deserve to express,
regardless of our income bracket.
For the serenity we all desire,
regardless of purchasing power.
For the peace we all need,
regardless of our race, color or creed.

This is the time.
This is our time.
Come rain or shine!

~The End~

This story is part of the
Poetry Journey and journal writing kit
“River of Tranquility as we Face Covid-19”

To check out the Poetry Journey, go here: