A Cancer Survivor's "Isolation Journals" Become a Balm for Pandemic Loneliness

Author Suleika Jaouad's new project helps people channel isolation into creativity and connection.

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Cancer survivor Suleika Jaouad, author of the upcoming Between Two Kingdoms: A Memoir of a Life Interrupted, knows something about the extreme social isolation that medical treatment can bring on.

Now she has introduced her coping mechanisms to the pandemic world in the form of a project titled "The Isolation Journals." Inspired by Jaouad's experience blogging for the New York Times' Well section about her cancer diagnosis and treatment in the early 2010s, the project is meant to help people overcome pandemic isolation by fostering creativity and connections.

In 2011, Jaouad—then a 22-year-old aspiring foreign correspondent with what seemed like the entire world at her feet—was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, a form of cancer rarely seen in young adults. She underwent several rounds of chemotherapy, enrolled in a clinical trial and received a bone marrow transplant before finally being declared cancer-free in 2014.

But Jaouad's survival came at a high cost. She spent a "large part of her twenties," she wrote on her website, "confined to a bed" and unable to "travel, eat out, see friends, take a walk."

One of the few rays of sunshine in her life at the time was a pact she made with her friends and family members: to do "a small creative act, every day, for a hundred days." Jaouad credits "The Hundred Days Project," as the initiative became known, with keeping her "grounded, hopeful and connected to those around me." "For me," she wrote, "periods of turmoil have also been invitations to deepen my creative practice and experiment with what's possible."

When the pandemic struck in mid-March, bringing with it the then-novel concepts of "self-quarantining" and "social distancing," Jaouad decided to resurrect the project under a new name. Thus, "The Isolation Journals" was born.

Billed as a "collective of resilient humans" over 100,000 people strong, the project supplies a

writing prompt—often penned by a celebrity or media personality—over email on Sundays, with the goal of providing a creative safe space in which participants can share their thoughts and feelings.

Some sample prompts:

- #101, “Beauty Hunting”: “Think about the last time you looked at something and noticed a change within—studying a painting, an animal, a flower, a piece of fruit, what you saw through a window. Write about what you saw, and what you felt shift”
- #99, “Things I Learned From My Father”: “How do you get past pain? How do you let go of the illusion of control? How do you find meaning?”
- #94, “Breaking Old Patterns”: “What did you trade as a child for attachment, safety, or love? Who did you think you needed to be in order to get those things? And how do you see that pattern show up today?”

Isolation journalers can share their work online in one of three ways: by posting in the community Facebook group, by using the hashtag #TheIsolationJournals or by sending an email to theisolationjournals@gmail.com.

The prompts, Jaouad emphasizes, are not meant to spawn literary masterpieces but rather to encourage people to pause and “take a few moments to exhale and reflect…during these extremely challenging times.” Given the fast pace of modern life, “taking a few moments to exhale and reflect” is likely not something participants have engaged in recently, but, as Jaouad points out, “we are in an unprecedented moment”—and unprecedented moments call for unprecedented measures.

To learn more about acute myeloid leukemia, click here.

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