



JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAINS

Be What Someone Needs, Today

In an incomprehensibly vast universe, we are but tiny little stars longing to be connected to the larger human constellation. This is me reaching out for you. I do that for you, but also for me, too.

It's early May, and the nights are finally less frigid here in Northern California. I make the bed and stare at the extra blanket laying crumpled against the wooden frame at the bottom of the bed. I swear that blanket was ecru six months ago, but now it's more of a light tan. Curiosity tells me to sniff it, but reason tells me, *Don't*.

How the hell is it May already?

The last time I pressed my foot to the clutch of my Jeep Wrangler was March 10, the day I went to a coffee shop on Castro Street in Mountain View to meet up with a new colleague. It'll be another week before my governor declares that we have to shelter in place, yet I'm prone to pneumonia so I've already started wiping down seatbelts and tray tables, and avoiding doorknobs, light switches, and basic human touch. At the café, though, my colleague opens up about some tough stuff, and when we're saying goodbye she comes in for a hug. I'm here to help, hold, support, and see humans, so I can't make myself pull back from her. (It's also a fact that I have a hard time saying no). We embrace. I feel her cheeks and arms press into mine. As we detach ourselves from each other, my mind reels. On the drive home, *she* becomes my news story, *she* becomes the virus pressing itself into me. As I pull into my driveway, shift into park, and turn the engine off, my lungs tell my brain, *Don't do that again*. I obey.

I stay not just inside, but a good distance from my loved ones too, methodically disinfecting anything we all touch, keeping track with checklists taped all over the house. Two weeks after this last point of human touch, I know that I'm okay, we're okay, and I touch my family members once again. Now it's been eight weeks since that café visit, and on this property it's just me, four other humans, and the occasional delivery person.

Our energies intersect like sine waves. Most of the time we do a respectful dance with one another. Occasionally we manage a most exquisite harmony. But sometimes our energies bounce hard against each other, and the walls of the house feel like a cage. *What day is it?* is

sometimes a real question, whereas *How is everyone feeling?* is more easily intuited. And the answers to that question are what determine whether I'll go to the effort of lighting the candles in my kitchen and listening to Roberta Flack while making an elaborate dinner. Or whether telling everyone it's "catch as catch can" is the best way to get us all to the end of this day.

Nothing is like it used to be.

My grown children need me and don't need me in ways I'm still figuring out. I spend quality time with my mother almost every day, which has, I think, never ever happened before. My beloved Dan, who has been a part-time stay at home parent for 20 years, is about to take a full-time job for all kinds of good reasons, but his absence, or just his mind and hands being elsewhere will likely upset our little appletart. In the midst of this, work is my retreat. My claim on the past. My way to force my neural pathways to do something familiar, even if everything I call work is now crammed into this small laptop here in my 96-square-foot outdoor office, ten steps from my kitchen door, lined with books, filled with stacks of papers that are all "to-do" but could easily become compost if I let them sit a year. And this is where I most feel okay. Probably because I am alone with myself. Because I am predictable. Which I find comforting.

The other morning when we were still in bed, Dan rolled toward me. I'd already been up for awhile, arms outstretched to the bedside table so I could attend to the various bits of work that come through the phone, when he pressed his face into my back and said, "What can I do to make today better for you?" This is what makes me want to go back in a time capsule and tell my twenty-year-old self, *Yup, him, for sure.*

This is what I'm offering you today. The fact that asking a person one simple question: "what can I do to make today better for you?" tells them *I see you, you are not alone, you matter, I'm here for you.* These are messages we crave to hear from the universe, God, and each other, especially now. It's why I write to you. It's why I like it when you respond.

So, in this spirit of being what someone needs today, I suggest:

- Be like Dan, and ask the person you love the most, "What can I do to make today better for you?" Do your best to do what they ask, within reason. If after a few days they have not reciprocated, it's okay to nudge them ("Heyyy... remember when I asked you... I'd love to be asked that, too").
- Second, here is a [really incredible compilation](#) from the folks at [Option B](#) of the ways the pandemic is hitting different groups of people, with the aim that it might empower you to be what someone else needs today. From family and friends, to parents of school-age children, to children themselves, to those facing domestic violence, to those who are financially insecure, to those who are on the front lines because of their work, to those who have lost loved ones, there are things we can—dare I say *must*—do to help buoy others through these challenging times.
- The third is [a webinar](#) I'm doing tomorrow (Thursday 5/7) for parents who need some

buoying in the form of real-talk confessions and stories instead of “expertise.” If you’re a parent and are struggling with how to be your best self while also being what your kids need in this weird time, join me and the folks at [Shift Your Thinking](#) where you’ll hear me confess to some of my less-than-finer parenting moments, and also hear one or two of my parenting “wins” amid pandemic. It’s free. If this sounds like something you want to be a part of, please register to join us [here](#).

I’m wishing you the peace that comes from knowing that you made someone’s life a bit better today. So get on out there. And let me know how it goes.

xo,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JULIE". The letter "J" is large and stylized, with a long horizontal stroke that extends to the left and then curves back to the right, underlining the word.

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