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Writing her way through the pandemic

Kate Walter, 72, was living her dream in New York City in March 2020. Just retired from teaching, she was single, gay, and part of a lively, creative, supportive community in the famous Westbeth Artists Housing in New York's Greenwich Village. Westbeth is a NORC (Naturally Occurring Retirement Community) with many over-65 residents who have been there since the 1970s.

Kate, an extrovert by nature, had it all—an exciting, active life, plus many friends and plenty of alone time to write. Except for not having a romantic partner, she felt her life was good.

And then the pandemic struck, with New York as an epicenter.

As the city went into lockdown, Kate's life went into meltdown. A sense of fear pervaded Westbeth. It turned into a ghost town as those who could escaped the city, and everyone else remained behind locked doors.

Except for a few words in the hall with neighbors and walks for exercise, Kate was alone for months.

Kate dealt with this in her characteristic way—she wrote about it. Her essays, which appeared in the Village Sun, a local publication, evolved into a fascinating book. [Behind the Mask: Living Alone in the Epicenter](#) reflects her resilience during a time many of us would rather forget.

I spoke to her about her experience:

How was your Westbeth community unique when it came to facing disasters?

Westbeth is like living in a little village. Everyone knows each other. Prior to the pandemic, we had gone through tragedy together. From our rooftop, we witnessed 9/11 and saw the towers burning and falling. We also lived through Superstorm Sandy when the Hudson River rushed up our block and flooded the basement and knocked out electricity for weeks. But those two disasters brought us together. By its very nature, the pandemic forced us apart.

Were you frightened? How did your fear manifest itself?

I was pretty scared at the beginning when we did not know exactly how COVID spread. Like many people I wiped down my groceries, which seems silly now. I was afraid to go out at night since the streets were deserted. Then I got really scared when my internet went out. It was my lifeline, so I started to panic. But fortunately, I solved the problem quickly.

I think my fear also manifested in a series of nightmares. I know many people had crazy pandemic dreams. I include a few in my book.

At what times did the lockdown hit you the most?

The holidays were the most difficult. Instead of sitting around a table with a crowd of relatives in New Jersey for a sumptuous meal at Christmas and Easter, I was home alone, making food for my solo celebration.

I missed attending church on Christmas and Easter. Watching services at home is not the same. I missed singing carols in the lobby of Westbeth with my singing group, and I especially missed attending the GayPride Parade in June 2020.

What helped the most to get you through the lockdown?

It helped to create daily routines, to have a weekly schedule. I had various classes on Zoom—yoga, qi gong, and writing workshops. I knew the teachers and most of the participants. I watched church services on Sunday. I went to the greenmarket on Saturday. I meditated every morning. I planted my sidewalk garden in the spring, as I did every year.

I read books and taught myself how to play the harmonica. I thought of my mother who was a very resilient person and tried to draw strength from her. Also, talking to my therapist (on the phone) helped. She was very good at interpreting my scary pandemic dreams. And most helpful, I wrote about what I was going through.

Can you share some of the writing prompts you created and how you think they can help others?

I think we all were traumatized in various ways and writing can help whether you're a professional writer or not. Here is one prompt: Did you have a point during the pandemic where you lost it or "hit a wall"? Here are two more: Who or what do you appreciate more now? What lessons did you learn from the pandemic? You'll have to get my book to find out the other prompts.