



Single, Black and Alone: Thoughts about Sheltering in a Place that Does Not Feel Like Home

By Stella L. Smith, Ph.D.

I HAVE TO GO HOME. This COVID-19 pandemic is getting bad. The number of people that are sick is increasing. People are dying. The government says I have to shelter in place. My job says I have to go home. But where I live is not my home. I am here for a job. The job that I worked so hard for. The job that I sacrificed so much for. The job that took me away from home and family. The job that was supposed to bring me security. The job that was supposed to bring me peace and prosperity. The job that would support my family. The job that pays for home, back home. The job that I give so much of my time and energy. Going to this job is now putting me at risk, so I have to shelter in place.

I have a shelter, but it is not home. Home is in the country. Home is where my family is. Home is where my significant other is. Home is on our ancestral land. Home is where I am loved. Home is where I am safe. I am not sure if I have ever had a home here, but now they are telling me to go there and stay. So to my shelter I go. To bare walls devoid of memories. To quiet spaces without laughter or love. To solitary meals and sterile air. To days and nights filled with screen time but no sunlight. I am here with my thoughts.

I AM SHELTERING. I have survived the grocery store. I have stood six feet away from anyone and practiced social distancing. I have stocked up on essentials. I have carved out space so my professional can coexist with my personal. My clock is set and my schedule is decided. My computer is ready and my tasks are clear. My goals are mapped out and my duties explained.

I keep in contact with my job and my coworkers. We try to talk like we are in the office, but we are not in the office. Technology allows us to communicate and keep business running, but it is not business as usual. Timelines are adjusted. New processes are created. Some tasks are more efficient and some are not, but productivity is expected to be the same. No actually, productivity is expected to increase. The work day is now twenty-four hours.

I AM SURVIVING. But mentally, I am at a breaking point. My imagination is running rampant. I cannot watch TV or I will lose it. My social media feed is full of gloom. Two months in and phone calls are not enough. All of the technology in the world cannot fill the void I have. I am not the only one. People are uncovering long buried feelings of animosity to each other. Fear is growing. There is unrest. I am missing things that I never noticed months before. The joy of a visit from a friend. A conversation at the water cooler. A long walk outside on a bright sunny day. A concert in the park. Window shopping in the mall. An afternoon at the coffee shop and the book store reading. A weekend getaway to a far off destination. The voice of a stranger saying hello. People don't talk to you anymore. They will not even look at you. The pandemic has made some of us invisible. It has made others hyper-visible. The weight of uncertainty is

heavy and overwhelming. It is a feeling that you just cannot shake no matter what you do. I just want to curl into a ball and sleep. I miss being touched. I miss random encounters. I miss living in vibrant color.

I LONG FOR HOME. Where home is seeing my Mom smile and hearing my Dad laugh. Where home is the normalcy of going to the grocery store and not being concerned about staying six feet from someone. Where home is my hands not being dehydrated from constantly washing and using hand sanitizer. Where home is the opportunity to talk to someone without having to wear a mask. Where home is calling a friend and going out to dinner and a movie. Where home is staying in place and not feeling like I am sheltering for my life. Where home is being able to travel and see family whenever I choose. Where home is not being worried about whether I will have a job when I am finally able to leave this shelter. Where home is receiving a hug from a long lost friend. Where home is the intimate conversation with a glass of wine. Where home is the opportunity to share space with people of the same faith. Where home is doing everyday things without running the risk of killing someone by my very presence.

Home is not only a place, it's a feeling of comfort and security.

I hope that I will be able to go home and feel at home again.



