

Image page 1: "Hanging by a Thread," 2022, digital photo composite.

Image page 2, top: "Shattering of the Vessels 2," 2022, digital photograph.

Image page 3, lower: "Turtles All the Way Down," 2022, digital photograph.

Image page 3, top: "A Feather on the Breath of All," 2022, digital photo composite.

Image page 3, bottom: "Hovering," 2022, digital photo composite.

Nikole Hannah Jones, *The New York Times Magazine*, et al. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. One World, 2021.

Martin Luther King Jr, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Harper & Row, 1967; reprinted Beacon, 2010.

Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. Viking, 2009.

Paula Modersohn-Becker, "Letter to Milly Rohland-Becker, August 12, 1906," in *Paula Modersohn-Becker, The Letters and Journals*, Northwestern UP, 1998, p. 407.

Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*. Random House, 1997.

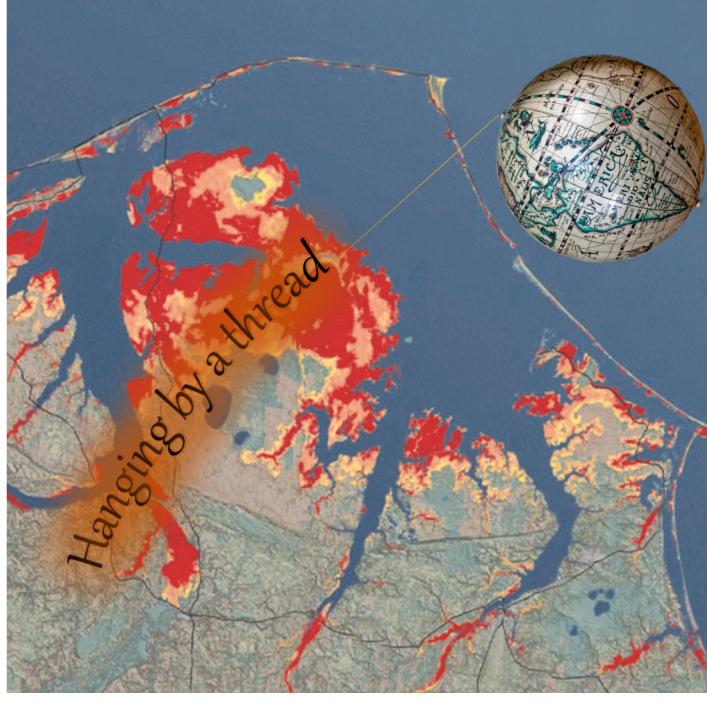
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## LET'S NOT GET BACK TO NORMAL

### Lynne Scott Constantine

*Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?*

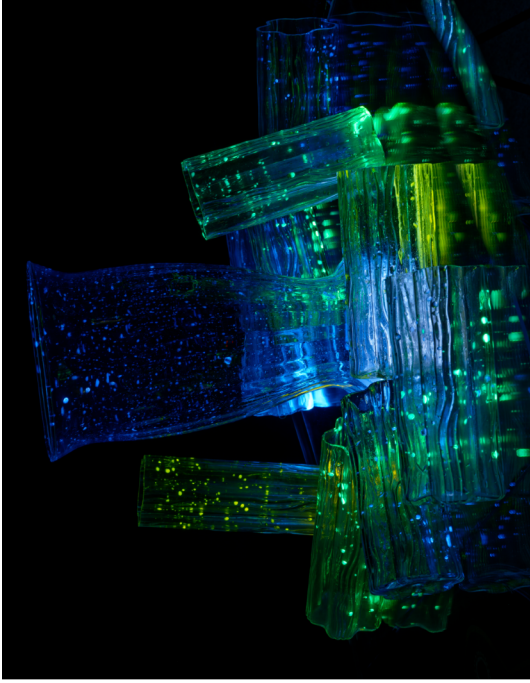
- Esther 4:14

After two and a half years of radically disrupting our lives to outrun a brutal and unpredictable disease, it's no surprise that we are trying hard to "get back to normal."

Let's not get back to normal. I hope we WILL be forever changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Is this not a moment to say "Never Forget"? More than one million Americans dead, millions more worldwide, many more left grieving. Countless health care workers traumatized by their frontline experiences and the dangers they faced before vaccines. Economic disruption for so many workers, especially those already living precariously.

As if that wasn't enough, there was all the fighting, fighting, fighting—over mask mandates and lockdowns, over confusions as scientists raced to understand what did and did not promote contagion, over treatments and vaccines, over the supports needed to help the suddenly unemployed stay fed and housed and cared for when they fell ill.

And as if THAT wasn't enough, the horrors of daily life for some Americans simply continued as usual. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd took place within a few weeks during the height of the first wave of COVID-19. Despite the specter of disease, millions took to the streets nationwide, shouting through masks their outrage and brokenness at the pandemic of racism, in which the extrajudicial sentence for a petty crime, or for no crime at all, is death. – And then we fought again, over *The 1619 Project* and over the teaching of race and over whether those outdoor demonstrations hastened the spread of COVID-19 (scientific verdict: they didn't).



I do not want to forget. I want to be permanently transformed. But how? Our stories of transformation typically stop when physical form changes: the nymph becomes a tree, pining lovers become stars and constellations, a mythic bird disappears in spectacular flame. What comes next? If COVID-19 and its disruptions, if the social movements around Black survival, economic justice, and the common good have brought us transformation, where do we turn for stories of meaningful next steps?

In the title of his final book, written at the height of the turbulent 1960s and just a year before his assassination, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked that same question: *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?* His answer was, “relentless action”: when years of struggle and sacrifice finally win promises of change, turn the promises into realities through steady forward motion. No space here for “getting back to normal.” Normal is overrated anyway when your “normal” is not a place of safety and security.

When the coronavirus pierced the illusion that all is fundamentally well with our nation, we saw how easy it was for community to descend into chaos. But the unexpected gift was that we also got a glimpse of how to turn chaos into community, to create what Rebecca Solnit has called “a paradise built in hell.” And now is our time to take those next steps.

But wait, you say. What about all that fighting? What about our hopeless differences? What about the Internet and the media echo chamber? What about political deadlock?

These obstacles are what sociologists call “wicked problems”: convoluted and involuted, with so many dependencies that they seem insoluble. But as with knots in a filigree chain, someone working knot by knot, without apparent progress, engrossed in the work, can sometimes be rewarded with the web of knots melting away, seemingly all at once.

Follow Dr. King’s advice: just keep moving forward, as you are able. Just keep going. You may meet friends along the way. You’ll also meet people who do not like your pace,



or do not like the direction you’re taking, or do not like your shoes. Just keep moving. And do some work. Pick up trash. Help a disoriented turtle. Leave a little surprise on a bench for a weary traveler. Your journey will not be without danger, without the possibility of angry confrontation. But try to be calm. Cultivate intellectual humility. Listen more. And just keep going.

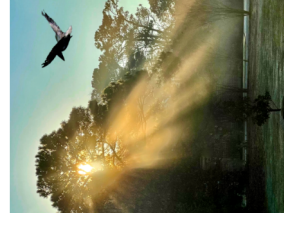
“To struggle for strength: it sounds so dramatic,” wrote the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century artist Paula Modersohn-Becker. “One does as best one can, and then one goes to bed. And that’s how it becomes clear, after a while, that one has achieved something.”

The heroism we need now is heroic persistence—doing what needs doing, without hope or despair. From the Judeo-Christian tradition, I think of the story of Esther—an ordinary woman, a foreigner, who caught the attention of a rash and violent king and who used his favor to save her people from disaster. Despite her realistic fears of the king’s wrath, she quetted her doubts and did what was within her power.

Ordinary people like Esther are always saving the world. Think of the many unsung heroes of the last two-and-a-half years: people just doing their jobs, making possible your comfort and maybe even your survival.

According to one tradition, the world was created when divine light was poured into vessels not strong enough to contain it. When the vessels shattered, stray light formed our world and its inhabitants, while the vessels’ shards became tragedy, sadness, violence, and all the wicked problems of creation. Without the vessels’ fragility, creation would not have happened. But that creation needs us to do what is within our power. Our profound duty, and our opportunity for transformation, is in the act of repair.

Repair does not have to mean imperfections are erased. In kintsugi, the Japanese art of mending broken crockery, brokenness is a map to guide restorative joinery using a mixture of gold and lacquer. Far from hiding the cracks, kintsugi makes the sutures more visible, glorious, an etched history of survival and an affirmation that, as the writer Alice Walker put it, “anything we love can be saved.”



On dark days of terrible news—another school shooting, another police shooting, another menacing COVID variant, more economic disaster, another devastating fire or storm or drought or famine or war—I think of Walker’s words and wonder, “Really, can *anything* we love be saved?” I honestly don’t know. But it’s not my job to know. I’m just walking. You say you are in despair over the state of our world? Perhaps, like Esther, you have come to this place for just such a time as this.

The images created for this exhibition are contemplative images, influenced by surrealism—which certainly fits with our experiences of the last couple of years—and born of my own need to give visual form to this moment. Some of the images draw on the natural beauty of the Outer Banks and the coastal Carolina mainland, while others are purely fanciful responses to stories of transformation that spoke to me. The images suggest a narrative in the aggregate, which you can follow in the exhibition guide if you like, but each image also is intended to be open and expansive, giving you space to make your own story.