



# Being Still

**Alice Elgie** describes what she has discovered while being locked down in France

**E**ach morning, together with my daughter, I wander down to the poultry coop to feed the array of rescue chickens, ducks and turkeys that live on the smallholding in France, where we are working in return for food and board. Our morning routine feels like a kind of meditation as together we silently let the birds out, clean and fill water troughs, distribute feed, observe the different characters and give a pat to those who need it. I marvel at how, when we arrived more than two months ago, we would slip and slide around in our wellies, all our concentration needed just to stay upright, all our energy directed at our freezing hands whilst we broke through the icy water so the animals could drink. Now, as winter

has turned to spring, I stand in flip-flops on dry ground staring out above the compost heaps onto this little slice of Normandy countryside, wondering if this is how it might be for some time.

This article should have been penned from the road. I have imagined the words I might have written, where my feet might have reached as, with my family, I embarked on a walk to Portugal. Alas, this adventure was not to be. With the invasion of coronavirus, our planned month here with friends has turned into three and, by the time you read this, we could well be on month five if things carry on as they are. What was meant to be the starting point for our long-distance walk is now our home for the foreseeable future. It never fails to startle me how much things can change in just a matter of weeks, how now we can only

focus on the day, the hour, the moment, because anything else is futile.

Strangely, I had been craving this. In my sadness at the cancelling of our walking dream (for now), I thought of all the reasons why I had wanted to walk. They ranged from a longing to spend quality time with my now teenage daughter and the desire for an adventure with my family, to wanting to be more present in the moment and have time to meditate on peace – specifically inner peace – to find a sense of calm within myself and therefore in my response to the world. I had thought that, by stripping everything back to just my rucksack and my family, to sleep outdoors every night and cook on a fire, I would find the answers I have been searching for in how to be in this world that, at times, can feel confusing and cruel. To cancel →



## AS A PERPETUAL WANDERER, THIS IS THE LESSON I AM TO LEARN: STILLNESS IS OK

→ this thing I had wanted so much was sad, but as the reality dawned that this was what was happening and that here in Normandy was where we were to be indefinitely, I began to recognise that this lockdown could still bring most of what I desired: time together, the opportunity to be present, and space to meditate. Adventure, however, I wasn't sure it could bring, and I felt unsettled at the idea of our freedom being taken away, our freedom to wander as we please, to come and go in search of new experiences. I would not be able to escape to somewhere new when things got tough. As I could not break away to the beach when I needed silence, I started to go to the gardens to meditate on why I feel so keenly this restriction on my freedom. And what I am discovering is eye-opening.

In my meditations, I am finding that to be still *is* a kind of freedom because I do not need to think beyond now. I can only be here and so I have noticed something in my mind slowing because there is no fight; the list of things I need to do in order to achieve other things has diminished. There is something in my breath that is easier – that breath when you know you can do nothing *but* breathe – when all control is taken out of your hands and you know that you should be flailing and yet, somehow, you feel at peace because really, what else can you be? Talking with friends, all of us in different situations and yet the same, I have seen similarities emerge. We all begin to relinquish everything we have known, and in that giving over, we notice that, as humans, perhaps this is what we have needed. During one chat with a friend, she shared her happiness and yet frustration at having laid on a sun lounger all day reading a book. That she had found the time in her life to do this was strange in itself, but stranger still were the feelings of guilt she felt from doing so. I mused whether, as humans, we have simply forgotten *la dolce far niente*, an Italian phrase meaning, 'the sweetness of doing nothing'. Without work, school, after-school clubs, home-education meet-ups, trips out, family

get-togethers – or a long walk in my case – we are at a loss and perhaps, as we reflect inward, we become afraid of what we find because so much of what we do defines us and, without these things, we feel adrift. Even writing this article has been difficult for me because, without the focal point of my adventure, the words have become stuck, the essence of my story blurred.

But I keep writing, observing, meditating and in doing so I realise that within this stillness is where life really is. Instead of the moving scenery to alert my senses and absorb my thoughts, I am faced with the same view each and every day, but now I am forced to watch carefully, I see it too is equally absorbing. I have always loved nature, but more often than not I find myself watching it in snapshots, from here to there, whereas now I can absorb the full cycle, and it is the same with the

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people and animals around me. Here in lockdown with me are a young Brazilian couple, paused in their European travels, there are our hosts, a couple who under normal circumstances would be running this vegan restaurant and hotel for paying guests, and then there is the 92-year-old mother of our host and, of course, the huge family of rescued poultry. It is an eclectic mix and as I mould my place within this unique family, I'm learning to work with the little idiosyncrasies of people and animals, and it is humbling because I am also being pushed to find new places within myself. I am learning to not always be so solitary, not be so afraid of supposed life passing me by that I must grab for something new at every opportunity, and I am learning to share more of myself. Perhaps that is the most important lesson: in being still, we begin to discover the essence of who we are and what we need because there is nothing else to define us, we can be only who we are.

On this journey, I am also beginning to see that adventures are here, all around us, and I am

starting to embrace life differently. This weekend, as a community, we camped out in the garden. We pitched our tents, built a fire, brought our instruments and stared at the stars. We talked about dreams, lived and desired, but mostly we just sat in the moment, chatting and laughing and I thought, it doesn't matter where we are, we make what we want from it. Other days my 13-year-old daughter goes to play scrabble with the oldest member of our community, who tells her stories of life during the war and exciting times lived in London as a 20-something, and I see the narrative of life unfolding right before us. We, all of us, find ourselves working together to make things run smoothly; I deliver homemade soya milk to doorsteps, my husband and daughter flip pancakes or bake hot cross buns to distribute for celebrations. Portuguese lessons, gardening, pot-luck meals and stories around the table are shared and, in all of this, I appreciate what can be found when we simply stand still.

The other day, as I walked around the gardens, I found myself utterly absorbed by the unfurling of a horse chestnut bud. I marvelled at the intricate beauty that had been sitting patiently, just waiting for the right moment to emerge and I understood that, as a perpetual wanderer, this is the lesson I am to learn: stillness is OK. I do not always need to rush forward to something else and it is not always necessary to have a new plan or project on the horizon to help make me, me. Instead, it's OK to just be, to recognise that the seasons will pass, that patience will bring what is needed and that I don't always have to rush off to somewhere else.

## NOW WE CAN ONLY FOCUS ON THE DAY, THE HOUR, THE MOMENT, BECAUSE ANYTHING ELSE IS FUTILE

In this moment of wonder I ponder that, just as this event is resetting the natural world, perhaps the enforced stillness is resetting us, too. Because if we can become more comfortable in the moment, the space where we find ourselves when stripped back from all the peripheral→

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→ belongings or pastimes we crowd our minds and lives with, if we can relinquish pressures from the outside and focus instead on nature, accepting that life will happen as it should, when it should, then as humans, perhaps we will be calmer and more at peace in our response to the world. This is my greatest hope. The world is a beautiful, nourishing, heart-warming place to be and yet often, this is overshadowed by the pain and fear we inflict on it and all its inhabitants. This is my struggle and this is perhaps why I am in perpetual movement, so I do not have to face that which I do not like. Yet, standing still has made me see that sometimes we must face what makes us uncomfortable, both in ourselves and around us, in order to make it better.

This morning I went down to the poultry coop to perform the same routine as always – opening doors, filling water troughs, emptying compost, stopping to stroke Monsieur Robert the duck, laughing as Madge the cockerel jumped on my back to make it known that he wanted his food first and, as I watched the turkeys stride out with their calm confidence, I thought, they know how it is. They know that every day the sun will rise, the leaves will bud, the blossom will fall, the rains will come and life will be lived, and instead of looking out over the increasingly spring-like countryside, wondering how long I might be here, I began to wonder if it will be long enough to learn the lessons I need to learn, on being still. ●

Illustration by Jo Berry  
[www.joberrydraws.com](http://www.joberrydraws.com)



Alice Elgie is a writing, home-educating, simple living, perpetual wanderer (usually), hoping to one day find a place from which to be still permanently – rescuing animals, growing food and sharing her vegan table and stories with travellers from around the world.