

Weather Wonderings

Hi, I'm Sarah Bell, I'm a Lecturer in Health Geography at the University of Exeter. Most of my research to date has explored the role of everyday 'nature' encounters in shaping experiences of health, wellbeing, mobility and disability through the life course. I've spent the last few years exploring this in collaboration with people with sight impairment, which started with a research project called 'Sensing Nature', which ran from 2016-2018. Along the way, I have thought about how the weather moves and shifts around us, and the therapeutic potential of moving in and with different weathers.

In this brief weather provocation, I'd like to draw on some of my past research, which I will interweave with some personal reflections from this year. A year when I've spent more time than ever indoors, and yet have also been so acutely aware of the weather and of weathering, my own and that of others.

I'm going to start with an extract from a short piece I wrote towards the beginning of the year...

It's March 2020. I am on Day 10 of the new daily 'normal' of social distancing in a bid to halt the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. I live in a small top floor flat with my partner, in a Cornish 'city'. No outdoor space but we're lucky to have big Velux roof windows, with early spring sunshine streaming in, warming my hands as I type. I squint through the screen glare but can't quite bring myself to close the blinds, increasingly treasuring these moments of warmth; a probable lifeline as the days go on and 'social distancing' turns to 'lock down'. Last week, I stepped away from my computer screen when I could, pausing the new 'Zoom' meeting regime to wander along quiet lanes, relishing the opportunity for movement; my own but also that of the world outside, the breeze, the mizzle, the birds, the gathering momentum of spring.

In recent days, the words of my Sensing Nature research participants have been running through my head in many different ways. Reminding me to tune into daily moments of light, warmth, the breeze and bird song as the world seemingly unravels around us. Reminding me to notice the kindness unfolding in its wake, and to find ways to adjust to the ever-changing concept of 'normal' that each day brings.

I remember Alva, a thoughtful and brilliantly playful Sensing Nature participant in her 80s. When reflecting on what nature is to her, she explained how:

“It’s life-giving really, to me, nature. It’s an awareness of the space that I can find myself in, and when I go outside, I’m aware of light, which I’m not always aware of inside. I’m aware of, just the air and the sounds, the natural sounds around, which are very special... I think if I don’t get out or involved with it, I feel very drab, very dull, very flat”.

These words have resonated with me throughout this year. Times when the relentless nature of work have made my one mid-week venture out of the flat even more important. I didn’t always have time to go that far, but to feel the weather, to feel the onset of spring in the earlier days of the pandemic, became a lifeline.

The cycle of the seasons has been flagged in the wider literature as integral to people’s weather experiences, with each season bringing a “new ensemble of weather elements” (de Vet 2017, 144), at once enhancing and undermining people’s embodied capacities to both function and flourish. Many of the Sensing Nature participants expressed sentiments of hope and uplift with the shifting qualities of light, temperature and life unfolding with the onset of spring. As one participant in her 60s commented:

“Spring is my absolute favourite season. I think it’s that growing awareness as we come into February that nature’s beginning to stir and come alive again, and that sense of excitement... things just beginning to uncurl and unfurl... that exuberance that you get a sense of even if you can’t see all the details of it. There’s something about the quality of the air and the quality of the light... the way that it feels on your skin, the way that it feels on your face. It’s invigorating to, you know, just breathe it in, to breathe deep, it’s just enlivening I suppose”.

I have become particularly aware of changing qualities of light through this year. In Spring, I took to recording shadow waves on my weekly run and sending them to my parents as a playful form of connection, searching out places where I could pause in peace and capture my shadow for them. They started returning the gesture and we gathered quite a collection of sunny shadow waves.

Until the onset of autumn, when finding the sun became harder, and the time to get out more elusive.

With autumn came a changing soundscape, different textures, different smells. I remember one of my participants describing her love of “drinking in” the evocative smells of bonfires and wood smoke in autumn, and another joking about the strange appeal of “decay” as the leaves start to fall off the trees.

Yet also autumn and the shorter hours of daylight, the longer periods of rain, bring challenges too. I remember the words of a participant in her 40s. She said:

“It’s the fact that, you know, there’s just so little light... and I really do find interacting through the winter very difficult... it becomes a very claustrophobic, slightly anxious time ... the idea of walking is, you become very restricted because I wouldn’t walk, when the clocks go back, I won’t be walking after sort of 3 o’clock or 4 o’clock in the afternoon because it’s just, that anxiety”.

As noted by Vannini et al. (2012, p.368), “if weather is the medium we move through, then feeling ‘trapped’ – unable to move through – is a perfectly sensible reaction”. I’ve thought about this a lot as my running route has gradually turned into more of a mud wading route recently. I’ve diverted to more of the roads, and couldn’t help but notice the challenges a cane user might experience along them... the mud and puddles hugging the road edge, the source of orientation information that someone might be seeking out with a cane.

My participants explained how getting out and about in winter requires continual adaptation, often experienced as a relational achievement, with many relying on a mix of cane use, working with a guide dog, going out with friends or family, and trying to reschedule practices around the vagaries of the weather. Add in trying to maintain 2m distance between (often oblivious) passers-by and I can’t help but wonder what this autumn has been like, and how it will fold into winter.

And so I come to my closing thoughts around weathering. It's now November 2020. I'm sitting in the same chair, at the same desk, under the same window as I have been since March. Other things have changed. My hands feel brittle from the cold, my body creaky through relative lack of movement in a somewhat relentless year of work. Though still grateful that I've been able to continue working, I feel tired, foggy, less able to find the words to type. Yet the inbox keeps pinging, apparently our new way of saying hello to each other... and help!

Life at home has delivered a sharp and painful reminder that while we've all been so preoccupied with the risks of Covid, other conditions close in, quietly taking hold, materially and metaphorically, around the hearts of loved ones. And yet I know that how I weather this, how I respond to those emails, to the students, colleagues, friends and most importantly to my family, will shape their weathers. While I'd like to ignore the broken orchestra of email, Zoom and Teams alerts, I know that my currents interweave with theirs.

We think a lot about the materialities of weather, but less about the metaphors ... "If you want to see the sunshine, you have to weather the storm"... "without people like you, there'd be no rainbows"... "life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, it's learning to dance in the rain". When we look to these metaphors, seemingly designed to inspire or sooth during times of trouble, we see that act of weathering, of our own lives but also of how our actions weather the lives of others.

In recent months, this mutual act of weathering - this interdependence - has perhaps never been more apparent. Indeed, the health and wellbeing of individuals across the planet rests more than ever on collective cooperation. SARS-Cov-2, the virus causing COVID-19, needs human-human interaction to thrive, and humans more explicitly need each other to survive; for care, for food supplies, for continued access to water and energy, and for emotional support. To chat, to listen, to bring a sense of normality in small but treasured ways, to find and share humour at times when anxieties threaten to overwhelm.

So my provocation from these - probably rambling - weather wonderings is whether the weather – and the act of weathering – offers a useful way of foregrounding our more-than-human

interdependence... of resisting prominent definitions of health and wellbeing that celebrate individuality, independence and mastery... instead inviting us to embrace understandings that prioritise the interconnection of all things for wellbeing – human and otherwise. That nurture respectful and care-full more-than-human relations as the weather moves and shifts around us, as we move in and with different weathers, and reconfigure the weather currents of each other.