

Life As It Is

Episode #8 with Daisy Hernández

“Dwelling in the Casita of Equanimity”

March 23, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Today, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I are joined by journalist, professor, and *Tricycle* contributing editor Daisy Hernández. Daisy’s latest book, *The Kissing Bug*, blends together memoir and investigative journalism to tell the story of Chagas disease, an insect-borne illness that disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. The book recently won a PEN/Jean Stein Book Award and the National Book Foundation Science + Literature Award. In this episode of *Life As It Is*, Sharon and I sit down with Daisy to reflect on the past two years of the pandemic, her practices of equanimity, and how she finds refuge in times of war.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with writer and journalist Daisy Hernández and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Daisy. Hi, Sharon. It’s great to be with you both.

Daisy Hernández: It’s wonderful to be here.

James Shaheen: So Daisy, the last time we had you on the podcast, we discussed your latest book, *The Kissing Bug: The True Story of a Family, an Insect, and a Nation’s Neglect of a Deadly Disease*. The book blends together a very personal memoir and investigative journalism to tell the story of Chagas disease, which is insect-borne and disproportionately impacts Latinx communities. In the past month, the book has won a flurry of awards, including the PEN/Jean Stein Book Award and the National Book Foundation Science + Literature award. So I’d like to start by saying congratulations.

Daisy Hernández: Thank you so much. I am still in shock over all of that.

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James Shaheen: I was having lunch with you before you went to the award ceremony, and it was so fantastic to hear that you'd won.

Daisy Hernández: Thank you.

James Shaheen: So why do you think the book is resonating with people right now?

Daisy Hernández: That's a great question. I am asking myself that as well. I definitely think that COVID changed everything, including how we respond to books like this. I think that without COVID, we would just not be thinking about racial disparities in healthcare for one. We would not have the kind of intimate knowledge that we have at this point about zoonotic diseases and the impact that they can have on our communities and our day-to-day lives. All of us have been through some experience with trying to get tested, trying to get vaccinated at different points. So I think all of that has definitely made readers much more aware and sensitive to something like this, Chagas disease, which, as you said, disproportionately affects the Latinx immigrant community in the US. It is not a contagious disease the way that the COVID virus is, so it's a disease that's really going to stay pretty contained to that particular immigrant community. But I think because of COVID, we've become more sensitive, dare I say maybe more curious as well to what other communities are experiencing.

James Shaheen: Right, so the same sort of thing with regard to care and outcomes played out with COVID. In other words, certain communities were disproportionately affected, not because they were more prone to actually being susceptible to the disease, but again, it was this environmental condition that really led to it. For instance, in Queens, you had large immigrant families living in close quarters, and healthcare access varied. So could you say something about that? Did you look closely at those disparities with COVID?

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Daisy Hernández: Yeah, so I actually finished working on this book just as the pandemic was declared two years ago. I talked to my editor, and we realized, of course, that we needed to add what at that point was the beginning of the pandemic. It was a little scary actually how easy it was to write about COVID in the context of a book that I had already finished writing, that I had been working on for seven years, because I did talk about racial disparities in healthcare. What I pointed to is part of what you're describing is that it's not that this particular group of people are more susceptible to this insect-borne disease but that there are just a whole host of systemic reasons why this is happening. And so with COVID, yes, we do not have affordable housing that allows low-wage workers to have all the room that they need for their families. So we don't have affordable housing, so people make do with what they can do. We also have people I know in New York City who were working jobs that constantly put them into contact with a lot of people. We have people that also need to use public transportation that do not have the ability to just grab an Uber or a Lyft or a taxi when they need to get to a certain place. So there's so many reasons that people of color specifically in New York City became much more vulnerable to COVID when it first hit the city. And I would say it continued on as well. Similarly with Chagas disease, these are immigrants in the US who are like my auntie. They grew up in pretty poor families in Latin America, they had a lot more contact with rural communities, and sometimes that means that they grew up in rural communities where there has not been an investment in housing or pesticides or any kind of way of protecting people from these insects. My auntie actually really grew up in the city, but her family and her friends and all their connections were in more rural areas of the country. So they were just as vulnerable as people who were living there as well. And I think with COVID, this is something that different public health officials were struggling around, but it's the public healthcare message. So with Chagas disease, specifically in South America, Central America, and Mexico, which is where you find this, there has not been a vigorous campaign to raise awareness about this disease so there's also been an incredible lack of knowledge just among communities themselves there and also, of course, in the US. This is the

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first book for a general readership about Chagas disease even though you have 300,000 people in the US who are infected with it.

James Shaheen: Right. I was thinking about what you said. I know that many of us who have jobs like mine simply went home and carried on and many people ordered out rather than even go to the supermarket, yet there were people employed by the supermarkets who were required to show up every day. I think that the inequality that the disease threw into high relief is something that is probably still under discussed. But your book obviously brings it to the fore.

Daisy Hernández: Absolutely. We're still not talking about it in a robust way. I think that's the best way to say this. Stat News, this news outlet devoted to healthcare, has really done some interesting coverage on different aspects of racial disparities in healthcare, including the kind of articles that get published in medical journals. They did a really incredible story showing how even when these medical journals wanted to start focusing on racial disparities in healthcare, who they turned to were the work of white scholars and white academics who are actually still pretty new to the field itself. Some of them were essentially presenting research that had already been done by Black scholars specifically. It was an incredible story. They've done really interesting coverage on the continuing racial disparities, but it's a very specialized news outlet, right? It's not the nightly news, and it's not what we're hearing on the radio all the time or on social media all the time.

Sharon Salzberg: I think that's just fascinating because one of the things that is not really analyzed necessarily in research is what's the norm? If you're trying to compare your level of stress to the “norm,” who's defining the norm? It is usually a very particular kind of person. Dismantling the way we look at things seems to be a really important task.

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Daisy Hernández: Yeah, absolutely, and that actually makes me think of the necessity of having BIPOC spaces for Buddhist practitioners because I think sometimes when you walk into a predominantly white space, you are bringing already that stress of your life as somebody who’s constantly negotiating issues around race, and then you come into the space and want to sit down with it, but you’re doing it again in another white space. Whereas when you walk into a BIPOC space of Buddhist practitioners, you can at least already say OK, we’re starting the conversation in a different way at a different point. You can tell I’m really looking forward to the BIPOC retreat this June in person. I so need it. Two years without it has been hard.

James Shaheen: Is that up in Barre at IMS?

Daisy Hernández: It is.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, we’re here. We’re open.

Daisy Hernández: I did it virtually in 2020. I don’t know what happened to 2021. I still don’t even know how that year happened.

Sharon Salzberg: It’s interesting, like what happened to that year? Because two years ago, I left New York City thinking, “Oh, things are really uneasy here. Things are feeling really anxious. And I’ll just go up to Barre for two weeks and wait it out.” It’s been two years and it is like a fog. We started this podcast in many ways because we wanted to hear from people how they have been navigating these very uncertain times. Maybe you could say something about what the pandemic era has been like for you and how you’ve been getting through and how you’re reemerging.

Daisy Hernández: Yes, that is a question. How am I reemerging?

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Sharon Salzberg: Am I reemerging? I'm not sure I even am reemerging.

Daisy Hernández: I think I am beginning to reemerge. But I'm remembering I was registered for the in-person BIPOC retreat in 2020, and it went virtual. It's incredible now two years later to remember how strange and odd that first retreat was because I think that that was my first retreat virtually. And yet how magical it was, and how necessary it was and how having that structure encouraged me to have a conversation with my sweetie, like, “Hey, I'm going to have these days of silence at home, and I'm not going to be watching whatever TV show we were watching every night at that point.” It made me appreciate my home practice in a different way. It definitely has humbled me. I thought I had a more robust home practice. It really underscored this conversation that I had with a teacher many years ago where I was just noticing and outlining to her all the shortcomings of my home practice and how different it is when I have access to a group that I can sit with at least once a week if not more. She was in the Zen tradition. I was expecting her to offer me something very deep and riddled, and instead she said “Yeah, sangha. We need sangha.” It's not more complicated than that, that need for community to make our practice possible. I think these last two years have really underscored that need for community. I had just joined a new BIPOC sitting group in Nashville because that's where I was when the pandemic hit. I was in Nashville for that semester teaching. And that group took off in a really wonderful way and brought people from different parts of the country because of the pandemic. There's so much that we made happen during these two years that I think it's going to be hard for us to fully appreciate until we're further down the road. I think I leaned very much into the concept of taking refuge, as I'm sure others did, taking refuge in virtual sangha and the teachings. Just the concept of taking refuge has felt really important these last few years. And I think now, as we're talking about this, I think that's what I'm going to need moving forward because I spent four days in New York City and I saw more people than I've seen in two years. I've had more meals in restaurants in

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four days than I had in two years. And that’s disorienting as well. So I think I’m going to need to, I think, work with that concept of taking refuge as I come out of the cocoon.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, it’s such an intense thing in and of itself. I saw my doctor in person for the first time in two years, and at the end, she just looked at me and said, “I think you need to get out more.” Because I just said, Well, I’ve been in Barre, Massachusetts, and I’ve seen maybe six people over the course of two years. I’ve been online constantly, and I have the world’s biggest mask collection, and I don’t go anywhere. It feels so important that we connect one way or another and maybe many ways, that we not kind of lose that and the vitality of that. How great, you went to New York and you just forged ahead.

Daisy Hernández: Somewhere in the last two months, it really hit me. It was probably the start of winter here in Ohio, and winters in the Midwest are no joke. It gets gray and gray for days and days, and it is cold. I think something about that combination and just coming up on the anniversary pushed me, although I’m wearing a mask everywhere pretty much, but it definitely pushed me out the door. I think also having the award ceremony and another ceremony with the National Book Foundation felt like, for me, it was all a matter of is it worth getting COVID and be really sick perhaps? And so I just kept saying “OK, it is.”

Sharon Salzberg: It’s interesting because it strikes me that it’s very much like leaving a retreat, of course. I’ve always counseled people that when you leave the retreat, it’s a culture shock. You’re going to think, “Boy, people are moving quickly, and they’re all talking. I’m used to being silent,” and you kind of look around like you’re sitting in the restaurant, or they hand you a menu and you think, “Oh, I have choices.” And it’s very much that kind of feeling of dislocation and also joy at the abundance of life as it’s presenting itself. I was going to ask you about the award ceremony and what that was like.

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Daisy Hernández: Well, I do have to say that you have struck on the perfect analogy. I think we are collectively leaving the retreat center. You're reminding me of the first time that I left a retreat, and yes, they gave us the talk about going slowly. I was driving out of the retreat, and so they said, “Be mindful of your speed because you'll go much slower than everyone else.” I'm a pretty fast driver, so I thought that was rather silly. And then I remember myself leaving the retreat center, this was in California, and driving down the road. I was like, “Everyone is really speeding. That guy must have been going 90.” But I remembered what they said to check your own speedometer, and I was going 30 on a 60 mile road. And so yeah, it was quite the disorientation and the dislocation. It's true, when I got to New York City, I had forgotten that this many people could be in one room and move about each other. The PEN America award ceremony was amazing. They did an incredible job organizing it. They had rapid tests available for all of the writers whose books were finalists because we were going to have more contact with each other backstage and so forth. So it did create this other layer of uncertainty because you didn't know if you were going to pass your rapid test or not. And so I had a really wonderful opportunity to be in the moment backstage as I was waiting for my test result and just watching my mind run in every direction: “What if it's positive? It can't be positive. If it is, I'll ask for another test. I'll run to the corner store and get myself a test. It can't be positive.”

James Shaheen: I would have felt terrible because I had lunch with you before you went to the ceremony.

Daisy Hernández: I was actually blaming you. I was like, “If it's positive, I have to call James and tell him.” So yes, it's exactly as when you leave a retreat. I remember leaving a retreat and driving to the airport and flying out. I had lunch at the airport, and I remember the waiter and just suddenly having space around my interaction with him and my thoughts about him and realizing like, “Oh, I never have this space around my meals and around interacting with people about my meals.” We had such a lovely connection. I remember thinking this is retreat leftover time. I feel

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like the award ceremony was very similar. I would have appreciated it in a different way pre-COVID. I think because of COVID, every hug with another writer felt really special. Every person I was able to see in person felt just very precious and very meaningful.

Sharon Salzberg: Speaking of space, ever since I quoted you in my book, *Real Change*, I've thought of you and called you the “equanimity lady,” and equanimity is comparable to space, spaciousness, not like a cold, icy distance, but a really balanced, open space. It feels like something we could all use more of right now. So I wonder if you could talk some about equanimity and your practice during the pandemic in terms of equanimity and the kinds of crises, the political crises that we're in?

Daisy Hernández: Yeah, during the pandemic, I definitely felt like equanimity was so central. You and I spoke about that as well. I don't know how I would have gone through that time without, as you're saying, having spaciousness for all the difficulties to exist and also for all of the joys to exist as well, because as we're saying, so many connections were possible during these last two years. I reconnected with old friends. I made new friends online and by old-fashioned telephone as well, and to be able to say that there's space here for all of that to happen. And with what's happening now, I think it makes equanimity even more necessary. I found myself yesterday listening to another journalist talk about what's happening in Ukraine, and as many analysts and journalists are telling us, there are only degrees of terrible outcomes. I was listening to Masha Gessen talk about how the best possible outcome might be that Putin is satisfied with taking part of Ukraine. I mean, the best outcome is a terrible outcome too. And those are moments in which for me, I have to practice pausing. Before equanimity, the pause to say, “OK, I am having a lot of emotions right now. I'm having a huge reaction to hearing someone whose work I respect give an analysis, a very sober, sober analysis of the situation,” this pause, a moment to always breathe for me and to come back to my body and to say there's space for me to hold this, and there's also space for me to hold the incredible sense of unity that

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people are experiencing in Ukraine and other parts of the world. I also have to really make space to also hold the fact that we're having an incredible outpouring of support for the Ukrainian people, but this is not the kind of support that we show when many other people have to flee their home, not just Syria, of course, but Palestine and many others. And so holding space for all of that to be true and existing at the same time is just very necessary right now. How are you working with all of this, Sharon and James?

James Shaheen: Well, as Sharon said, when we first discussed this podcast, it was going to be about how people are getting through the pandemic. But the other day, I told our producers, and I said I would discuss with Sharon, that I think maybe we should call the podcast, “It’s Always Something.” “Life As It Is: It’s Always Something.” To describe the pandemic and my experience of it, I remained in New York, and I was taking the subway and interacting with people as I had to. It’s a crowded city. So my experience was a little bit different. But it was also like emerging from retreat. But you know what we’ve been through from the time Trump was elected to the pandemic to George Floyd to the social unrest that followed that and the social justice movement picked up momentum and then the next wave of the pandemic, the next wave, and we just think we’re coming out of the pandemic, and we’ve got a war. It’s been a long haul. But Daisy, I just want to ask you, a few years ago, you wrote a piece called “The Noble Abode of Equanimity” on equanimity and not getting swept up in the political storm—or any storm for that matter. You talk about the brahma-viharas as casitas, “sacred little houses where you can dwell when times get rough.” Can you talk more about these sacred little houses that you wrote about?

Daisy Hernández: It really came to me because at Spirit Rock, where I started going on retreat first many years ago, they had their dorm rooms or cottages labeled with the brahma-viharas. I think that actually is what got it into my mind, that association of these with little houses, but the more that I thought about it, I felt like that really worked. For me, I feel like I need a sense of a visual element when I think about refuge, and so the idea of thinking about these as little houses,

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as casitas, really just gave me a strong visual of entering into a physical space because I think, especially for me, when the world is turned upside down, I need ritual oftentimes, and that happens in a place. Whether it's creating a little altar or changing a physical space, somehow I need to enter into a bit of a different physical space. And so thinking about them as casitas just made it more accessible for me and more real. I talked in that essay about feeling like equanimity was a far-off concept and such a mouthful of a word, and so for me, putting it in terms of a little house or a casita just made it much more tangible and closer to me culturally as well. I think in my mind, it also made me think of Spirit Rock and my first retreat there and how scared I was to be silent. I think I just went for a weekend, two days or something. So yeah, casitas just made it more accessible for me. I feel like we have to make the practice work for us.

James Shaheen: I think of the different refuges I tried during the pandemic, and the first one was work. I lost myself in work, and that didn't turn out to be a very nice casita. Then I began sitting more frequently. I even got up to IMS at one point and got to sit there with Sharon and Joseph, and that was truly wonderful. There really for me is no substitute in terms of refuge for sitting. That was tremendously helpful. Also, the Zoom retreats. Sharon, how did you fare?

Sharon Salzberg: I was alone. I was also online like 20 hours a day, it felt like, because the suffering was so acute and I felt I couldn't not respond. I just had to do anything I could. I was teaching a tremendous amount, and I think what I was teaching, of course, is what I was trying to practice and what I needed to be practicing myself. I realize listening right now to you, James and Daisy, that a lot of what I was emphasizing was really forgiving yourself for whatever you were feeling, which meant I had to forgive myself for whatever I was feeling, which was the entire range. It was both allowing the really distressing pained feelings. I knew so many people who lost somebody personally due to COVID, and then I had already for years been working with healthcare workers and first responders and people we call caregivers who are really the heroes of this society or any society who are so unheralded and kind of on the frontlines of

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suffering. This was quite a bit of suffering to be on the front lines of. To actually allow the anger and the grief and the sense of uncertainty, which was so acute, and also to allow the joy, which was also true as people came together sometimes or they offered food. I was sustained for a long time by this story about this place in Minneapolis. It was a public school that closed down and became kind of like a food bank. They put out a call for 70 bags of produce and food, and they got like 20,000. So I thought about that story every day. I guess it was all about equanimity. It was allowing what is to be there and not relating to the various feelings as though they were permanent because they're not. Just keep that perspective. Somebody sent me a tweet the other day. Their eight-year-old came back from school and said, “The teacher said, ‘Imagine that you're like a pond and they're all these fish in the pond. The fish are your feelings. Remember, you're not the fish, you're the pond.’” And then the person who wrote it said “Primary school is a lot better than it used to be.”

James Shaheen: The nuns didn't tell me that.

Sharon Salzberg: No, I guess not. My teachers didn't tell me that either. I think that was so essential to my own practice and therefore what I was trying to offer.

James Shaheen: You know, I want to come back to refuge for a minute because, Daisy, you also wrote an article for us called “Finding Refuge in a Time of War.” It was from the early Trump years, but the title feels particularly apt right now, and again along with my “It's always something,” I think it's always apt. You asked Sharon and me how we're finding refuge or how we're faring. I wonder what for you is refuge right now.

Daisy Hernández: That's such a beautiful question. Connecting with people that I love right now feels like refuge. With some of them, it was connecting with them in person while I was in New York City, and it felt like a refuge to get a hug, like an actual physical hug after I spent

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these two years in Ohio. For me, there was a refuge in physical contact, in that being embraced and being able to see the smile of my best friend who I've known since I was 10 years old and hadn't seen these last few years. I got to spend some time with my parents recently as well over the holiday break. I guess that's a couple of months ago now. Being able to have a meal with them, being able to hold their hands, being able to see where they are in their lives, as opposed to video, which I really appreciate that I was able to see them on video, but I feel like I definitely took refuge in spending time with them and, now that I'm thinking about it, and now that you asked, also taking refuge in the silence that you have with people in person that is different when you Zoom together for a virtual coffee. It's a different experience to have silence in that virtual space socially. I don't know if that makes sense. But with my parents who are not chatty, I do not know where I came from, they are fine with silence. They're like, "Great. We can just sit here and drink our coffee and look at the banana trees in the yard." I definitely felt a sense of refuge in that beautiful shared silence with them. Talk about equanimity, there was sort of a sense of equanimity in that moment with them.

James Shaheen: You know, there's something else that I didn't mention aside from sitting. At the beginning of the pandemic, we closed down on March 9, 2020. We took a kind of refuge in being of service to the readership. It sounds a little bit corny, but in fact, we did. It was a kind of generosity. We began offering online teachings for free. Everybody did it, including Sharon, Pema Chodron, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Joan Halifax. A lot of people doing something for others in that way lifted a lot of the anxiety. Instead of just focusing on ourselves and our own fears, we were actually offering something. I wonder if you or Sharon can say something about generosity. That just occurred to me because it really changes one's state of mind, and it really gets one out of oneself and one's own personal fears, which can be so imprisoning. I think of your book, for instance, as an offering.

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Daisy Hernández: Thank you, James. That’s such a great insight. For me, we’re precisely around the two-year mark where I said goodbye to my students. I assumed that I would see them the next week, and instead, I got the email that said, “We’re all going online, get out of your dorm rooms, figure out how you’re teaching this class online until further notice.” I definitely initially took refuge in being of service to my students because it was a shock for all of us, of course, but for me, I was aware that I could stay where I was. For them, they just had a few days to take everything and head back home. For some of them, they could not head back home because they had parents who were immunocompromised or they had difficult home lives. We forget that for many students, college campus is actually the refuge for them. And so it wasn’t just about going back to a parent’s home, it was figuring out an auntie that could take them in or cousin or someone else. For me in those initial weeks, there was so much goodness in just being able to focus on how I could support them, how I could alter the class. We were just about to start a module on literary journalism, which usually I do with them by having them interview people on campus. So we changed it up and they interviewed people in their social circles around how they were coping with the pandemic. So it was sort of literary journalism on the spot, but you’re right, it was a refuge. And then I also had to be really careful. I noticed that after the first three weeks, I was like, “Wow, I’m exhausted.” And I think this goes back to something you were saying of realizing I can take refuge in work up to a certain point, and then it’s very easy to lose oneself, and so I had to course correct a little bit and notice when I need to walk away. I started working with a timer. I started really paying attention to the dog, who was like, “Yeah, we need to go for walks.” I really had to be careful of that. I’m wondering, Sharon, how you do—so I know James asked a question, but I was wondering how you do, I don’t know if it’s a course correction, or where you do take refuge in working with others and helping others and then have to also make sure that you’re giving from a full cup.

Sharon Salzberg: Totally, I was just thinking you each have dogs. I don’t have a dog. I have to create my own boundaries. No one’s going to say “Time for a walk” or bark at me.

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Daisy Hernández: You have to bark at yourself, perhaps.

Sharon Salzberg: I have to bark at myself like, “Time for a walk, get up.” But I was also thinking about the last time I taught anything in person was March 9, 2020. I had just gotten back to New York City. I had been traveling for a month. I was teaching in a place in New York where the speaker sits in the audience in the front row until they’re formally introduced, then you get up on the stage and you speak. It was such a strange time because nobody quite knew: Could you touch anything? What’s going on? And so the woman who’s sitting next to me said, very reasonably, “You know, I almost didn’t come.” And she was very overwrought. And so I said to her, “Well, there’s a series of breathing patterns, where the basic premise is that if your out-breath is longer than your in-breath, your parasympathetic nervous system will start taking over from your sympathetic nervous system, and you’ll basically chill.” I had people with panic attacks and things like that try that, and it’s just a way of soothing your system. So I suggested that. She wasn’t interested at all. I said, “Well, there’s lovingkindness meditation, which can get you recognizing you’re not so alone and that you have this feeling of connection.” She wasn’t interested in that either. So I just looked at her and I said, with this kind of wild intuition, “Is there anyone you can help?” And she lit up and she got really radiant. She said, “I have this elderly neighbor, and maybe I can slip a note under their door and suggest that I go grocery shopping for them.” Look at that. I saw a lot of that, which was really celebrated. People in New York said to me, “I’ve lived in New York years and years, and I never even knew my neighbors’ names, and now we all have each other’s names and phone numbers, and we’re looking out for one another.” Looking back, I also feel the poignancy of what terrible division arose later and hostility between people, but there was this time when it was just there. But onto your question, I can easily get exhausted for sure. There’s no end to need, and so I basically have to bark at myself: This is unsustainable, what are the limits, don’t forget to replenish and have fun even. It’s OK. It feels so wrong in the face of such terrible ordeals, and not everyone has a place to

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retreat to and take refuge, which I did, so it feels like it's selfish. But I've learned through the years, of course, it's absolutely essential. I need a dog actually, that's what I need.

Daisy Hernández: I think our takeaway from this is that Sharon needs not just a dog but a puppy,

James Shaheen: A puppy. But you'll blame us later because when the puppy wants to go at three in the morning—

Sharon Salzberg: I think sometimes about another refuge through creativity, through writing. I wonder if you see a relationship between your practice and your writing.

Daisy Hernández: Oh, absolutely. I can't imagine the writing happening without the practice, and maybe vice versa as well. There is the danger that sometimes I'm on the cushion, and my mind is like, “Ooh, I could write it that way,” and my mind starts going there. But no, absolutely. I think for me, the writing itself is definitely, as I think you just said, a refuge, especially because I was interviewing so many families who had faced this chronic disease that can just be ravaging. I spent a lot of time with one patient who first needed pacemakers, then a defibrillator. The parasite will often go after the heart and can really decimate it. And so he had reached a point where he needed a heart transplant and was living with a left ventricular assist device. He spent a lot of time with me, and we talked a lot about both what was happening for him currently, which was waiting for a heart to become available, and then we also talked a lot about his childhood because he had begun to experience cardiac symptoms when he was a teenager, actually. Those interviews were really difficult, and so for me, knowing that I was going to be able to transform what he was sharing into a narrative that I was going to be able to hopefully raise awareness about this disease by sharing his story, that is an incredible refuge and incredible sense of comfort and transformation. As you were talking about when you saw this person light up at the

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possibility that she could help someone, I think that very much happens for me as a writer. There's a way in which I feel a lot of energy and serenity comes with that as well from knowing I'm going to be able to transform this into a piece of work that will reach readers and others. There's something very powerful in that. And yet at the same time, in those moments, I remember specifically with him when I was interviewing him, where he's going in and out of sadness as he recounts his experiences, it was really important for me to have lovingkindness, for example, as a practice. Sometimes it was lovingkindness, sometimes it was tonglen practice. Because in those moments, I'm there as a journalist. I'm not there as any kind of caregiver. It's not appropriate for me to try to comfort the other person. I'm not there as a cold person either. But I'm also aware that he has not invited me into his home to do certain work. He's invited me here to share his story. That's the work that I'm there to do. So for me sometimes, just allowing that silence to be there between us, silently sending him metta as I'm sitting there, and then there were times when I would actually say out loud wishing him well as he went on his journey. I feel like it's not even just the creativity in the practice, but it's the creativity, the journalism, and the practice, that triangle. They very much are three legs, same stool for me.

James Shaheen: Daisy, you mentioned your students earlier. I just want to remind our listeners that you teach creative writing at Miami University in Ohio. I'm curious about how the stresses of the past few years have affected the stories that your students tell.

Daisy Hernández: Yeah, that's an excellent question because I do teach creative nonfiction, so they are writing about their lives. I would say that everything has happened on the page, just as it has happened during this time. So before the pandemic, I would always get essays about love stories and breakups, and during the pandemic, they found love and they also broke up. Life goes on, and it definitely shows up, and so what looks a little different is, “Oh, we met on the group text for the dorm rooms,” that's how they found love, and “Oh, we broke up on some video game.” I don't even know how that happens. The heartache and the love happen in different

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contexts. What I also am seeing that's actually really different, and I think probably we're all seeing this, is just much more conversation and openness about their own mental health. I think that these last two years have definitely opened up a space where students are writing about that much more frequently and openly. I especially noticed that this semester. This is our second semester where our campus is back in person in the classrooms pretty much across the board. There are exceptions, but we're in the classroom again. I noticed last semester, which was our first one, that some students were broaching the subject of mental health in their essays, but it was few and it really felt like dipping toes into that conversation, whereas this semester, it has just been the entire essay is about this, the entire essay is about depression, the entire essay is about anxiety attacks or OCD. And it really has just been hitting me as an educator that I really have different groups of students in my class. I have students who finished high school virtually, and so they've only known a college experience during the pandemic. And then I have the seniors where the middle of their college years was this pandemic, and now they're trying to get jobs—talk about emerging from a sort of cocoon space, and they're supposed to go work full-time. And I think there's a lot of questions about how they do that. Just realizing that even though I'm looking at all of them and I'm thinking that there's a shared experience that they're having as college students, they're really not. They're in such different places. And on top of that, we have students who are immunocompromised or just spent the last two years with parents or siblings who are immunocompromised, and that's a very different experience, or who have younger siblings at home who couldn't get vaccinated as early as adults. They're having incredibly different experiences of these years.

James Shaheen: How does all of this centering of mental health issues that arise in the students who are young and under tremendous stress change your role as a teacher?

Daisy Hernández: In a couple of ways. Before the pandemic, my conversations with students about mental health would happen one-on-one predominantly. That still happens. I've had

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students where I've said one-on-one, “Do you need a hug right now? Would a hug be helpful right now?” because they are on the verge of tears, and sometimes a hug will help you to get there. So one-on-one was more common before. It's still happening, but I feel like now I see more of a need for me to talk about mental health with the entire class. We'll workshop someone's essay, so we're giving them feedback about a narrative that they created around depression. So now I'm definitely much more taking the time to talk about the subject matter in a broader way with all of them to also open up space if anyone wants to share their own experiences as well. There's a larger conversation happening,

James Shaheen: It sounds so incredibly different from my college years. But of course, it's a very different world.

Daisy Hernández: It's a different world. Yes, I did not have any of these conversations in college.

James Shaheen: No, I didn't either.

Daisy Hernández: I'm running a reading series this academic year, and the writers that I chose to bring, I'm also very intentional about who's coming. And so for example, we had this YA author, Lilliam Rivera, who wrote this beautiful book, *Never Look Back*, about these two teenagers in the Bronx, Puerto Ricans, after Hurricane Katrina. One of them is essentially a climate refugee, and she's struggling with her mental health. It's an incredible book. It's a retelling of the Greek mythology of Orpheus. But I definitely wanted to read this book and have my students engage with this book in another class because of the component around mental health and different cultural interpretations of mental illness as well. So it's definitely impacting the texts that I choose, in addition to what we do in the classroom as writers.

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Sharon Salzberg: I just want to ask what you’re writing now. Do you have any projects in the works?

Daisy Hernández: I am writing essays, and I don’t know what they’re about yet. Part of what I’m working on right now is that some of the essays are pieces that I wrote that did not make it into my book, *The Kissing Bug*. You work on a book for seven years. Readers will be happy to know that not everything I learned went into the book because the book would be 800 pages, not 300 pages. So some of that is going into this next book. Part of that is around citizenship because I became really fascinated by how we decided to attach our healthcare access to citizenship, so not only to jobs, many of us have our health insurance through jobs, but we also made decisions around citizenship and access to healthcare. So it made me really curious about the beginnings of the United States of America when citizenship was as in flux as it is now, I would say, and how we decided how we would take care of people who did not have the financial means to pay for a private doctor. So there are some essays in this new collection that have to do with that, and I think that’s the theme that is emerging, but I’m also working on an essay about the rapper Cardi B, who I’m obsessed with, but whenever I tell that to people, they’re like, “Everyone’s obsessed with Cardi.” So I’m trying to write into that obsession, and somehow that will also have to do with a theme like citizenship. So stay tuned, it’ll be another seven years.

James Shaheen: Daisy Hernández, thanks so much for joining Sharon and me. It’s been a great pleasure.

Daisy Hernández: It’s always so fun to talk with you.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I look forward to the next time. So for our listeners, please be sure to pick up a copy of Daisy’s now award-winning book, *The Kissing Bug*. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I’m going to hand this over to Sharon.

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Sharon Salzberg: Great, thank you so much. Let’s just sit together for a few minutes. You can close your eyes or not. Just be at ease. Start just by listening to the sound of my voice or other sounds. as they arise and pass away. Let them come, let them go. Even as we like certain sounds and we don’t like others, we don’t have to chase after them to hold on or push away. Let the sounds wash through you, and bring your attention to the feeling of your body sitting, whatever sensations you discover. See if you can feel the earth supporting you. See if you can feel space touching you. We think about touching space. Usually we think about picking up a finger and poking it in the air. But space is already touching us. It’s always touching us. Bring your attention to the feeling of your breath. Just the normal natural breath, wherever you feel it most deeply, most distinctly, the nostrils, the chest, or the abdomen, wherever. When you find that place, bring your attention there and just rest. This is a refuge. The breath is with us. We can rest. We can connect. See if you can feel one breath without concern for what’s already gone by, without looking forward to even the very next breath. Just this one. Allow thoughts to come and go, feelings to come and go, sensations to come and go as you rest your attention. As you feel ready, you can open your eyes or lift your gaze, and we’ll end the meditation.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon. Thank you, Daisy.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you.

Daisy Hernández: Thank you, James.