WASH YOUR HANDS

by Dori Midnight

(This poem was written at the beginning of the pandemic outbreak.)

We are humans relearning to wash our hands.   
Washing our hands is an act of love  
Washing our hands is an act of care  
Washing our hands is an act that puts the hypervigilant body at ease   
Washing our hands helps us return to ourselves by washing away what does not serve.

Wash your hands   
like you are washing the only teacup left that your great grandmother carried across the ocean, like you are washing the hair of a beloved who is dying, like you are washing the feet of Grace Lee Boggs, Beyoncé, Jesus, your auntie, Audre Lorde, Mary Oliver—you get the picture.   
Like this water is poured from a jug your best friend just carried for three miles from the spring they had to climb a mountain to reach.  
Like water is a precious resource   
made from time and miracle

Wash your hands and cough into your elbow, they say.  
Rest more, stay home, drink water, have some soup, they say.  
To which I would add: burn some plants your ancestors burned when there was fear in the air,  
Boil some aromatic leaves in a pot on your stove until your windows steam up.  
Open your windows   
Eat a piece of garlic every day. Tie a clove around your neck.   
Breathe.

My friends, it is always true, these things.  
It has already been time.  
It is always true that we should move with care and intention, asking  
Do you want to bump elbows instead? with everyone we meet.  
It is always true that people are living with one lung, with immune systems that don’t work so well, or perhaps work too hard, fighting against themselves. It is already true that people are hoarding the things that the most vulnerable need.   
It is already time that we might want to fly on airplanes less and not go to work when we are sick.  
It is already time that we might want to know who in our neighborhood has cancer, who has a new baby, who is old, with children in another state, who has extra water, who has a root cellar, who is a nurse, who has a garden full of elecampane and nettles.   
It is already time that temporarily non-disabled people think about people living with chronic illness and disabled folks, that young people think about old people.  
It is already time to stop using synthetic fragrances to not smell like bodies, to pretend like we’re all not dying. It is already time to remember that those scents make so many of us sick.   
It is already time to not take it personally when someone doesn’t want to hug you.  
It is already time to slow down and feel how scared we are.

We are already afraid, we are already living in the time of fires.

When fear arises,   
and it will,  
let it wash over your whole body instead of staying curled up tight in your shoulders.  
If your heart tightens,  
contract  
and expand.  
science says: compassion strengthens the immune system  
We already know that, but capitalism gives us amnesia  
and tricks us into thinking it’s the thing that protects us  
but it’s the way we hold the thing.  
The way we do the thing.

Those of us who have forgotten amuletic traditions,   
we turn to hoarding hand sanitizer and masks.   
we find someone to blame.   
we think that will help.   
want to blame something?   
Blame capitalism. Blame patriarchy. Blame white supremacy.

It is already time to remember to hang garlic on our doors  
to dip our handkerchiefs in thyme tea  
to rub salt on our feet  
to pray the rosary, kiss the mezuzah, cleanse with an egg.  
In the middle of the night,  
when you wake up with terror in your belly,   
it is time to think about stardust and geological time  
redwoods and dance parties and mushrooms remediating toxic soil.  
it is time  
to care for one another  
to pray over water  
to wash away fear  
every time we wash our hands

<https://dorimidnight.com/uncategorized/wash-your-hands/>

**Annotating a text** helps you actively think about what you are reading so you can get more out of what you read. It also helps you think and read critically by “talking back to the text.”

The key is to develop a system of annotation that works for you.

*Listen* to the poem as it is read aloud. Then, read the poem again silently to yourself. Mark up the text. Consider both the style and content of the poem. Annotations to try might look like this:

* Number the stanzas.
* Put a box around words or phrases in the text that seem significant. Define the word if necessary.
* Underline any statements that elicit an emotional response. Write in the margin a brief comment describing that response: For example, did it raise the hair on the back of your neck, bring tears to your eyes, or make you want to argue?
* Double underline any strongly opinionated, political, or controversial statement the poet makes. In the margin, write a brief, personal comment about why you agree or disagree.
* Draw an arrow 🡪 from the statements you double-underlined to the poet’s evidence for that statement.
* Put **[**brackets**]** around sections of the text where you can see the author’s intentional use of style. Look for the author’s use of repetition, a list, a symbol, irony, a shift in verb tense, an image, a metaphor, theme, etc. Focus on one or two stylistic moves by the author. Briefly comment in the margin about the effect of the author’s stylistic moves on the meaning or feeling of the poem.
* Put a ✓ next to places where you see an unconventional use of punctuation or capitalization.
* Place a star next to a place or two in the poem that seem to crystalize the poem’s meaning.
* Put a **?** next to a line you don’t understand.

**Written Respond to “Wash Your Hands”**

What lines or words or ideas could you use as a jump-off for a piece of your own writing? For example, play with the line “wash your hands like.” Change the word “wash” to a different verb that would elicit a different list. What other phrases might you want to fold into your piece?

Use this poem as a lift-off for writing. Maybe you want to write a poem, or maybe it’s a narrative, a rant, an editorial, or an interior monologue that helps you say what you need to say. Know that you will be asked to share your writing.