

*Ulster Publishing's*

# Hudson Valley Health

*Autumn 2021*



**The Mental &  
Physical Benefits  
of Volunteering**



# Volunteer power

*The mental and physical health benefits of working for no money*



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Ulster Federal Credit Union employees volunteering at RCAL.

by Violet Snow

**O**UR TOWNS RUN on volunteers. They serve on boards and commissions, arts organizations, food pantries and soup kitchens, historical societies, emergency departments, environmental organizations, and many more groups that residents rely on but can't afford to support financially. All those volunteers must get something out of it, or they wouldn't keep serving the community.

What volunteering is not:

A tedious duty you take on out of guilt that you have more money or opportunity than somebody else.

A social obligation you do as fast as possible so you will feel deserving of doing something that's fun.

A task to fill up your time when you don't have enough to do.

Okay, that last one might be appropriate in some cases. Retired people often turn to volunteering when they have time on their hands, but most of them also have a sincere desire to give back after years of being supported by their community. The jobs I took on when I volunteered out of a sense of guilt or out of boredom didn't last long.

I find the best volunteer experiences come from pursuing activities I'm interested in and offering skills I enjoy exercising. If you're not enjoying it,

**Paul E is the lead tax preparation volunteer at United Way of Ulster County.**



you're not going to keep doing it, and you're probably not going to do a very good job.

I'm not saying every moment has to be bliss. There will be aspects of every volunteer opportunity that are challenging. You need a sense of altruism, a desire to give, since you're not getting paid.

If you're thinking of taking on a volunteer job, seek one that includes an element of personal motivation. Enjoyment, however, is not the only advantage of volunteering. People who serve as volunteers receive many benefits, both mental and physical.

**Volunteering reduces depression.** Research by the Corporation for National and Community Service found that people who regularly volunteer have lower rates of depression than people who don't. In the case of retirees who may feel isolated or bored, volunteering gets them back out into the community and energizes their

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Bob C. is a volunteer tax preparer at United Way of Ulster County.

lives with a sense of purpose.

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mit to the number of hours that fits their current lifestyle and capacities. Without

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## Hudson Valley Health

*Autumn 2021*

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Photo courtesy of  
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you'll be able to share information towards a common goal. Teamwork provides a sense of unity and satisfaction.

You also have a chance to meet like-minded people, or you might meet people you wouldn't meet otherwise. Impressed with the fire department's response to Hurricane Irene, I joined as a social member (not a firefighter), partly because all my friends were transplants from urban areas, like me. I wanted to meet people who had lived in the town their whole lives and had a different perspective from mine. For a similar reason, I taught English for the Ulster Literacy Association, knowing I'd meet people from other countries.

**Volunteering makes you feel virtuous.** When a friend of mine had a baby that turned out to have special needs, I spent one

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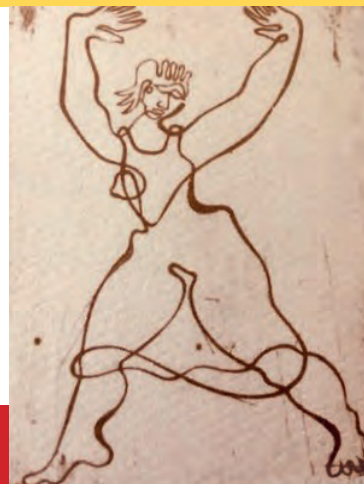
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afternoon a week taking care of the baby.

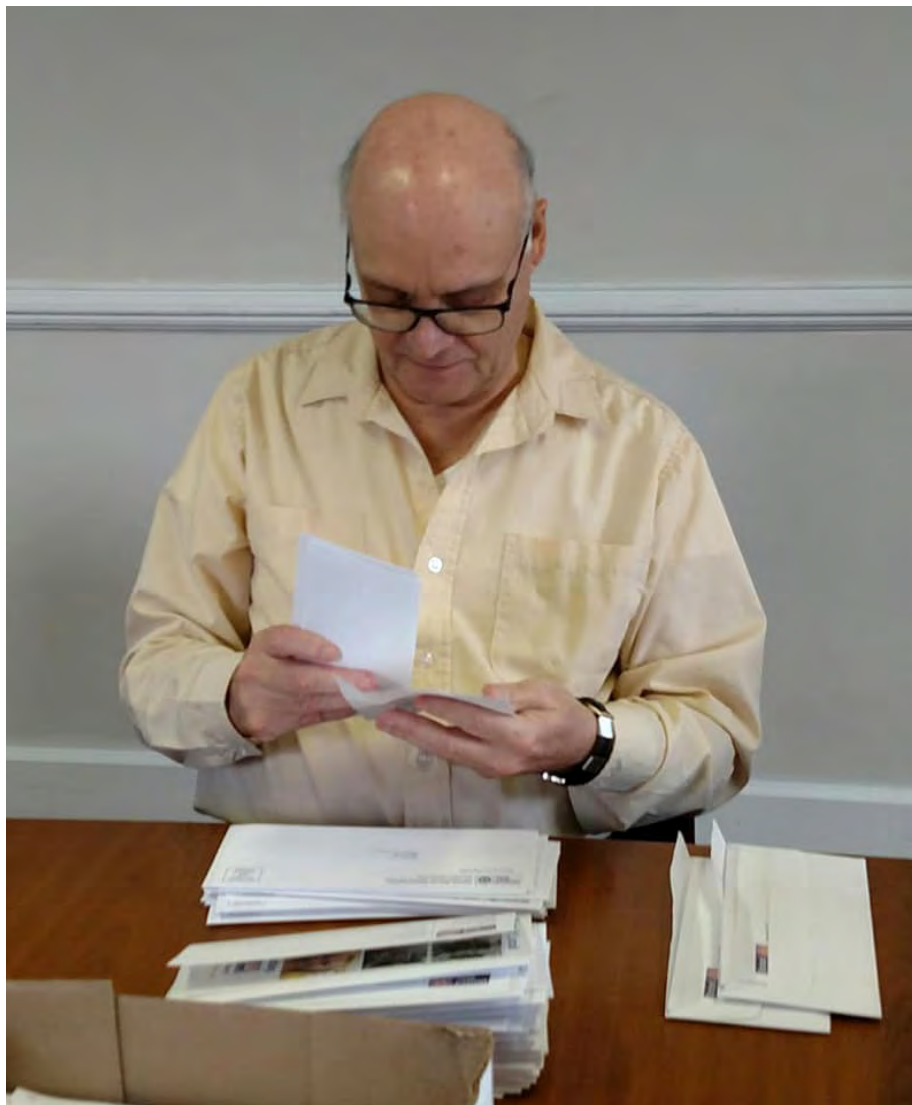
There was something liberating about performing a service for free, without worrying how much money I was making, knowing my service was of value to a stressed-out mother. Even if the babysitting was not always easy, it was gratifying to know I was capable of giving without expectation of return.

**Volunteering teaches new skills.** Often you volunteer because you have a skill to offer, but the experience you gain almost invariably involves learning something new. As a church member, I went from passive listening to learning how to compile a reading and run a Wednesday night service, which I really enjoy. Later I became treasurer and was trained in the use of accounting software, a skill I might get to use elsewhere one day.

**Volunteering can lead to paid work.** When I had a longing to revisit my childhood passion for horses, I volunteered at an equine therapy program for kids with disabilities. One thing led to another, and ended up with a job feeding horses at a local barn four mornings a week, living out my youthful dream.

You could volunteer at a nonprofit organization you care about. Once the staff sees how capable you are, you might be asked to take on more responsibility for pay. This route may be more effective than interviewing for a job and competing with other candidates, although it will take a little longer to reach the goal.

**Volunteering supports physical health.** A Carnegie Mellon University study, which focused on adults over the age of 50, found that participants who volunteered regularly were less likely to develop high blood pressure than non-volunteers. Research at the University of British Columbia followed adolescents who spent one hour a week working with elementary school children



Edward R volunteers regularly to do mailings at United Way of Ulster County.

in after-school programs. After ten weeks, they had lower levels of cholesterol and cardiovascular inflammation than members of a control group.

These examples are just a few of the many studies that demonstrate health benefits.

**Volunteering provides exercise.** Most types of volunteer work require some kind

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of physical activity, a boon to those of us with sedentary lifestyles. From handing out flyers for a political candidate to running a table at a library fair, gentle but regular movement can improve muscle tone, increase stamina, and lengthen life span.

**Volunteering keeps organizations you love alive.** When I was acting in a community theater, I was having lots of fun, but when I was invited to join the board of directors, I thought it sounded tedious.

At first I said no. Somehow I got talked into going to a board meeting, where I realized that not only was it interesting to be involved in running a theater, but the theater would not exist without people to run it. I helped select plays, find directors, and make decisions that shaped the theater's direction. I was even president of the board for a year, surprising myself by taking on responsibility I didn't know I was capable of, which brings us to another benefit:

**Volunteering increases self-esteem,** not only from helping others but also from exercising talents and learning new skills. Flexing your abilities in the world leads to self-confidence as well.

I've had jobs I've really loved, but volunteering has provided some of the most satisfying experiences of my life.

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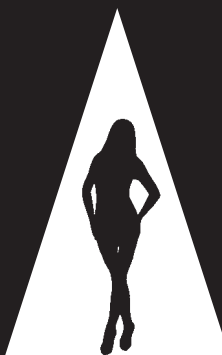
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# Health be with you

*Hospital systems have initiated active post-Covid recovery programs*

by Geddy Sveikauskas

**T**WO MAJOR REGIONAL hospital systems in the mid-Hudson area, WMCHHealth and Nuvance Health, have recently launched extensive post-Covid recovery programs, with over a thousand local patients between them. WMC started its formal program a year ago, Nuvance its program this past springtime.

The programs are not dissimilar. They encourage post-Covid patients to explain their symptoms and learn with professional guidance how to deal with them.

Does a thousand patients seem like a lot? In the context of the Covid pandemic, it's really not that many.

In all, more than one Ulster County resident in every ten has contracted Covid,

and of those who got it about one infected person in 60 has died from it. As of this week, there had been 285 Covid fatalities in the past year and a half in Ulster County. These are sobering statistics.

Recent figures put the grand total of Covid-19 cases in Ulster and Dutchess counties at 53,461. The number of people in the programs at the two hospital systems is about two per cent of that total – and that two per cent comes from a wider geographic area. On October 21, with the number of people newly infected diminishing, there were

still 86 new Covid cases in a day in the two counties.

The October 22 state health department dashboard put the positivity rate for Covid tests in Ulster County at 1.93

percent – the first time it's been that low in a couple of months. It's a good sign. Many experts don't expect a seasonal surge this winter.

In all, about one Ulster County resident in every ten has contracted Covid in the past year and a half,

and of those who have about one infected person in 60 cases has died from it. These are sobering statistics.

**“The road to recovery for some Covid-19 patients may be longer than [for] others”**





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## Leading the learning

Covid-19 hasn't been around long enough for many conclusive peer-reviewed studies of it to be completed. The learning curve has been painfully slow. We know that so far the vaccines against the disease have been almost miraculously effective, with side effects only limited to a small number of people. Though a few persons who were vaccinated have contracted Covid (the so-called "breakthrough infections"), most of the incidence has been among the unvaccinated. The two local hospital recovery programs didn't have readily available statistics on the past vaccination status of their patients.

Dr. Gary Rogg is one of the clinical leads of WMCHealth's post-Covid recovery program, working at the Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla. Dr. Rogg said the symptoms of the WMC program's patients were similar to those reported at programs nationally. Extreme tiredness, brain fog, and shortness of breath, he said, are the top

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three symptoms reported both nationally and locally by long-Covid patients. In their work in the post-Covid recovery programs, physicians must be prepared to encounter the bewildering variety of the complete list of reported symptoms.

Dr. J. Keith Festa, associate director of medical affairs at Mid-Hudson Regional Hospital in Poughkeepsie, runs the program for the northern territory of the WMC system. The two parts have the same organizational structure and follow the

same protocols, he said.

Dr. Sharagim Kemp heads the New York post-Covid program for Nuvance Health. The Nuvance system has substantial assets in both Connecticut and New York State, and it has two separate post-Covid recovery programs. But as with WMC, the two operations mirror each other, Kemp's office is at Northern Dutchess Hospital in Rhinebeck.

The two programs do intake differently. WMC begins with a physical examination by a primary-care doctor. Nuvance starts with a telephone interview. Is telemedicine effective in that intake role? Dr. Kemp says that it works well if done attentively. It's surprising how much information a doctor can gather in a 40-minute or hour-long virtual visit with a prospective post-Covid patient, she said.

### The road to recovery

We don't know nearly as much as we'd like to about what's called "long Covid," persistent symptoms that can continue long

after the Covid-19 infection has receded.

What are some long-term effects of Covid-19? The Nuvance list consists of a unlucky thirteen prominent ones: muscle weakness and fatigue, memory loss or "brain fog," difficulty breathing or chest pain, balance issues and trouble walking, weakness or numbness in arms and legs, body aches or joint pain, headaches, stroke, mood changes, abnormal heart rhythms, loss of taste and smell, rashes, and hair loss

Estimates are that between 20 percent and 25 percent of all people who have recovered from Covid complain of a bewilderingly wide variety of ailments they attribute to the disease.

"The road to recovery for some Covid-19 patients may be longer than [for] others, with a wide range of symptoms that can last for weeks to months," warns the Nuvance recovery program website. "The long-term effects of Covid-19 can be debilitating and prevent people from getting back to their normal routine."

## The post-Covid syndrome "... is a very real health issue. And it is treatable."



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"A person [in the recovery program] can wake up one morning convinced that they are finally completely well," said Dr. Festa, "and then complain the next day that their symptoms are worse than ever."

### The post-Covid syndrome

Successful recovery benefits from teamwork among medical professionals. "By creating a cohesive team of specialists across Nuvance Health, we can seamlessly help patients navigate the care they need, and ultimately, improve function and hasten recovery," the Nuvance website quotes Dr. Christopher Lehrach, president of Nuvance Health Medical Practices, as saying.

WMC takes a similar tack. "The tristate area has been one of the hardest hit in the nation during the Covid-19 pandemic," says its program's website. "Today, an increasing number of people who became ill from the coronavirus continue to deal with issues surrounding their physical, mental and emotional health and quality of life. Sometimes referred to as post-Covid syndrome, this is a very real health issue. And it is treatable."

Diagnosis before treatment. Both hospitals' programs start with a primary-care provider reviewing the patient's history and figuring out what specialists need to be involved. Both emphasize the customized nature of their treatment plans for dealing with the varied symptoms of this unusually elusive disease. Both assign patients the services of a clinical navigator as a guide in the development of a treatment plan.

The state has been developing a treatment plan. Its is for more intensive post-Covid research.

Governor Kathy Hochul gave a speech on October 19 assuring New Yorkers that the state would be very active in applying for its share of the billion dollars in federal funding the National Institutes of Health has been allocated for post-Covid research. "We will lead on this initiative. That is what we're going to be announcing in the next couple of weeks, our plan for addressing this because clearly, it is still with us," she said. "And there are many New Yorkers still struggling with this, trying to get back to work and take care of their families and get on with life, while dealing with very scary unknown side effects from having contracted Covid many months ago."

There was considerable interest in the state Department of Health webinar this past Monday, October 25 to raise awareness among healthcare providers of post-Covid symptoms and their treatment. Some 600 providers had already signed up for it at the time of Hochul's speech. She has promised "to convene an expert panel to determine what steps New York State can take."



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*The goal of Pilates is coordination of body, mind and spirit*

by Susan Farkas

**L**OOKING FOR A new exercise to tone and strengthen your core? To improve your posture and flexibility? A low-impact exercise you can do at home or in a class? Something to lessen back and neck pain after long hours at the computer?

Have you considered Pilates? There are several Pilates studios in Ulster County, and you can also try Pilates virtually, on a mat at home. Or take private or semi-

private Pilates lessons on equipment like a reformer, designed to provide resistance and guide your movements.

Joseph Pilates was a German-born circus performer and boxer who developed the exercise routine that bears his name. He aimed to strengthen the mind and the body. His philosophy of movement was based on six fundamental principles: centering, control, flow, breath, precision and concentration.

When World War I broke out, Pilates was imprisoned in a British internment camp.

He started rehabilitating injured detainees. When he wanted to incorporate resistance, he didn’t have weights or other props when he wanted to incorporate resistance, so he used bed springs and beer-keg rings for tension. Springs are still part of the reformer’s design. Beer-keg rings have evolved into the “magic or fitness circle,” a small hoop used in a variety of exercises.

Pilates and his wife Clara emigrated to New York in 1926. They set up a studio where Joseph taught for the next 40 years. Clara taught for another ten after her



PHOTOS BY DION OGUST

Melissa Bierstock is a dance and Pilates instructor with her own studio, Mainly Pilates, in Kingston.



husband died. Their strengthening and rehabilitative exercises became popular with dancers who rehearsed at nearby studios. Pilates exercises have since evolved, but they are still widely used by dancers and recommended by physical therapists.

The goal of Pilates is the "complete co-ordination of body, mind, and spirit." Like in yoga, breathing correctly is critical. In Pilates, though, you'll breathe in through your nose and exhale through your mouth because it helps engage your core. Unlike

in yoga, you won't hold your poses. There's no spiritual component or meditation. Nonetheless, concentration and form – doing poses precisely, moving from your center out – are essential.

### Pilates in Ulster County

Melissa Bierstock is a dance and Pilates instructor with her own studio, Mainly Pilates, in Kingston. She says Pilates is

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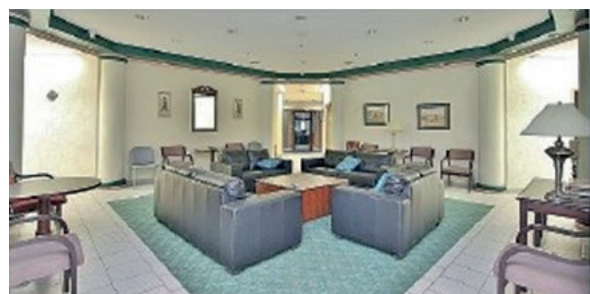
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“a stretch and strengthening technique.” Bierstock grew up in Ulster County and trained as a dancer from the age of four. She moved to Toronto in 1996 and performed there professionally in both modern dance and ballet. She used Pilates techniques to treat injuries and became certified in the Stott Pilates Method of Body Conditioning so she could start teaching. When she became pregnant with her daughter, she convinced fellow dancer and husband David Loewen to get certified so he could take over her classes. He still teaches today at Pilates on Main in Gardiner. (The couple are now divorced.)

Bierstock trained National Ballet of Canada dancers and owned a pilates studio in Toronto until her return to the Hudson Valley in 2007. She opened Mainly Pilates in 2008, and now owns and teaches at the Ballet School of Kingston, formerly the Annie Hebard School, where she learned her first ballet steps as a child.

“Pilates is for everyone,” Bierstock says. She believes that it should help with activities from running to skating, dancing or walking. Pilates will teach you proper alignment and stability. “We try to strengthen the body in all of its planes and directions, moving carefully and methodically.”

### Hundreds of exercises

Mainly Pilates studio is roomy and quiet. You’ll probably start prone on a mat, centering your core or “powerhouse,” as it’s known in Pilates. Bierstock admits she’s a stickler for form. “I don’t let people move on until they’ve mastered the fundamentals,” she explains. Mat classes run for an hour, and you might use a strap, ball or “fitness circle” in your exercises.

While many people only do Pilates on a mat, some prefer the more intense workout of a reformer machine. The machine, which looks like a wooden bed with a cushioned platform called a “carriage” that rolls back and forth. Springs are set with varying degrees of tension as you pull yourself with straps or pulleys.

Bierstock says her students master the basics on the mat, but soon enjoy using one of the two reformers or the other apparatus



Melissa Bierstock on the mat.

she has, “half-Cadillac, half-towers,” which provide a lot of feedback.

Most of the classes at Mainly Pilates went on Zoom when the pandemic broke out, Bierstock says. The virtual classes worked so well that she and her clients decided to continue them online. Bierstock leads noon classes on Zoom three days a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and there’s an in-person class on Wednesday evening. All classes cost \$22 each, four for \$80.

Joseph Pilates developed hundreds of exercises; his followers have come up with hundreds more. But here are three basic exercises Bierstock recommends to get you started on Pilates:

**The cat.** If you suffer from lower back discomfort, get on your hands and knees. Starting with your tailbone, curl your back up into an arch, then slowly return to a flat spine.

**Pelvic tilt.** Use the lower abdominals to

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crawl the belly back in and allow the tail a little curl. "It's a really nice stretch, and this exercise starts bringing the abdominals into your awareness."

**Clam shell.** Lie on your side with your knees bent. Try to keep your hip still as you open and close your leg several times. (Most Pilates exercises are done with only a few repetitions, since they all involve your core.)

If you want to try Pilates on your own, there are some good classes on YouTube.

After a Pilates workout, Bierstock says, "You should feel a sense of being lifted in yourself and that you're carrying yourself a little bit better. You'll feel taller, and you can breathe more easily because things are where they're supposed to be."

You may even sleep better. Enjoy!

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# Stepping out

*The motion movement has found many local converts*

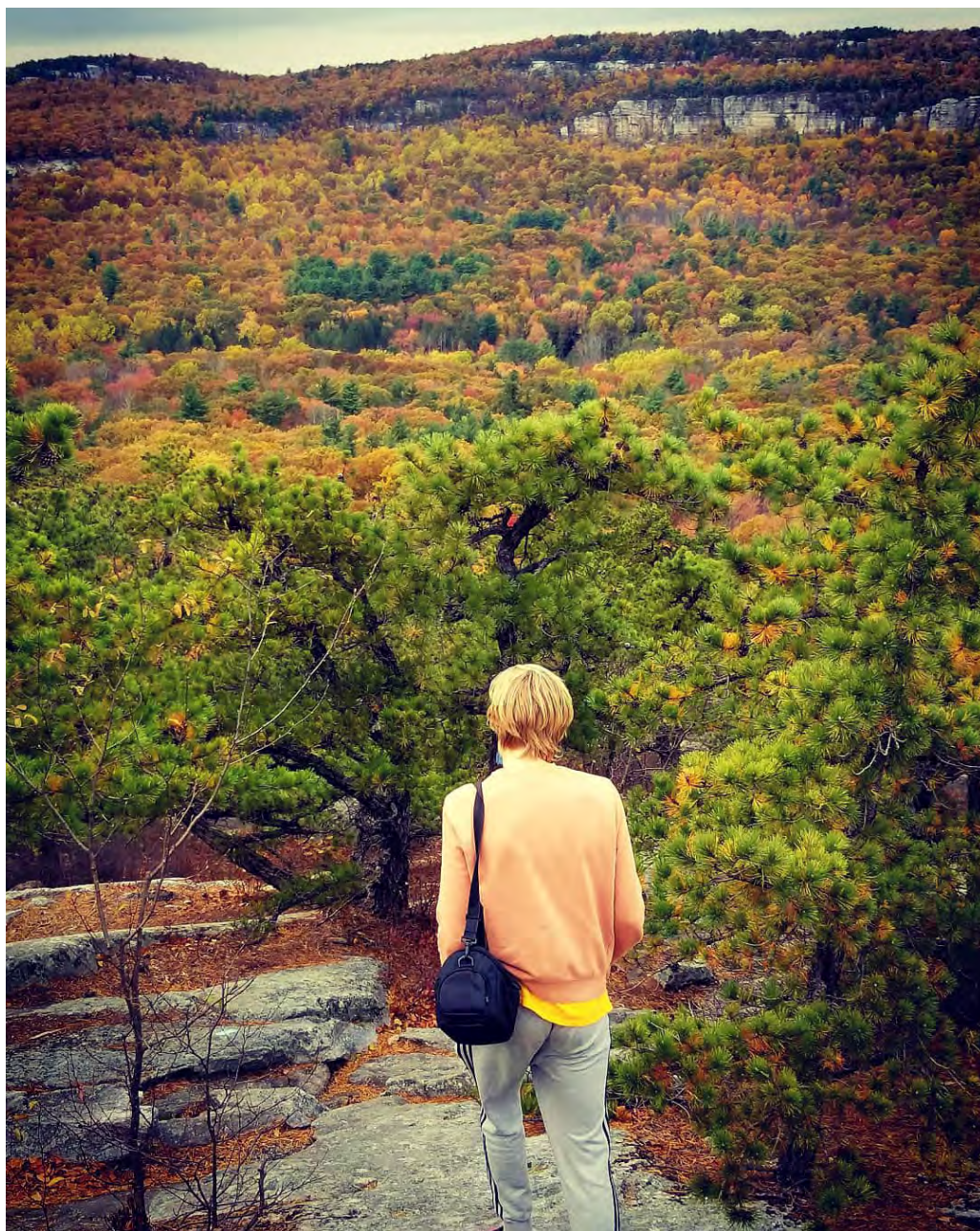
by Erin Quinn

*Lift your attention  
For the appearance of the next road  
It might be through a family of  
trees, a desert, or  
On rolling waves of the sea  
It's the ancient road the soul knows  
We always remember it when we  
see it  
It beckons us a birth  
It carries us home*

— Joy Harjo. An excerpt from  
her poem *Road in American  
Sunrise*

**W**ALKING IS PRIMAL. Our bodies can crave that motion. Our thoughts sway inside the boat of ourselves as we set sail on a path or road or trail. Sometimes we walk without thinking, and at other times we walk to think. As we move our muscles, however fast or slow, however buoyant or tired, there is this sense of freedom, of becoming unburdened from stasis, of allowing our minds to unravel along whatever ribbons unfold beneath our feet.

Yes, people walk for exercise. They walk for fresh air. The health benefits include weight loss, muscle gain, lowered heart rates, Vitamin D absorption, and a general sense of wellness. But what if one is unwell? What if the grief or the loss they are in mourning for is too big to sit with, too heavy to carry? What if it is pebble-sized or elephant-large? What if it adheres to the heart, makes a nest inside the chest?



PHOTOS BY ERIN QUINN

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Can we let it fall from us as we walk? Can it dissolve, stay a pace away, soak into the ground like rainfall, peel off of our limbs like the bark of a birch tree?

We asked four articulate friends whether walking has helped them to overcome their mourning over a loss. Here's what they said.

### "Walking is my healing balm"

Nikki Wilson Clasby, a lecturer and composition program coordinator at SUNY New Paltz, doesn't think of loss or grieving as a specific event or tragedy, but "more like small leaks of precious life-source disappearing on a daily basis." She grieves "time lost each day in a digital screen," or "time spent sitting at work — my body deprived of movement. I grieve for forgetting to breathe deeply, for being conscious in the moment."

She said she grieves for being too consumed by her work to the detriment of other things that she loves. Walking can serve as an antidote, a time out, or a time-in, depending on how you look at it.

"I almost always walk alone," she said. "Walking is my healing balm, my opportunity to recalibrate and revitalize my spirit, my nerves. Walking for me is nutritious; it's a vital supplement. Without walking, I wither. I need the silence, the space to unfold — expand. I need to blend into the wind, soak into the smells, lose myself in the birds."

When she's out hiking, Clasby feels like her life is fulfilled, and "I can die a happy person."

"I know that sounds morbid," she conceded, "but when I'm hiking I often feel like I have completed my life's work, as though all that's really important is right there in that moment."

Her walks and hikes often take her into the Mohonk Preserve. "There is a profound energy up there, and I never tire of it," she said.

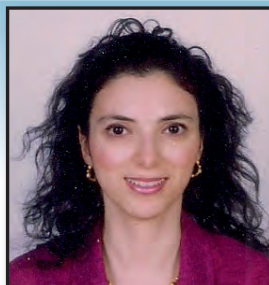
### A sense of proportion

Ashley Holloway of Poughkeepsie, a graduate student who works in a law firm, said that walking helped her through a sense of loss when her parents moved from New York to Ohio. "I could feel myself getting anxious and tense and sad about the thought of them moving away, and I didn't want to dwell on that feeling," she said. "So I went for a short, five-to-ten-minute walk, and when I got back to my apartment I felt much more relaxed and able to focus."

From then on, Holloway convinced herself to just "take the recycling outside and get some fresh air," whenever that sense of sadness would drape over her. "Once I was outside, the fresh air felt so nice that I would just keep walking around [my apartment complex] and I didn't realize

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how much better I was feeling until I returned inside from my walk.”

She said that her mood would be so elevated that she almost forgot why she had decided to go for the walk in the first place. “These weren’t long walks, but they were enough to provide me with some solace because I was able to move and breathe and feel the sun, admire nature.” She said being outside gave

.....  
**The health benefits include weight loss, muscle gain and a general sense of wellness. But what if one is unwell? What if the grief or the loss they are in mourning for is too big to sit with, to heavy to carry?**  
.....

her sadness a better sense of proportion. “It made me feel small in a way, which was reassuring.”

#### **A return to so-called normal**

For Emily Benkert of Highland, walking and hiking “can alleviate anxiety and never-ending thoughts. I don’t think that I was grieving one loss but what seemed to be a constant loss of mile-



stones and memories as a senior collegiate athlete [during the pandemic].”

She would walk a trail behind her college campus, and when she was sent home in April 2020, she walked with her family every day in their neighborhood in Lloyd.

“We would walk to get out of our house, the four walls of our bedrooms, to breathe fresh air that hadn’t been the same air we’d been breathing for two months straight,” she said. “We’d walk just to forget the insanity that was happening around us, and

we were grateful to be able to have a home and a neighborhood where we could go for a walk. So many people did not have that.”

The walking began to expand from her neighborhood to various trails and paths throughout the Hudson Valley. “Walking helped me get back to living a so-called normal life. The first thing I did with any of my friends once we started being able to see each other again was to go on walks. I have gone on more walks in the past year and a half than I had in my previous 20

years of life and now sincerely look forward to the want-to- go-for-a-walk?” text from my friends.”

Walking was for her a life preserver in a sea of collective confusion and loss of the conventional regularity that had marked her days.

She’s right. As we begin to refill those places and spaces, will we still turn to walking, lean on our legs, thrust out our throats to the wind, and express some of that loss within us?



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### Living with profound grief

For Elise Gold, walking “one mountain at a time, one trail at a time, one step, and really it boils down to one breath at a time,” is how she lives her life. As people flocked to the Shawangunk mountain range to seek their own sense of solace in April 2020, Gold craved even more space.

“While they were finding a place to breathe, I was feeling smothered.” Her husband suggested that they take a hike in the Catskills, where he had been working on the “Catskill 3500 — a challenge to hike all of the peaks, 3500 feet or higher in elevation and repeat four of them in the winter, which totals 37 mountain climbs. The scale

of the challenge seemed daunting to her.

She thought to herself, “I can do one peak.” They ventured out and that same day, she said: “I found a new love.”

“When her daughter Maya took her life in 2015, Elise Gold did not know that it was possible to continue her own life. Not in the sense that she was suicidal herself,

**“Without walking, I wither. I need the silence, the space to unfold — expand. I need to blend into the wind, soak into the smells, lose myself in the birds.”**

but that she just didn’t know in her heart if she could go on. “It wasn’t long before I realized that, if I’m going to be here, then I need to find joy. This is my work; to find joy while living with the grief”

It’s not that the joy that fills her when she is hiking erases the grief. “I will always live with profound grief.” She said. “Where

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there is grief, there was love. This love will always be there."

For her, it is about being in this moment, and then being in the next moment. To that end, there is no alleviation. There is no working through. "I live with grief and I find joy and gratitude."

Hiking the Catskill Mountains provided Gold a sense of timelessness. "I find myself laughing at the playful rock-hopping side of myself, groaning at a challenging rock

scramble, angry or sad by the news of the day that still is gnawing at me, the fear of getting lost on the bushwhacks or blissed out while in awe of a view."

Bliss is sustenance. "I don't keep my eye on the time. I have my eyes on the buds, the blossoms, the boulders, the moss, the mushrooms and yes, the moon. On a few occasions, I hiked back in the dark." She has found a new love of winter through her winter hikes.

Whether hiking alone, with her husband or a friend or a group, the act of walking provided Gold with sustenance — physical, emotional, social and spiritual. "Maya's spirit is always with me," she said. "When I take my time to be quiet, to just be, I feel her presence more deeply. Hiking has not alleviated the grief. It has given me pause to be more in touch with all aspects of myself, one step at a time, one breath at a time."

Movement, breath and focus: the root beneath the heel of a boot, or the pile of pine needles hiding a slick rock, or the feel of the sun at high noon and the cool depth of the fern-flecked forest floor. All allow us to carry things with us, not to be weightless, but to be held, propped up, steadied, one soft step after another.

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