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Essay by Barbara Calhoun

Looking Back, Forward, Under, and Through the Pandemic



It was sometime during our umpteenth driveway drinking party, in 2020, when it suddenly hit me: the Solo fire pit had its own space, a sooty mark where it had been rolled to, on a fairly continuous basis, if the weather was fine on a

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Friday night, over the past year-plus in our neighborhood. I recognized specific lawn chairs dragged across the street by neighbors to mark their spot while they finished the dinner dishes. A group of people who, in 2019 and before, only occasionally said hello while coming and going to who-knows-where, was now on a journey together along a tunnel that would lead us to a new reality. This is known as a wormhole, and we were deep inside it, hurtling forward together in the dark, drinking beer from our unbreakable glasses.

If we are constantly in motion in the pandemic wormhole, why don't we feel a breeze?

I always thought that wormholes were Einstein's way of giving his colleagues more work to do, the dust he left behind on his mental construction sites. Wormholes, which offer the enticing possibility of short-circuiting enormous distances between stars, are the holy grail for space travel in science fiction. But the unfortunate consequence of being in a wormhole is that the *traveler* has no idea when it will end.

This is terrifying.

Or maybe it's a signal that we might as well sit back in our Eddie Bauer camp chairs (the ones we picked because they didn't dig into our thighs, and had deep cup holders) and let the wormhole pass like starlight over our baseball-capped heads.

Our children understand this. They ride their bicycles in the dark, circling at the end of the driveway with no fear, full of the realization that the number of cars coming through the neighborhood has been reduced by 75 percent. The littlest ones, say, the ones who turned five during the pandemic, will be the first to tell you to pull your mask back up over your nose, thank you very much. They get it. They're okay with it. They don't need some scientist in a white shirt and skinny tie, clipboard in hand, face bathed blue from the glow of a bank of computer monitors, to tell us what's happening.

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We are in a wormhole, and Einstein must be amused. From all accounts, the man had a terrific sense of humor. For myself, I'm ready to get the heck out of here.

If a group of people, maybe our entire planet, wanted to exit the wormhole, would their desire be enough to make it happen? The funny thing about phenomena that can only be expressed algebraically is—we simply don't know. But then again, we didn't know if we could put people on the moon until we did it. So why not try to rewire the wormhole?



Perhaps Einstein was only half-right, his theoretical arguments limited by the technology of his time. We, on the other hand, have oodles of both technology and time. Time we gained back by working from home, no longer commuting in heavy traffic at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. every Monday through Friday. If that's not a wormhole, I don't know what is, and frankly it's evidence enough that we could break one if we wanted to.

What would it take to alter the wormhole? Would all 7.5 billion of us need to understand, like *Alice in Wonderland*, not just where we are, but also where we were, where we're going, and what the Cheshire Cat is trying to tell us? Would our multicultural population be able to rise above politics, religion, and sheer laziness to will this wormhole to end? Of course, we would continue to rely on science, vaccinate ourselves to the extent possible and all that. I'm talking about changing the circuitry of the tunnel and finding the exit ramp.

We should grab our popcorn and our kids, and troop through the opening. Hopefully, we'll still fit through the door, after all those homemade brownies and bottles of wine.

Maybe, if we can work out the math, we'll find a way. One key variable is the extent to which we have the kinetic energy to do this together. So many people have lost so much. We don't know when the next spike will occur, a variable that's both frightening and immediate. The expanse of time we thought we had just a moment ago to figure this out now feels like it's vanishing as we speak. Taking all this into account, the equation is starting to look like...

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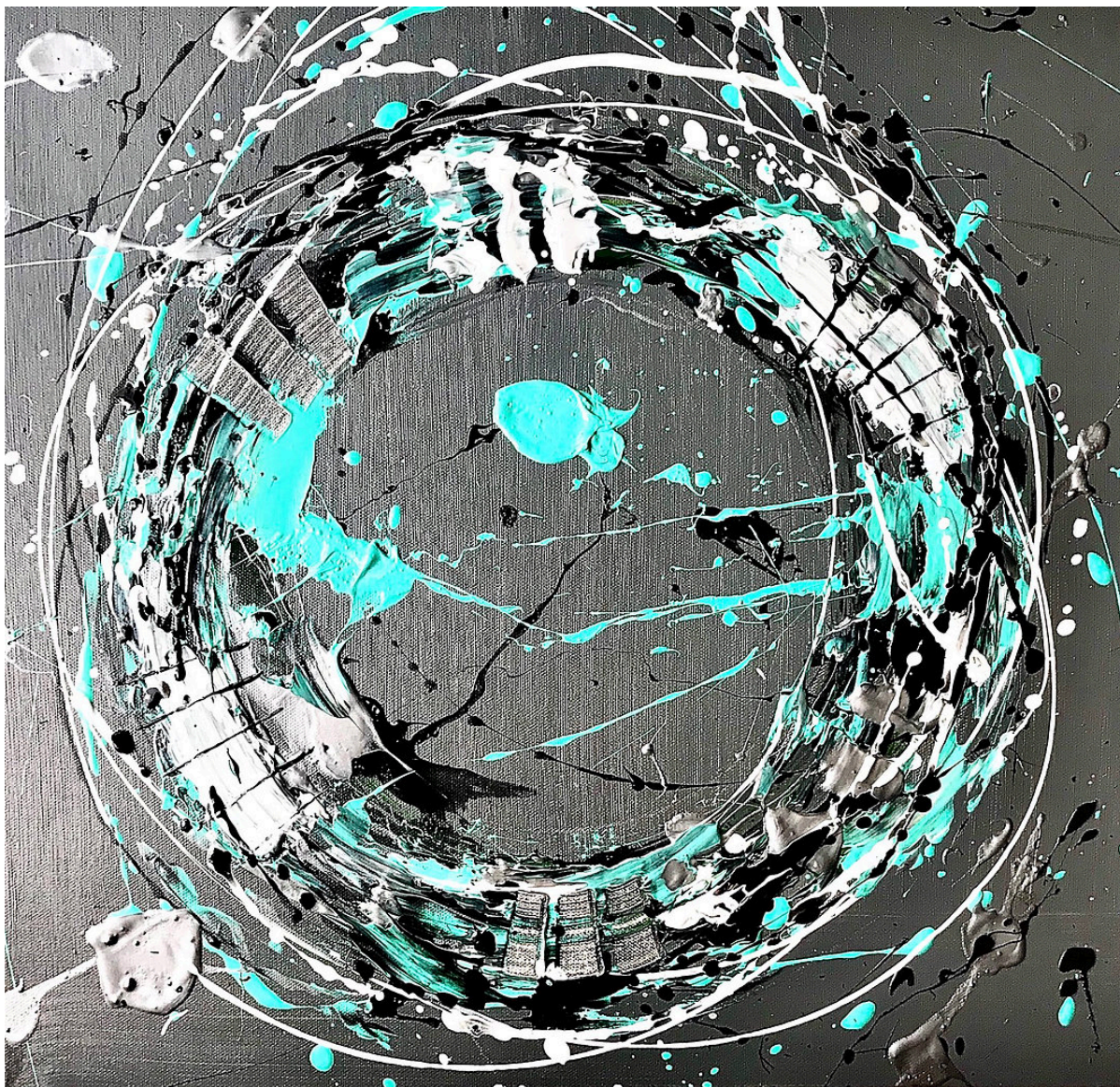
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Wait. Did I mention that astrophysicists, such as Ethan Siegel in *Forbes*, have written about using wormholes to travel into the past? I think we just found the glowing exit sign: we could rewind to the point where the pandemic simply didn't happen. But, if this is true, why didn't we rewire the wormhole earlier? I'm going to assume that part isn't verifiable. It's too heartbreaking. We cannot bring back those we lost. As my father used to say, "Let's just deal with what we can change." But the possibility of changing the past, which in turn would change the present, most certainly leads us to the conclusion that the entire equation for altering wormholes is beyond our capability to devise.

We can't rewire the wormhole. We must travel through it, hoping someone outside the Slinky is hanging onto that cosmic clipboard, ticking off moments, bringing us closer to the endpoint.

As another Friday night approaches, refugees fill their cups with wine, looking forward to a gathering around the elemental fire. The night will begin quietly at first, and then the breeze will pick up. If we lash our chairs together like a fleet of life rafts on the open sea, perhaps we will all simply blow toward that distant shore, where the sun sets brightly in a flash that nearly blinds you and finally find the other end of the wormhole.



Publishing Information

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- “[How Traveling Back In Time Could Really, Physically Be Possible](#) [5]” by Ethan Siegel, *Forbes*, November 14, 2017.

Art Information

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Barbara Calhoun is a member of the Dramatists Guild and Authors Guild. She is a graduate of The Attic Institute fiction workshop. Her work has appeared in *Storied Stuff* and *Medium*, and her poetry will be part of an art installation on Social Being at the Maude Kerns Art Center in Eugene, Oregon in January 2022. She is currently developing stories across various media, including historical fiction, essays, and poetry.

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