

Topography

By Sarah Townsend

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I'm sitting in a bright south-facing room, drinking a perfectly steeped cup of tea. The sea is a mile away; the mountains -- snowy, precipitous, fantastic - frame my days in the city, glowing in changing light.

When I was working, I didn't actually have time for the mountains. They stood there while I dashed through my days. I appreciated them, but let's face it, it's hard to identify with hunks of rock when you're dashing.

When I was working, most everyone I knew went off to work in the morning. But there are those of us at the margins who don't go: retired folks in well-earned respite; kids in strollers directing their adults with gleeful imperiousness; the graveyard shift, yawning and heading off to bed; the self-employed, the barely-employed, the unemployed; the artists. And those of us who are limited.

When I was working, I never thought about those of us who are limited. Like most people, I never really thought about limitations until I got some. I now have my very own limitations to keep me humble and slow. So now I have time for the mountains. They keep me company.

When I was working, I was reliable and diligent and productive, and proud (mostly of being reliable and diligent and productive). Now that I am none of the above, I struggle to value my basic mineral being. And I have found - eventually, with difficulty, with a generous dose of imagination - some core of uneroded solidity, a mountain aspect within my fragility. I wish my mountainous bit were bigger, though, and stronger; able to bear the trampings of life the way the mountains bear our boots, both unyielding and forgiving.

When I was working, I lived in human time, North American-style. Human time runs quick. Like most people I knew, I would stand in the shower in the morning scheduling my day down to five-minute increments. I had friends, family, students and staff to support and to enjoy. I had so many things to learn, to discover, to become engrossed in each day. And I felt there were dire consequences to screwing up the to-the-five-minute schedule. All those folks to let down, all that work and play unfinished.

I no longer live in quick human time, and I don't accomplish much in any one day.

People are let down, work and play are left undone. But this society of ours is more flexible and accommodating than I had imagined, and I am less essential to its daily functioning than I had thought. To my relief and dismay, the rapid flow of life in the world continues undiminished in the absence of my frantic contributions. I am substantially changed, though. In some strange way, I now live in geologic time. My new pace feels glacial; my accomplishments seem barely perceivable. The five-minute interval is utterly irrelevant. I am subject to forces of uplift and erosion that work on a different scale. My struggles are steep and craggy and very slow.

When I was working, my community consisted of people racing along on common paths, sanctioned and central. From my new position at the edge, I encounter people traveling on tangential paths. I volunteer with recent immigrants, and they have changed my vision of community. These new members of my community have come from the thick of one society, to the margins of another. They are trying to navigate, learning new landmarks. Though I can no longer do what I used to do in the world, I can still laugh and listen. I can just be here, an increasingly familiar, reassuring part of their new landscape. The mountains show me the value of being here, even if I don't do too much. There is a semi-cool, somewhat useful "doing" aspect to just being around - mountains frame Vancouver; I frame my community.

I'm sitting at home on a gray Friday morning when most everyone else is off to work. My limitations are manifest - my mind has a disconcerting dullness and lack of focus; the depths are maybe not so deep as they once were. But the sea is still a mile away and the mountains haven't moved much. Maybe it's okay that I'm not moving much either. Maybe now I help form the necessary edge of my community, even though my participation is more topographical than kinetic. Community exists for me in both geologic and human time and space; I stand solidly at the side of ordinary life, framing the bustle. I delight in the folks who pass through my days, but the mountains are my true companions.

Sarah Townsend lives in Vancouver. She is on leave from the faculty of medicine at UBC, having done extensive laboratory research in Immunology. She's currently coming to grips with some physical limitations and has time to ruminate on the value of celebrating our various human quirks.