



I've been thinking a lot about [Spoon Theory](#) lately, which made me realize I'd never talked about it here on Parentheticals. For those who don't know, Spoon Theory is a metaphor used by the disability community to explain what it feels like to have a limited amount of energy available for basic tasks of daily living and how it is more difficult to replace or regenerate that energy if one is dealing with a disability or chronic illness than it would be for others. (A "spoon" in this metaphorical sense just refers to "a unit of energy", not an actual eating implement.) People use this metaphor to express various ideas about having energy, running out of energy, safeguarding one's energy, spending one's energy, etc. So one might say, for example, "I wish I could go out to that event tonight, but I am all out of spoons." Or, "It took almost all my spoons just to shower and get dressed today." Or, "I used all my spoons up yesterday and I don't have enough back to do that today."

When I was going through the active phase of my cancer treatments, with all the chemotherapy and surgeries, I was definitely much more spoon-deprived than I was used to being. Of course it made sense that all the difficult physical demands of killing cancer cells and re-sculpting my body would take a lot of spoons, and it was not surprising that I found I needed to hoard my spoons and spend them only (or at least mostly) on self-care and recovery activities (however broadly or personally defined those activities may have been in my specific case).

But then I got better, and after a while the physical demands eased and I found my spoons didn't run out so fast. I found I could go back to spending my spoons on activities and projects besides self-care and daily living, like I had been used to doing. So of course, I did. And I'm happy to report that physically, my stamina and spoon supply seems to be nearly back to normal. (If I had to estimate, I'd say I'm at about 85-90%.)

But now...now I'm realizing that spoons as a metaphor for units of energy doesn't only apply to physical energy, it also applies to mental and emotional energy. And I'm still lower on spoons in those areas than I used to be (or than I want to be). Mentally I'm getting better, though I still struggle with some concentration and memory issues and my stamina for doing intellectual work is still somewhat lower than usual (which is a bummer for writing, though I'm pushing through and trying to spend spoons on it as often as I can, because that's still a major priority for me). Emotionally though, it's even more of a struggle. I find myself in a place where I'm seriously low on spoons, both because I'm spending a lot and because they're slow to get back. It's like maybe I loaned all those spoons to my physical silverware drawer, or maybe that they're still in

the dishwasher and the dishwasher doesn't get run everyday so I have to wait longer to get them back.

Metaphor torturing aside, I've found that it's often been the pattern that once the physical demands lessen, the emotional ones surface to get their turn, and that seems to be what's happening now in this phase of my cancer recovery. I'm still dealing with waves (sometimes larger, sometimes smaller) of grief, anxiety, depression and anger. And because I run out of spoons faster, my resilience is low; I'm less flexible, less forgiving whenever things go wrong or just go in a way I didn't expect (which, because I am alive, is all the damn time). All that is understandable and fine, but this is also a time of additional emotional challenges brought on by the state of uncertainty, fear, anxiety, outrage and despair that our national political situation is creating. Every day seems to bring a fresh new worry or upset (or sometimes several), and even though I know I could just make like an ostrich and ignore the news, it's hard to look away, to not at least bear witness even if I can't summon the spoons to act. I know I'm not alone here—there are many, many people all around me that feel emotionally battered and exhausted from this same climate—but I'm finding it especially difficult to handle both my personal trauma and our communal trauma with a still-relatively-limited number of spoons. I'm impatient—I so badly want to be “all done” with all this recovery process and back in the cheerful, optimistic, enthusiastic, motivated, energetic mode I prefer, but I'm just not consistently there yet. I feel like the world outside my house is a rapidly devolving mess that urgently needs caring responsible people to fix it, and that I have to justify why I'm still floundering around in this depressive place. I find myself worried about being judged for not doing enough, for not improving fast enough—though I am pretty sure that it's only me that's doing the judging, not anyone else. (Why I am so judgy and hard on myself is a whole other topic, one which I have explored in therapy for many years and am still working on...suffice to say that during times of low resilience and not enough spoons, one's chronic issues tend to get inflamed more easily.)

So what do I do with all this? (Apparently, I write a blog post so I can play with metaphors...) Seriously though, I think the first step is acknowledgement and acceptance of how it is: that emotional processing takes time and that I am still low on spoons of all kinds. Then the next step is a continual practice of mothering myself in a loving way, trying to be both gentle with and forgiving of myself during this period, which after all is hopefully temporary (God willing and the creek don't rise.) Then after that I need to start being strategic about how to conserve and regenerate my spoons. Now is not the time *for me* to Do All The Things, or even most of the things. (Basic adulting and parenting excepted.) As I apparently reminded myself way back in 2011 (before I was even half as challenged as I am currently!), now is the time for [practicing, prioritizing and pausing](#)

. I can be the change I want to see in the world, but I also have to respect and honor the place I'm at and the priority of self-care. (Oh hi, Oxygen Mask Theory, here you are again. Come on in and rest a spell, I made up the bed for you.) Fallow time is important for healthy growth, even for people who have plenty of spoons to spare. I can make more spoons for myself by resting, by making art and spending time around like-minded, positive, loving people. These are not

indulgences; they are part of the process, part of the practice.

Practice, practice, practice. Isn't that the challenge and the privilege of living? As someone who is particularly grateful to still be alive right now, I'm going to choose to see all this opportunity for practicing my lessons as a good thing, even though it doesn't always feel so good. No rainbow without rain. No mud, no lotus. [Just keep swimming.](#)