“When you experience a trauma, it’s hard to talk about it at first because you haven’t figured out how it fits within a narrative of yourself.” This is Megan Reynolds, a graduating English Ph.D. who studies trauma within Jewish and African diasporas. Reynolds, like many of us, has had to work through important personal questions to finish her PhD during a pandemic. One question many people can relate to: when is the appropriate time to work through major traumas while also getting work done?

The early months—and for some the first year of the pandemic—offered unique time to do work, research, and spend time alone at home. Reynolds remembers that time fondly, but she also emphasizes that everyone has had to find their own ways to process past and present crises. Reynolds talks about the applicability of trauma studies as a theoretical lens for thinking about such layers of lived experiences: “trauma is inherently a rupture; it’s a breaking of something.” While we grieve and look back on the trauma we have experienced, this time at the end of the school year provides us with the opportunity to congratulate ourselves for graduating and bettering ourselves during a global pandemic.

The pandemic impacted many lives, individually and collectively, and now we can reconnect despite the ongoing presence of such traumatic ruptures. Reynolds offers a great example of forming valuable connections during the pandemic. Her experience occurred during a research trip to Montgomery, Alabama last year. As she walked through the Legacy Museum, a section of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, she focused on aspects of haunting and spirituality. While observing and taking notes, she attracted the attention of a couple of fellow visitors. The couple approached her and asked about the nature of her research; she recalls the conversation as an exciting opportunity to offer an academic take on the museum while also allowing her fellow visitors’ experiences to inform her own research. Such an “every day, pragmatic lens,” Reynolds notes, is central to grappling with social justice issues. Often, people have strong knowledge on a topic and use non-academic language to apply that knowledge, she shares. Experiences like these enhance work that is so closely related to important theoretical questions; Reynolds’ story is a great example of how students bridge theoretical research with real lived experience.

Like many scholars in English and the Humanities, social justice is central to Reynold’s work. She has continued her work on social justice issues, diaspora, and archival studies as a development coordinator for the Jewish Book Council, a non-profit based in New York. When asked how she did it, how did she land such an impressive job during a global crisis?, her response is to remember others who have dealt with so much to make it this far. That, and the fact that building good habits and finding a solid workflow provide important lessons we can all use during this time. Reynolds shows us that after everything, we still can find new strategies to better ourselves and our lives even as we grieve what we’ve lost.