Pete Sutherland: Possibly the most common experience for everybody now is loss. As a result of this pandemic, bringing us together in this particular way, bringing everyone together under this leaky umbrella of loss.

Cello theme begins, and plays under narration.

Mary Wesley: Hello, welcome to VT Untapped, a podcast from the Vermont Folklife Center that explores the state through the voices of its own residents. I’m Mary Wesley.

This is the fourth episode in a series where we talk to people around the state about what they’re going through and what they’re thinking about in 2020, part of our Listening in Place project.

Upbeat cello begins, and plays under narration.

This month we get a unique, and deep, glimpse into one person’s experience during this strange year. Since early spring South Burlington resident Pete Sutherland has been keeping an audio diary; periodically turning on the voice memo app on his phone and speaking his thoughts, worries, gratitudes and observations aloud.

Pete is a longtime friend of the VFC and a vastly influential contributor to traditional music and culture in Vermont. He’s prolific as a musician, teacher, visual artist, composer, writer, and storyteller, and his way with words comes through in this diary. He’s been generous enough to offer this developing audio record to the Vermont Folklife Center to include in our growing collection of materials documenting Vermonters’ experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and our Listening in Place project. He also agreed to let us share some excerpts in this episode of VT Untapped.

A diary offers a remarkable opportunity to gain real insight into how another person makes sense of the world. It’s a collection of casual, personal reflections on everyday experience—thought out for sure, but not rehearsed. Remember, Pete didn’t make these recordings for us, we’re just lucky enough to get to listen to them. And, for audio nerds like us at the Folklife Center, there’s something even more remarkable when these reflections come in the form of an audio diary. As you’ll hear, Pete often records his entries in the moment, on location, and as events unfold around him. His thoughtfully assembled sentences put us there with him, immersed in the scenes and soundscapes where he’s recording. Through his own internal voice he helps us witness—in a small, removed way—his experience of the dramatic changes and pressures the pandemic has brought to all our daily lives.

Pete started recording on March 26, and as of this month is continuing to make regular entries. When he shared his existing audio files with us this fall they totalled nearly three hours. In this
episode you’ll hear some selections. Some are small vignettes that could almost be timeless - sitting near a stream in the woods, waiting for a city bus...And then others put you right smack dab in the middle of 2020.

A quick note: Pete records his diary by stopping and starting within the same voice memo file. You’ll notice the storyline sometimes jumps from one scene to the next. Listen for a brief tone played on the cello to let you know when we’re moving from one day’s entry to the next.

*Cella tone.*

Think of it as turning a page...

*Upbeat cello theme begins, and plays under narration.*

We are so grateful that Pete reached out to the VFC to share this personal record and I’m excited for you to hear it. As always, you can learn more about everything you’re hearing in this episode, including tips for starting your own audio diary, in our show notes at [www.vtfolklife.org/untapped](http://www.vtfolklife.org/untapped).

And now I give you the Covid audio diary of Pete Sutherland, which begins beside a babbling brook:

*Cella music.*

**Pete Sutherland:** This is just day one of one person's journal about isolation in the time of the Coronavirus outbreak worldwide.

It's March 26th. It's a Thursday. It's just an arbitrary starting point. The outbreak has been steadily growing since about January, I think. Being in this country for about a month, give or take, being in my state of Vermont for at least a couple of weeks, probably three weeks, and being in my city of Burlington for probably a couple of weeks, including, I think eight people dead so far.

Everyone is online. A huge amount of time and not always for work. I think people are starved for each other's reassurance that everyone is still there. And that everyone has some semblance of hope and optimism about them. Although there are certainly a number of people who are given to posting drama and despair.

I don't know whether it's audible, but I am sitting on a log above a rushing brook. It's late March as I said, and the water, unconcerned with the day's news or the darkness that is on the human spirit right now, continues to flow.

*Cella tone.*
Day two, isolation, separation, big change, traumatic, really. One can be a grown up and have everything figured out and spend precious little energy second guessing or being caught up in the childhood level anxieties and then be completely upended by circumstances.

I went for a distanced walk with my son, who lives an hour away. And we happened on a port-a-john that we both needed to use when I was making ready to exit, I used the Purell from the dispenser and realized I had my half empty bottle that is always with me of sanitizer, homemade sanitizer, and without really batting an eye. I dripped a bunch of it into my little bottle, not quite filling it. Just maybe bringing it up by half again, what was there. Kind of seemed OK to me.

A very small, petty crime. Very small. About the size of the bottle.

Cello tone.

Day five or six of this journal, I'm sitting above the creek again, Potash Brook. It was kind of calling me this morning.

It was a piece came over the sleepless Internet yesterday from India, but it applies everywhere. How it's the haves that can afford to suspend work, take care of their kids, procure hand sanitizer and masks, avail themselves of specialty delivery systems for the better food and other things they might need.

I know that if I had the resources beyond the good fortune that I currently and probably temporarily have, I would be donating a lot to the food shelf and other agencies that are doing the really great work and the unheralded work that's needed.

My band and I did raise a thousand dollars from a livestream, but I wonder how long that lasted. It also seems like it's coming from a place of privilege to have poetic thoughts about returning to the simple life. Noticing the little things, being grateful for the cup of tea, even though we imagine that this is what binds us all together as humans in good times and bad.

Cello tone.

It's sort of fitting that there is no particular rhythm to doing this audio journal as the rhythm of life has been so upended.

It seems like every day has highs and lows and the highs can be from. Nature, they can be from an unmasked or a masked smile. And how does one convey a smile with a mask on? This is what everyone is kind of consumed with it at some point. Anyway, I also get mine from, from teaching online. Majority of my students are kids, but they have adapted to the situation admirably and to me they are role models, not just for me, but for any adult who is having trouble. And everyone is having trouble, in terms of their good humor, their willingness to embrace the limitations of technology and, and max out what is really there. And then the other
side of the coin is just wanting to be with these people when you’re having such a good time in such a limited flat screen and brief way.

*Cello tone.*

It's been over a month. And I'm standing right back where I started. Above the running water of Potash Brook.

I was thinking this morning that the prolonged pandemic, the prolonged response, mandated response of staying at home, no work, shutting down, making one's world very circumscribed and thus not intersecting other people becomes intolerable for some people beyond just their own feelings of safety, beyond their own feelings of empowerment and beyond the financial piece, and those are all incredibly real for everybody in some measure. And and for some people, it's 24/7 and I can only imagine the level of worry. But what makes it untenable beyond all of that is is maintaining a focus and alertness and a preparedness and a resolve against an enemy, if you will, that is literally unseeable. I think we train all our lives through stories and experiences to to bring everything we have to bear in a prolonged resolution to fight against seeable and knowable enemies and enemies that present themselves in armor or with weapons or some other aspect of of menace and formidable ness and challenge. And when all of those things are invisible, it's difficult to stay focused.

*Cello tone.*

I'm walking on the beach. It's barely 7:00 a.m.. I think we have to listen to this.

How many different tones are in that sound? How many different, what we call notes? How many different intervals and rhythms?

It's just amazing.

Possibly the most common experience for everybody now is loss. The most common emotion. And it's just strange to be in a time in episode an era like this. As a result of this pandemic, bringing us together in this particular way, bringing everyone together under this leaky umbrella of loss.

*Cello tone.*

Today is one of those glorious mornings. It rained lightly through the night, just enough to leave everything fresh and bright and glistening in a morning sun that is basically playing peekaboo with quite a lot of fleecy clouds as it makes its way up through the trees to the east of our house and lights up various corners of the neighborhood. The bird song is really quite striking this morning.
Kind of sobering to think that it took quieting us down to bring about the nonhuman populations flourishing and retaking of their territories and reasserting their right to express themselves with the coming of much warmer weather in the high 60s and possibly even 70 degrees on this very beautiful Sunday, Mother's Day, perhaps. I can't remember. Holidays are kind of coming and going in a low key way, the same as the anniversaries of social events that no longer are allowed to happen.

*Cello tone.*

It is full on spring, late May, Memorial Day weekend.

People are just itching to have some kind of fun that they haven't had, whether it's like completely back to normal for whatever their experience of normal was or whether it's just kind of like a giddy sort of step in that direction. All egged on by hot weather. The ability to just be outside comfortably. So many beautiful flowering shrub trees, lilacs, coarse and a little breeze blowing to keep it really manageable.

*Cello tone.*

Change up of scene. Again, this is the Black Lives Matter rally on the statehouse lawn in Montpelier. Sunday, June 8th. A lot of people wearing black. There must have been the word given somewhere. I just happen to be wearing a black shirt. Virtually every single person with a mask. Just noting that.

There's a constant parade of cars going by honking with signs. And that was prearranged that folks who were not really able to march would be would have that option to show their solidarity by driving.

Lots of cardboard signs. Black Lives Matter, Justice for George Floyd. No justice. No peace. There's a nine year old looks to be holding a sign that says defund the police. Exclamation point.

*Cello tone.*

It's been a couple of weeks, we're into high summer, mid-July. The weather generally has been kind of unpleasantly hot and muggy most days. Today, I'm finally getting around to one of those mundane and wretched and expensive tasks, replacing a cracked windshield. And, of course, the places out in the middle of the wasteland.

And and now I'm just sitting on a bus. A little bus depot bench, bus just actually pulled up. There's actually people starting to ride the bus again. Everywhere in masks. Not many people are on it, but three, four. And this is turning into rush hour here. So. I think a proliferation of masks and styles of masks really like it's become the designer item of the decade. With a decade barely begun, but, you know, mask wearing's can be a thing for a while.
It's again weeks later, I think, without checking. It's a very sunny day in an early September Indian summer spell here. And I just woke up from a nap, which is a blessing at 2:30 in the afternoon and I realized the first thing was that that I hadn't done the diary thing in a while. The COVID diary, as I called it. And the second thing is that I was aware of not being in any pain and I've had some minor aches and pains in these last two weeks, maybe longer.

Pretty much all old age related in some way, although, you know, haps and mishaps and all of that and certainly nothing to to rival a major life disruption like a chronic illness or, and just a momentary absence of any sort of pain at all is kind of remarkable. And I'm always looking for ways to reconnect with gratitude, and so it just feels like a particular kind of blessing in this moment.

It's the first day of autumn and the COVID diary that I was keeping for the last six months seems like there's still kind of I have a personal need for that. And and, uh, it started about the first day of spring. So here we are.

I was planning on beginning this entry, sitting on exactly the same stone wall where I made the last entry in. The first Covid diary file, but we're getting a little tiny bit of blessed rain. It's been such a drought. Um, and so I'm me and my device and my coffee are retreating into my Prius and watching the rain and watching downtown life from the interior.

It's probably a week later and I've done the work week and celebrated my son's 30th birthday. How can that be? Which included having lunch outdoors next to some fairly ineffectual heaters at a restaurant.

This morning, I got up over at the edge of the northeast kingdom where I go for weekends, and there was it was snowing and by the time I left, there was a couple of inches on the ground and it was time to look for the ice scraper that I knew was somewhere in the back seat. And I guess I have one of those cars, like so many people do, that is basically a little mini traveling storage unit. And so it's not always easy to actually locate the item that you're seeking. But eventually I did. And and it was some good, honest scraping for a few minutes. And that was sobering. On November 2nd to be engaged in that. But, you know, you just kind of grit your teeth and roll with it.

Kind of the most notable thing as a practical matter in my life with the change of the seasons is not being able to count on teaching in person music lessons outdoors anymore. And since
outdoors is really the only safe place, it just feels like the curtain is coming down on the summer rapidly.

*Cello tone.*

It's the Saturday after Election Day. I'm downtown at just about noon and of course, there the country's been waiting for days for a resolution to the the knife-edged election owing to the antiquated Electoral College process. And they've just called the election all the major news outlets have called the election for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris finally and know being here and in Burlington, it's a kind of center of the blue universe, you might say. I'm standing on a balcony at a friend's house and I've just been working with the better Internet than I have in my in my home life.

And there's been a succession. I don't know if any of it happen while I'm talking, there's been a succession of people going by cheering, cars honking intermittently. And this is not meant to be a political post necessarily, but the I think it speaks more to the human condition about wanting to to be patient, but to resolve something that is kind of almost unbearable tension.

*Cars honk and people shout.*

So there it is.

*Cars continue honking.*

There is a group of people skipping across the crosswalk, down in front of me. Twirling around and dancing.

*Lots of cars honking now.*

Fist pumping.

It's really no words.

*Bells ring and people shout happily.*

*Cello tone.*

**Mary Wesley:** Again - a huge thank you to Pete for sharing this diary with us. Please do visit our show notes at [www.vtfolklife.org/untapped](http://www.vtfolklife.org/untapped), where you can hear some of his amazing music and listen to a bonus interview discussing the inspiration behind this diary.

As the events of 2020 continue to unfold the Folklife Center’s *Listening in Place* project is an ongoing effort to maintain and cultivate community, listen to others, and document our extraordinary daily lives together during the pandemic and beyond.
If you’d like to learn more about making your own recordings, whether it’s an audio diary like Pete’s or doing your own interviews within your family, household or community, head to our website at www.vtfolklife.org/listening to learn more. If you so chose, the recordings you make could be added to the VFC archive and become part of a record that will allow future Vermonters to revisit and learn from what we’re going through, now. From all of us here at the VFC we hope you and your families are keeping as well as can be, and we wish you warmth, light, and hope during this holiday season.

Speaking of light - I want to tell you about our Winter Lights series. As a part of our ongoing Listening in Place project we will be releasing a series of audio shorts via social media and our website that feature interviews with Vermonters speaking about what it means to share light during this darkest time of the year. Catch them now through Twelfth Night—that’s January 5th—and hear Rabbi Amy Small talk about lighting a tiki-torch menorah at Hanukkah or find out why Troy Austin of Essex decided to put twinkle lights all over his car this year—and many more! Follow us @vermontfolklife on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter or visit our website at www.vtfolklife.org.

As for VT Untapped, this podcast will be taking a short winter break. Look for us in the new year with a new batch of Meet Cutes! Stories of love in the time of Covid! Expect to hear from us just in time for Valentine’s Day.

*Cello theme begins and plays under narration.*

If you liked listening to this show please tell others to look us up and subscribe. You can find VT Untapped on Apple podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, Spotify and TuneIn Radio.

This episode of VT Untapped has been made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom. It was produced by me, Mary Wesley. Abra Clawson was an assistant producer on this episode. Our executive producer, who also happens to be the VFC archivist, is Andy Kolovos. The cello music in this show was recorded by Dave Haughey.

*Upbeat cello plays and fades out.*

Thanks for listening.