

JENNIFER JOHNSEN - 5/18/20

Loneliness is Dangerous



The morning of March 6th, 2020 was an unusual one for me. The early morning and busy schedule I had Mondays through Thursdays normally made it impossible to sleep in on Fridays, though they were my only days free of scheduled responsibilities. However, March 5th I stayed up late mediating a disagreement between two of my freshmen residents, and my circadian rhythm allowed me to make up that sleep into the late morning the next day. Beyond just the roommate mediation, it had been a particularly draining week. Fear of coronavirus was beginning to take over all of our campus's day to day activities, and filled all of my social media. All of my meetings, regardless of the capacity, addressed concerns of what would happen if we were forced into a quarantine similar to the one that was presently happening in Wuhan, China. I kept trying to assure myself that the 24 hour news cycle would find something new to focus on, and that this coronavirus was not going to be the big deal that it was being made out to be, but underlying anxiety and fear from this new unknown had already taken a toll on my energy.

When I finally awoke on March 6th, I had a missed call and a voicemail from my professor Dr. Annie White. She was calling to let me know that out of an abundance of caution, the study abroad course I was taking with her would no longer be going on its planned spring break trip to New Zealand. I was heartbroken, but understood. Unfortunately, I had no idea that this was only the beginning of a series of heartbreaking cancellations and changes to my everyday life.

Over the weeks that followed the cancellation of my New Zealand trip, everything I had been looking forward to was cancelled as well. My in-person class meetings were cancelled for a month, and then cancelled for the rest of the semester. The course that was supposed to go to New Zealand was cancelled altogether, and I was enrolled in an independent study to take its place. I received crash-course training on how to remotely perform my duties as a tutor at the Writing and Multiliteracy Center, and was forced to swiftly say goodbye to the center that I had grown to view as a second home over the two and half years I worked there. The Island Fox, our campus literary journal which I served as a Managing Director of, was not able to meet during a critical week for typesetting the content in our print journal, and the bulk of the work fell onto a select few of us to do if we still wanted a physical journal that semester. All students residing on campus were encouraged to return home, but Resident Advisors were still expected to stay on campus and perform their duties. What I have loved the most about being a Resident Advisor has been the interactions with my residents. So, now that all of my residents were leaving and I was concerned about my RA duties potentially putting my health at risk, I felt like I had no choice but to resign from that position that I loved so dearly.

My commencement ceremony was postponed indefinitely. The reading event and celebration for The Island Fox was cancelled. My end of the year celebration and senior send off at the writing center was moved online. The last event I was planning to have with my residents was cancelled. The English department's speaker series, one of which I was supposed to read my own creative work at as an introduction to our guest speaker, was cancelled. My department's senior capstone presentations were truncated and moved online. I had plans to visit my dear friend McKenna in Seattle in April, which I had to postpone as well. One of my friends was about to celebrate her 21th birthday, and we would no longer be able to celebrate together. My graduate school that I was set to begin in the summer was moved online, so I would be missing out on developing close bonds and relationships in person with my cohort.

To top it all off, the week I returned home I started feeling sick. I stayed at home and tried to nurse myself, but everyday I felt worse. I ran a fever and had trouble breathing, but what was most concerning to me was that my sickness was starting to make it impossible for me to manage my diabetes. I was more worried about going into diabetic ketoacidosis than I was worried about having caught coronavirus, so I went to the emergency room. An emergency room doctor misattributed my symptoms to the coronavirus despite my first test coming back negative, and after unintentionally flooding my lungs with fluids that were meant to bring my heart rate down, I was sedated and put on a ventilator. After a second test for coronavirus came back negative as well, I fought for days to be taken off of the ventilator and was discharged the following day.



Once I was back at home and caught up on the work I missed while sick and hospitalized, I settled into my new social distancing routine. I would do my school work, sign in to my virtual shifts at the writing center, join in all my zoom meetings, and only left the house to walk my dog, Penny. At home it was my dad and I, but my dad works as a driver for a sanitation company so he was deemed essential and still went for his 9-10 hour shifts 6 days a week. As time went on, zoom meetings became more sporadic. I spent a week helping to care for my two young nieces while my mom spent some time in the hospital as well, non-coronavirus related, but when she was discharged I returned back to isolation.

I've spent my quarantine days mostly alone, sitting in my own feelings of disappointment. At first, I tried to just not think about all of the things that the pandemic had taken away from me, because I knew that once I did it would be overwhelming. Feelings demand to be felt, though, and this didn't last long. After three days of feeling too overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the future to do anything productive, I finally started letting myself be sad about what I had lost. I went on a long walk with my dog and tried to practice mindfulness while in motion. I thought of everything that I would no longer be doing, or no longer be doing in the format I expected to, let myself feel whatever way I felt about it and then exhaled deeply to let that feeling go. Once my list of things I lost was exhausted, I started to replace it with a list of things that I was grateful for. I knew I still had my health, I had Penny, and reminded myself that just because my celebrations were cancelled, that did not negate my four years of incredibly hard work that lead up to this moment in my life. I thought of the incredible privilege I possessed to be finishing up an undergraduate degree at all, and to not have to worry about paying my rent that month because I was able to continue to work. Through many tears and the longest walk that Penny has ever been on, I went home to develop a new social distancing routine that included more time to pay attention to my mental wellness.



What It Means

In a very uncertain and challenging time in our society, it's hard to remember to take care of yourself. I kept thinking that people were dying, and that everything I lost was superficial in comparison to those that were losing so much more. I didn't want to think about all of the abrupt changes in my life because I thought that the sadness I felt was selfish. However, just because things are worse for others, doesn't mean that I'm not allowed to have feelings. It's important to process feelings before they manifest into larger issues, like my brief inability to complete any of my assignments. I allowed myself to feel my feelings, but kept my perspective on my role in larger society. If I didn't process these things, they run the danger of one day getting the best of me and manifesting in a way that could be actually harmful to those who are suffering in more severe ways than I am.

Humans are creatures of habit; any sudden disruption to routine or expectations of routine affect us. I worry that those who are out protesting for their ability to 'get a haircut' have truly just not processed the way they feel about the sudden disruption to their routines, but rather than processing their emotions, are manifesting these emotions in ways that are harmful to the essential employees working diligently to flatten the curve of this virus. I think it's important that I took this time to process how I felt, so that I can move forward positively and not dwell on these negative emotions so much they turn into externalized negativity.



Opportunities and Possibilities

Though many of the things I lost from this pandemic I am not able to get back, there are many things that I will still be able to experience. My commencement was only postponed, not entirely cancelled. I will be able to bond with my graduate school cohort in the fall, celebrate my friend's birthday when it is safe for bars to reopen, and have an entire year to use my flight credit to go to Seattle. I like to think that this experience has helped me internalize the importance of checking in with myself and making sure that I am being kind to myself.

Some things will not be changing about what has made self isolation so hard, though. Being alone all day after having days packed with social interaction has affected me in many ways that I never expected, as I consider myself an introvert. My dad is still an essential worker, and stay at home orders are still in effect in my county. I'm considering driving to Missouri, where my brother and his family live, and self isolating with them for the summer. I think that it would make me feel a lot better to do my online graduate school work in the company of my two nieces, nephew, brother and sister-in-law. Even if I don't go through with this idea, it has been comforting to me to know that it exists as a possibility.



Response

Thank you for trusting me enough to share this piece with me. I appreciate your vulnerability and self-reflection in this time of such uncertainty and loneliness. I appreciated the way you reflected upon COVID-19's affect through the lens of both your school life and your personal life. As I read your piece I found myself relating to many of the things you wrote about. Today I was supposed to be walking across the stage in front of my family and alongside my amazing cohort and graduate with my Masters in the Art of Teaching. However, just like the classes of 2020 across the nation, these milestones we have spent 17 plus years working towards have been taken away. It's hard to not feel like we are being robbed of something we have shed tears and spent countless hours (and dollars) over. Everything seems so anticlimactic.

I absolutely loved the last paragraph of the first subsection of your learning story. It is in this that I noted tremendous growth and reflection. Your line "feelings demand to be felt.." suck with me. I feel that many of us - myself included - have responded to the news of COVID-19, social distancing, and cancelation of major events and gatherings in a similar way that you did. It always seems easier to avoid or run away from disappointment, fear, pain, uncertainty, and all the other feelings that come alongside COVID-19. However, like you said we must allow ourselves to acknowledge what we are feeling whether or not we want to. I am currently in the middle of allowing myself to acknowledge and process the myriad of emotions taking place inside my mind. Prior to reading your learning story I continuously felt guilty about being disappointed or upset with our current circumstances surrounding COVID-19 because I have not been directly affected. However, reading your learning story reminded me that our feelings must be felt regardless of whether or not we want to feel them.

Anyone who knows you knows that you are a very compassionate, kind hearted, determined, and loving human. This is apparent in your writing. While you acknowledge the importance of addressing the ways in which COVID-19 is influencing our emotions and affecting our day to day lives you also call attention to the importance of recognizing the realities of this pandemic and the ways our actions can be harmful to those around us. Not only are you aware of your role in the pandemic and your positionality of privilege, but you are also approaching things with a growth mindset. Taking this scary experience and using it as an opportunity to practice self-care and fostering a loving and healthy relationship with yourself.

I am proud of you.

McKenna Cole