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Transition in the Era of a Pandemic: An Exercise in Mindfulness

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COVID-19 took over the world in March 2020 and overturned our practices, customs, and perspectives. It reminded us that how we relate to one another defines how we choose to build our community and our society. In our forced isolation and confinement, it became evident that we must remember to let go, slow down, and rely on each other to positively influence our future. In times of drastic change, exercising kindness to yourself and to those around you can help wade through challenges and make the best of them, one day at a time, one step at a time. This reflection explores how the transition to remote learning was lived by an instructor and her students of French at a liberal arts institution in the Midwest. It illustrates that as we live through life's challenges, we find opportunities for personal and communal growth.

Sometimes change is forced upon us. We are given no choice. How we react dictates future outcomes. And how we relate to one another defines how we choose to build our community and our society. COVID-19 reminded us of this when it took over the world in March 2020 and overturned our practices, customs, and perspectives. In our forced isolation and confinement, it became evident that we must remember to let go, slow down, and rely on each other to positively influence our future. Coretta Scott King advised, "The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members, a heart of grace, and a soul generated by love" (King, 2000).

In the classroom, I strive to create a sense of community. I insist on collaborative work projects, on everybody knowing everyone else's names, and on students gaining a sense of accountability for their ac-

tions. I feared that the COVID-19 pandemic was not only a health hazard but would also undermine my attempts to create a learning community in the classroom. In times of drastic change, exercising kindness on yourself and on those around you can help wade through challenges and make the best of them, one day at a time, one step at a time. As we live through the challenges, we find opportunities for personal and communal growth. Perhaps that is where learning begins.

March 2020 was a turning point. The world of January, a comfortable and predictable world, was altogether taken for granted. Routine had us commuting by car or on public transportation for hours each day. We were confident in our command over our own lives. March shattered those illusions as the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus confirmed that our notion of mastery over our own destinies was greatly exaggerated, and that we were not in control. We did not have an inkling of what the future held (we still don't). Decisions were made for us. In my own bubble of higher education, it meant quickly saying goodbye to students one Friday and scrambling to adapt syllabi and lesson plans for the new normal of communicating, teaching, working, and living on Zoom for the upcoming months. Students had not signed up for online teaching. I had not anticipated the prospect of, nor been trained in, teaching remotely. I faced my students and smiled, pretended I was calm and composed. But really, I was scared. I feared I would lose students. I worried attendance would drop. I obsessed about details. I wondered: How can I, in a French language class, teach body parts vocabulary if students can only see my face and shoulders?

The transition brought with it anxiety, stress, and sleepless nights. I consciously decided to conduct synchronous sessions, contrary to the institutional recommendation to hold asynchronous classes (i.e., my classes would be held "live" at the normal class times, rather than archived on a platform for the students to access at their leisure).

The first week dragged on. I had to learn a completely new set of skills and do a fair amount of improvisation with teaching methods. At times, I felt as if I were talking to the abyss: Student participation is hard enough to encourage in person; it poses an even greater challenge over Zoom. I soon realized that the revamped syllabi that I had toiled

over were but semblances of syllabi that would likely need constant revision. Content delivery was slow and adapting to “Breakout Rooms,” “Shared Screens,” and “Chat” boxes was overwhelming to instructors and students alike. I started to doubt the effectiveness of my decision to have synchronous classes on Zoom. After the second online class of French 211¹, an honest and attentive student graced my inbox with a message titled “AWKWARD” (yes, in caps). He proceeded to acknowledge how the transition was obviously difficult for me, as well as for the students, and how class that day had been very “awkward.” But he finished his email with a note of hope and the knowledge that the experience would improve in the following weeks. He embodied Mariane Pearl’s idea that “each individual’s sense of integrity is our collective source of hope” (Jolie, 2020, para. 2). He demonstrated hope for the future. More importantly, he trusted me and conveyed the message that I must trust myself.

My own dissatisfaction with how things were going, coupled with this student’s honest voice, shook me. The solution lay not in the technology itself, but in its application through the lens of caring and of human well-being. I needed to embrace my vulnerability and cultivate my authenticity and self-efficacy. I had become so focused on the process and on mere survival that I had lost sight of the *cura personalis*, the caring for the whole person—my own and that of the students. The mind and body were engaged—now it was time to recruit heart and spirit. I recalled some of the principles of contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness. Instead of mourning the structure that was lost and being anxious about what was to come, I had to focus on the here and now, be mindful and attentive to my students in the present moment, and remember that we are interdependent beings (Hanh, 1975; Kabat-Zinn, 2012). I was especially reminded to abandon any preconceived notions

1 French 211 is the third course in a three-course language sequence that focuses on narrating in the past, describing future and hypothetical events, and expressing desires, opinions, and emotions, with the systematic development of all communicative skills. It provides further understanding of French culture, geography, and customs, enhanced by readings and video selections. The course counts as the global language proficiency, a requirement for graduation at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University.

of how I, or they, should be performing. In my virtual classroom, the global pandemic became an admonition to focus attention on the students' needs, to foster interrelatedness, to grow together and to learn together.

COVID-19 provided an opportunity for daily exercises in humility and in mindfulness. Just as we had done in the first half of the semester, we continued to get to know each other through small group work. I managed Zoom like I managed my physical classroom, by having stronger students help those struggling with the material, in this case through strategic choices in assigning "Breakout rooms."

Mindful reflection led me to several conclusions: We, and I firmly include myself here, construct perceptions of others' judgements of us and of the situational interconnection among us. We underestimate others and, I now realize, I underestimated my students during the transitional period. They were open to working with me, under the new circumstances, and I had not trusted them—or myself—enough. I had "talked the talk"—articulating right before we transitioned online that we needed to be kind to ourselves, to adapt, to be flexible... but I was not yet "walking the walk." If the remainder of the semester was to be a success—or at least not a total disaster—the forced change around us had to bring about a personal change within me.

Flexibility, kindness, empathy, and understanding became the watchwords for us all. Every semester prior to the pandemic and before the first language test in French 211, I performed a little ritual: I would share with my students a quote from Robert Frost: "The best way out is always through." The spring 2020 groups had seen it in February, but in March it took on a very different and deeper meaning. As I write this in summer 2021, one could say we're still going "through." In fact, there is really no going "around": We follow the trite old adage and make lemonade from the lemons in life (provided we have some sugar or honey in the cupboard).

The good news is we all have a reserve stash of sweetener—human resiliency guarantees that in the worst of situations we can make lemonade. That first week of remote teaching gave me many lemons. And students noticed how "awkward" things were. A slight change in

attitude, though, helped me sweeten the lemonade. Instead of resisting the change, instead of worrying, instead of stressing about students' reactions, I relaxed a bit. I simply needed to follow the advice of Saint Benedict—the patron of our university—and listen with the ear of my heart. I needed to listen to the students and remember that mindfulness is not an individual experience, but one of interdependence.

Many students felt misplaced and unsure of themselves, even in the familiar surroundings at home. The new mode of education invaded a space normally associated with vacation and time off from studying, and students needed reassurance and a renewed sense of belonging. The “Zoom room” was certainly not the physical classroom, but it could remind us of our caring for each other and make us present to each other. *The students* understood that the forced change was not ideal, that we had to work together, go through this new experience together and honor the community that we had created in the first half of the semester. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that we are, and everything is, a “part of the great body of reality and [...] that the great body of reality is indivisible” (Nhat Hanh, 1975, p. 72). We all experienced the pandemic and its academic consequences together and we needed to support each other and be especially attentive to the needs of the other. Mindfulness requires reflection, but also an engagement that brings it into the lived experience. Mindfulness is more than meditation, more than sitting on a cushion (Kabat-Zinn, 2021). Mindfulness requires us to act. While I was not introducing formal mindfulness practice in the classroom, I tried to live it and model it for my students, for my community.

In this way, the transition to teaching online due to the COVID-19 pandemic became an exercise in mindfulness. Before March 2020, the normal routine, taken for granted, had led to my losing touch with a daily practice of mindfulness. But with the onset of the pandemic and its attending consequences (particularly the synchronous online Zoom experience), I embarked on a journey impelled by the reawakening of the necessity to focus on the present moment, intentionality, and a non-critical attitude towards myself and others. Before each class, and inspired by our institutions' Benedictine ethos, I consciously took a moment of *statio*, of intentional pause and silence to prepare and to be present,

before clicking on the “Start meeting” button on the Zoom platform. Sometimes *statio* took the form of a short walk around the apartment building, and sometimes it was a breathing exercise. I realized that taking that bit of time to simply *be* before class not only made me less anxious, but ultimately it made class run more smoothly overall. Schoeberlein and Sheth (2009, xi), remind us that, “When teachers are fully present, they teach better. When students are fully present, the quality of their learning is better.” After a moment of *statio*, I was more centered and grounded, and consequently more present and available to my students and their needs, in the present moment.

Although the community was spread far and wide from our central Minnesota institution and common home², we were brought together on a consistent schedule, and were comforted by the sight of familiar faces, albeit in small squares on a computer screen. Our classroom community was suddenly fragmented and spread over a vast area, plunging us into the most private spheres of our respective lives: One student ensconced on a sofa in a Minneapolis suburb, another in Wisconsin at the kitchen table with family moving about behind him, another in the Bahamas, on a bed with little brother asleep at her side. And we had to be comfortable with that. It was a paradox. Somehow, the experience of using a two-dimensional, digital, virtual platform gave us back our humanity. The newly unfamiliar and uncomfortable world outside of Zoom was a world of masks, visors, and social distancing. It was a scary and unknown world. But in our virtual synchronous classes we could find the familiar and comforting presence of others from our pre-existing community. For the rest of the semester, we checked in with each other at the beginning of each class. We commented on how beautiful Alaska looked in the window framing one of the out-of-state students’ heads, we asked about the weather in the Bahamas, and all the while, we kept learning French together. While at first these interchanges seemed forced, they progressively became more natural and a genuine interest in the others’ settings and well-being. As a little community, we were

2 The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, partner schools sharing one academic program on two separate campuses, are liberal arts institutions rooted in the Benedictine tradition, and are located in Central Minnesota.

protected, at least temporarily, from the frightening world outside. Before the mid-semester transition online, students listened to each other, worked with multiple partners during each class period and knew each other's names as of week two of the semester. Indeed, this community of learning built before mid-March became more grounded in the impossibility of the group being together in the same room. Those students who were shy became more comfortable with sharing, and we continued to grow together. We opened ourselves up to each other in ways that were not possible in a classroom on campus.

Our vulnerability became our strength. In my struggles through the first week of transition, I had shown my vulnerability. Those struggles had been apparent and were revealed and freely shared with the students. In that transparency, students, who were experiencing their own vulnerability in an unprecedented way, could identify with the instructor's struggles. I believe that my model nourished their own sense of compassion and empathy, and provided an opportunity to enter into relationship with me. In response, I needed to be open to deepening my relationship with them. So, our common vulnerability, the greater comfort and ease with which we opened ourselves to each other and trusted each other, became our strength and, more, it strengthened us individually. In my comportment in class and in oral and written communications, I tried to stress to students that we needed only to focus on the moment, to not forget to breathe, and that all would be well—whatever might come.

In the end, all was well. I discarded any preconceived notion of how much material should be covered in each class period and accepted that what *could* get done *would* get done—and done well. Students and teacher alike expressed gratitude for the time spent together online. In the end-of-semester course surveys, students commented that, "It was helpful to meet over Zoom so we could continue with some semblance of normalcy" (Student #1) and that, "This helped [me] with having a routine everyday" (Student #2). Others referred how the virtual synchronous classes served in "keeping us connected to our class" (Student #3) and that the instructor "always made sure we were doing ok and really showed that she cared about us" (Student #4). Students

had ached for a sense of normalcy and connectedness as much as I had, and that became the basis for our productivity and success through the end of term.

The intentional work to create community prior to the unexpected changes mid-semester laid the foundation for carrying us through to the end of the semester. We became interlocking pillars of belonging amid our involuntary exile. In an email early in the online period, I urged my “Literature of the French-Speaking World³” students, a 300-level course which enrolled mostly French majors and minors with whom I had previously worked (and coincidentally, all women), to “cultivate that authenticity we’ve been talking about in class⁴. In your down time, find your inner peace, your happy place, your home.” I counseled the ten women in that class that, “The words of the day should be patience, adaptability, kindness.” My previous experience with this group of students may have made it easier to instill a sense of community in that class. However, I found that the two larger sections of French 211 that I worked with that semester (20 and 16 students, all of whom were working with me for the first time), were equally responsive to my efforts. Attendance and motivation stayed strong for the rest of the semester (in the Literature class there were zero absences during the semester), and students continuously reiterated how glad they were to have a routine and to be able to join their classmates during their normal school schedule. We were mutually supported and together in community. We created a new form of familiarity.

This new form of familiar is the key to success, I believe, because change forces us out of our routines, out of what may have become the

3 French 312, “Literature of the French-Speaking World,” explores literary and cultural developments in France and the French-speaking world, with continued emphasis on grammar, speaking and writing. Readings include a variety of short stories, one-act plays, novels and poetry.

4 In the first months of the course, one of the main themes discussed in regard to the literary works analyzed was that of *être* and *paraître*, or being and seeming. Students explored how characters’ (and our own) private spheres differ from public spheres, how they adapt to different circumstances. In the context of the readings, we examined what might constitute authenticity, how to hone it and how it can be used for the common good.

monotony of quotidian habits. Change creates challenges but also engenders opportunities. If we are willing and attentive, if we listen with the ear of our hearts, in the moment, change opens us up to new possibilities and the breaking of new ground.

In spite of physical absence and distance from each other, students and teacher were still present to the moment in the synchronous classes. Throughout the second half of the semester, I regularly had students start class with a brief writing activity: "Write [in French or in English depending on the level of the class] one thing that made you laugh, one thing that made you cry/sad, and one thing that surprised you in the last X days." This was not meant to be an exercise to share with others aloud, but for future reference and to provide a space for meaningful focus, self-reflection and metacognition, with the knowledge that "in silence we locate our interiority and self-knowledge" (Owen-Smith, 2018, pp. 28-29). It was an organic exercise of consolidation of the classroom experience and the lived experience outside of Zoom, of being in relationship with their experience of the moment. In the act of writing simultaneously as their classmates in their respective Zoom squares, students were living a shared experience and nourishing their already familiar, safe, and reliable community. Ultimately, it gave students time to reflect critically, intentionally, and with purpose on the history they were living. Comparable to a journal entry, this exercise of personal self-expression and exploration "remains grounded in the specific time and place in which it is written," present to the moment (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 130). Students were able to construct a bridge between their own smaller community and the global community at large. In this way, although absent from the classroom, we were truly present to ourselves and to each other in the collective act of writing.

I have repeated this experience many times in the last year of remote learning and will continue to do so in future years. After more than a year of remote teaching, it has become clear how important it is to take time in class to stop. Whether with a brief meditation, breathing exercise, journaling activity or simple reflection, metacognition has become a staple of the beginning or the end of my classes. It will continue

to be a part of my curriculum. By so doing, I can help students recognize, as Kabat-Zinn suggests, “that everything that unfolds within [life], the wanted and the unwanted and the unnoticed, is the real curriculum” (Kabat-Zinn, 2021, p. 785).

Metacognition, as a method of reflecting on the learning process in order to promote transformation and growth, requires, of course, content that is reflected upon and engenders the construction of learning. In the “Literature of the French-Speaking World” class mentioned before, students analyzed and discussed a coming-of-age novel of a Guadeloupian girl, brought up by her grandmother on the Caribbean island. The pre-teen is persuaded to move to the Paris suburbs to live with a mother she barely knows, and leave her beloved grandmother behind. The narrative itself was engaging, but students continuously made connections with episodes of daily life amid the COVID-19 pandemic. One notable connection was the girl’s desire to be with the grandmother, while confronting the impossibility of communicating with the illiterate mother figure or being physically near her. Students were extremely empathetic towards the girl’s experience, especially given the current circumstances of people isolated from family members, and of the impossibility of visiting grandparents in nursing homes, of celebrating accomplishments, or of bidding farewell and grieving departed loved ones. In another example of connection to the larger community, students in the upper division class, “French-Language Plays⁵,” had to write and perform a short one-act play as a group assignment. They resorted to the current history as context, and beautifully integrat-

5 This course is a 2-credit course, under the umbrella of “Studies in French/Francophone Culture,” for students having more than five semesters of French language. The course met once a week, for an hour a week, from February until May. Students read and analyzed four French-language plays spanning three centuries; attended on-campus English-language performance of Eugene Ionesco’s “The Bald Soprano” and “The Lesson”; and had a workshop with the director and cast members of the plays. One of the main projects of the course consisted in creating a short one-act play on a topic of students’ choice, and performing it as a culminating activity. The process was scaffolded, so students were guided from the early stages of choosing a topic, to developing characters and timeline, writing a coherent dialogue and rehearsing timings and delivery, before performing the play.

ed content and form. After brainstorming and reflection on the experience they were living, they opted to utilize the virtual medium they had grown accustomed to as a backdrop for their play. The students diligently cooperated over Zoom, both in and out of class, to write a one-act play about an American pre-med undergraduate student studying abroad, who was stuck in Italy because of the outbreak of COVID-19. The play took the form of a Zoom conversation between the student and her parents, both of whom dwelled in different countries. For these upper division students, writing became itself an exercise in mindfulness, of self-reflection, and of internalization of historical circumstances that are hard to comprehend. As Barbezat & Bush indicated (2014, p. 135), writing “can celebrate the importance of story and of the students discovering their own story and seeing it as part of a greater narrative.”

When there is little guidance, it is up to us to intentionally become our own guides and set our own path ahead of us. In the middle of seeming isolation, the students sought connection and communication. They were able to collaborate and accomplish something that provided meaning and purpose to them in the present moment, simply by being attentive to the world around them. After experience and reflection, students took intentional action in the form of an engaged artistic and literary creation.

Regardless of the confines of a computer screen, pedagogy and values remain the same. As humans, we have an uncanny ability to read each other. Students respond to the instructor and the instructor reacts to students. By exercising loving kindness and compassion towards self and towards the students, instructors learn to accept any flaws and challenges that might exist in lesson plans, student participation or class management. By letting go of the frustrations brought on by not finishing a lesson plan on a given day, or by being greeted with utter silence after several of my guiding questions, or still by not guaranteeing that every student had “air time” in a particular class, I became more aware and accepting that, “We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of

liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way.”⁶

Just as Robert Frost’s words open the season of test-taking for my French students, this quote acts as the opposite bookend, right before the final exam period starts. Routine and the pressures of pre-COVID-19 daily life had made those words lose their meaning, perhaps, when I had shared them with my students. The forced transformation of our lives by this invisible nemesis resuscitated the meaningful purpose of these words in my mind, as I shared them with students on the last day of classes of the spring 2020 semester. Letting go of the things that are beyond our control enables us to focus on the outcomes we can influence, no matter how small they may seem. Again, our vulnerability became our strength: in early May 2020, during the last “Literature of the French-Speaking World” class of the semester, I shared with my students that I had lost my last living grandparent in late March. The pandemic had made it impossible to travel overseas to be with family, as they grieved and were deprived of the comfort of a proper funeral. My story was everyone’s story during the pandemic. A student wrote in an email shortly after the end of class: “I want to write this email to you because what you said today about your family really touched me, and it was hard to keep any tears from flowing. I really appreciate how you pushed through any pain or sadness going on in your life to teach us with positivity and happiness. Coming to class always brightened up my day and gave my lonely weeks in quarantine a purpose.” Her words were a consolation in my period of mourning, alone and far away. They were also words that strengthened my own sense of purpose and meaning in life, as I work through challenges together with students.

Our transitional work was truly a beginning, a step along the way to reimagining the world to come. As we contemplated fall and spring

6 The actual source of this quote is difficult to pin down. Though it is often attributed to saint Oscar Romero, SJ, it seems more likely that it was cited *about* Oscar Romero and his approach to ministry. According to the Ignatian Solidarity Network (<https://ignatiansolidarity.net/blog/2018/10/13/prophets-romero/>), the quote comes from a prayer written by Father Ken Untener (“Prophets of a Future Not Our Own”). Its first public presentation was in 1979 and it was later cited by Pope Francis while speaking before the Roman Curia in 2015.

re-openings of college campuses during summer 2020, there was discussion of how exactly our new experiences could reshape how higher education may look in the future. In a late May 2020 article in *Inside Higher Ed*, Edward Maloney and Joshua Kim (2020) suggested that,

the experience of teaching under COVID-19 will likely cause many faculty to be more attuned and aware of the non-academic challenges that their students face. An orientation towards a teaching approach that explicitly emphasizes the caring for and well-being of learners may outlive the pandemic. This altered relationship between professors and students may ultimately be the true teaching and learning legacy of COVID-19. (para. 8)

Change *can* engender opportunities. It certainly opens our eyes and ears to the possibility of impactful transformation. The answers to the questions about the future of higher education are not yet clear. But perhaps it is not necessary for them to be clear at this time, as long as we “inhabit the present moment fully, and that means mindfully and heartfully” (Kabat-Zinn, 2021, p. 786).

Aristotle defined courage as a balance between oblivious recklessness and paralyzing timidity in the face of danger. In times of uncertainty, we step courageously into a future of unknowns and embrace the inevitable change to come as an opportunity to transform, to influence outcomes, and to better ourselves and those around us. In times of uncertainty, we stand between despair and hope. We reach for what is certain, and that is human interconnectedness and interdependency. Tenaciously, we reach for that bit of sweetener stashed away in the back of our cupboards. The recipe for success includes not only that sweetener, but a reliance on, and trust in, others. As kind and compassionate beings, we reach out for each other, and we work together, as a community, small or large, to improve what we can control. In the collectivity we find resilience. The extra-ordinary clears the way for what is possible and can be an impetus to reveal the extraordinary in each of us.

In ten or twenty years, in a world where, one hopes, masks and COVID tests will be long forgotten, my memory may fail me as I attempt to recall students' names from the spring of 2020. Some students may no longer remember how to conjugate the verb "être." Yet, we will all remember the impact that the pandemic had on our lives. We will remember our joint journey in navigating remote learning. More importantly, we will remember how, together though apart, we paid attention to the moment, we resisted judgement, and we learned from each other and of each other, to better know ourselves. That is where our learning truly began. And we can rest assured that, indeed, all shall be well, if we choose to depend on each other, if we choose to be in relationship with life and those around us, at each moment.

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