

Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine

Volume 6
Issue 1 *"I Think You're Muted': Voices from the
Coronavirus Pandemic"*

Article 23

2021

Teaching and Parenting During Covid-19

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Teaching and Parenting During Covid-19

3-15-20

Up since 4 30
Nursing, changing, time outs
Not a novel weekend
But the novel virus
Frightens the simplest tasks
I avoid my phone
My e-mail
No space for condescending family
No energy for difficult coworkers
The innocent cough coming from the back room
Has the hair on the back of my neck standing up
As I worry how I can herd 18-yos
Into an online format
As I worry how I can entertain babies
With my copy of *Maus*
He's eating the pages
Oh, right--the dishes

3-16-20

We've never had a place in our house where kids could easily roam free--the setup is not open concept and besides their bedrooms, no room is 100% kid proof. Today we decided to set up a pack-and-play to put the 10-mo in when I really cannot chase him and need him to stay away (showering, getting things out of the oven, etc.). It felt like questionable parenting, but a necessary survival tactic. Drum roll please....the 2-yo and 10-mo both love it!

3-20-20

The kids are no longer interested in being in the pack-and-play.

Today I am making an effort to not compare situations, which is an unfair road to nowhere. I am lucky to be able to work from home, though trying to teach four classes, run a writing center, and learn about my new position in assessment and accreditation while being fully responsible for two sick kids under two is, well, challenging. But it's nowhere near as challenging as being out of work, not being able to make rent, or being gravely ill.

Having to cancel the kids' birthdays was really hard. We've been talking to our 2-yo about having her cousins up for a swim party for over a month, and my 11-mo will never be one again. That time will pass and never come back.

Oddly, my sadness about this was bolstered by the bewildering response of people who don't care about others' sadness and find their cares trivial. I don't ever want to make others feel that way; I want to leave space for anyone's disappointments. Are you a senior and your state basketball was just canceled? I'm so sorry. Are you single in your early 20s, just finding your social footing and romantic interests and now you are semi-permanently separated from your people? I'm so sorry. Are you a kid who misses your friends? A proud workaholic who finds social value in office life and now you feel out-of-sorts? I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all your fears and disappointments. And I'm sorry for mine, too. But we're in this together – let kindness and gentleness reign.

(Hiding in the bathroom to write this, praying the baby is not choking or eating *Maus*)

4-18-20

A Normalish Birthday Poem, To My Boy

I went to sleep tonight
Last year
Thinking it would be a normal snooze
Until you knocked at midnight
Terrorizing me
Until you arrived two hours later.

Your dad said "it's a boy," laughing
And I said "we have a boy," laughing
A joy so complete it could cut through the pain and fear that was seconds earlier.
They asked me for your name
And I said "Wallace. His name is Wallace Lord Kunz."
My boy. My name.

You smile with gap teeth.
And laugh with the smallest of pokes.
You giggle and bounce when we get you from your crib
And cuddle into me when you cry in a way that makes my heart drop out of my chest.
You make an elephant noise for every animal
And think your sister is the funniest person in the world.

You wake up at 4 30 a.m. and I drag you into bed to nurse; you squeal and hit our heads until we agree to get up. If your eyes weren't so bright and smile so sincere, surely we'd hate you.

They make a lot of a parent's first
And so do we.

Your sister made a mom, a dad
She flipped our lives upside down
Stretched our hearts
Scared us relentlessly

They say when a baby is born the parents' brains are changed permanently.
Physiologically different. Can't go back.

Our neural pathways rearrange themselves so we can love you with abandon, stupidly,
forever.

The change is hard. And tiring. Soul-shifting and reckless. But it happened.

Your sister made me a mom and changed my life. She was my first.
But you were my first as a mom.
And that was everything.

You came into our lives already loved. I needed you immediately. I wanted you
without anxiety.

You were my boy.
My joy. Always.

5-9-20

This has been the strangest two months of my life. I don't think it's accurate to say that it's been the hardest, but it's definitely been the strangest. I am privileged to still have my work, just fully online. My husband is an essential worker in physical therapy, so besides following new safety protocol and having to take days off when patients aren't scheduled (which is becoming more frequent), his work is largely unchanged. I'm a reader, writer, runner, biker, hiker, pickleball & tennis player; I can continue these activities. I'm a mom of kids who are small enough that they can be engaged without fully grasping what they're missing by not being at daycare/preschool. I am grateful that I am experiencing quarantine at this time of my life, because if I were in my teens or early 20s, I think it would be much, much harder.

I tried so hard balancing working when the kids were at home. I don't think people are fully aware, or can fully remember, what it's like to parent small children in normal circumstances, let alone in quarantine, when you're trying to work. Small children are intense. And dangerous. And very high maintenance. They need help with everything: eating, drinking, going to the bathroom, getting baths, etc. They have to be fully

supervised otherwise they will kill themselves, and that's not hyperbole. I spend 75% of my 1-yo's awake time taking small objects out of his mouth that he's chewed off of furniture and stopping him from flinging himself down the steps. We've now hidden *Maus*. The 3-yo is easier, but she wants me for everything. I must be coloring with her. I must be watching a movie with her. Games. Reading. It's all *with* her, never solo. Zoom meetings are nearly impossible while caring for them; I tried originally to schedule during nap times, but they are children, not robots, so I could never get the timing quite right. The few meetings I did with them awake were ridiculous. I started only scheduling meetings when my husband was at home, so basically nights and weekends, if I could help it. This meant that there was never a time during the day or the week when I was just chilled out, or off. I cared for the kids all day while trying to do as much work as possible, and then when my husband got home I would start working for real. Despite being together all day, we are actually spending way less real, undistracted time together as a family.

The sad part about this is that my kids are great. I am so lucky to have my kids. They are generally well-behaved and easy-mannered. It's when I ignore them for hours to stare at my computer (which is what they think I am doing), that they begin to get restless. My 1-yo will start hitting the keyboard and my face to get my attention, and the 3-yo will "Mom Mom Mom Mom Mom Mom" me until I want to scream. It's a terrible feeling trying to get away from your kids all day when they are simply acting like 1 and 3-yos do, when they are just wanting love from their parent. I also love my job--it's who I am--so I feel like I can't give who I really am to anyone right now, and that's not even beginning to touch on how absent I feel from friends and extended family.

It's gut wrenching to live in this dynamic, because I love my kids and I love being with them, and I also want to be a good employee, friend, daughter, sister, runner, etc. I don't really feel good at anything at the moment.

At the end of March, we were keeping our kids out of daycare as much as possible, until I felt like I just couldn't justify their attendance anymore and took them out completely for all of April (though we were still paying full price to hold their spot). I held out hope things would get better...wishful thinking...because of course they didn't. And we had to come to grips with the fact that they won't get better anytime soon. Besides my husband's work and essential trips to the grocery store, we were 99% compliant with sheltering-in-place, which was a sacrifice, like it is for everyone. We've only seen our best friends' new baby from a distance. No one was at our kids' birthdays. No family has seen the kids for months, which is tragic when they're at ages of development when they are essentially a new person each month. We don't leave the house. Days bleed into nights into days into weekends into work weeks and there is somehow both work time and home constantly and work time and home time never. We were hanging onto the edge of the cliff, but our fingers were starting to slip, one by

one. It came down to either one of us quits our job or we put the kids back in daycare; we could not manage this lifestyle anymore.

We decided not to quit our jobs, so we made the choice that the kids would go back to daycare in May, which was both a huge relief but also back to the same worry we had in March. Were we putting our kids in danger? Were we putting other people in danger? The answer to both of those questions is yes.

I started scheduling meetings like a normal employee again. It was such a relief to have the whole day to work and focus, and not just these tiny windows of time while barely managing to also take care of my kids.

Then I started to feel pain on the left side of my face. It started with a bump in my eyebrow that I thought was a pimple, but it began to spread like a rash across my forehead, extremely tender and painful. I thought it was a spider bite. The pain kept getting more intense, and one time my daughter placed her little hand on my cheek, and I screamed out in agony. My eye was getting so puffy it was starting to shut, and my husband insisted I get looked at by a dermatologist.

It was a video-call appointment, and she immediately told me it was shingles even though I tried to talk her out of the diagnosis. Luckily, like the good medical professional she is, she still put me on an antiviral and antibiotic to address the problem. As my face became puffier and began to burn, and the shingles began opening up and oozing, I could no longer deny what was going on, and I reported back that no, my "spider bite" was not getting better. I have shingles. (She already knew.)

She sent me to an ophthalmologist because shingles can cause eye damage and blindness if it's by your eye, which it was. When he began asking me questions to understand how and why I would start presenting the shingles virus in my early 30s, he said "Are you more stressed than normal?"

Covid-19 is coming from the outside. My baby-chewed and toddler-ripped copy of *Maus* exemplifies the pain that comes from the external world, when there is nothing, absolutely nothing, you can do about it. What happens when your body rebels against you and exhibits an internal virus in response to the stress of an external virus? When the inside pain meets the outside pain and shows itself in a summit of pains across your forehead and down your cheek and over your eye?

Luckily, there was no eye damage, and I just needed to soldier on, stay on my medication, use pain relief methods, and try to "stress less, eat well, and get more sleep." I actually did feel like this was possible because the kids were going back to daycare.

Then the next day, I noticed two spots on the 1-yo's face.

When I realized I had shingles I took care to keep them covered, though anyone who has breastfed or has had small children can tell you that it's pretty much impossible to keep toddlers away from your face, especially now that I had white gauze wrapped around my head. The striking sight of my "owie" made my 3-yo cry in empathy, and I tried my best but couldn't keep my 1-yo away from it completely.

I didn't want to be neurotic, but I decided to check on the 1-yo's immunizations, just to make sure that he was protected from the virus. He had his chickenpox shot the same day my shingles became painful, which meant he wasn't protected before the virus showed up on my face. His pediatrician kept saying things like "this is quite a unique case" and we phoned a dermatologist friend annoyingly often to try to figure out what to do. But in a couple more days, Wallace had a rash that covered his whole body and made him extremely uncomfortable. He was crabby and couldn't sleep. His pediatrician said he needed to stay home from daycare to not spread the virus to other kids.

I think this was the first time I finally came to terms with how badly things were going. I thought I was handling everything okay, but the stress gave me shingles. Then my son got a terrible rash either from me or the vaccine or a combination of both: "this is quite a unique case." Exasperated, we decided to break quarantine and ask our in-laws to come up and help.

Their presence made me feel the most relaxed, helped me complete the most work, and be the most present I've been with my children for two months. I worry about possibly exposing them to the virus, but I'm trying to let some of the worry go, because I can't control everything. And I have to come to terms with that there is no good decision here. I can't make a "good" decision. It is a terrible feeling, but it's not possible.

It sounds like a bland platitude, but I really mean it: we're all just doing the best we can. We're all just doing the best we can. We are sacrificing where we can, quarantining when we can, and getting help when we just can't. And we're so, so lucky that we can get help when we just can't; I know that's not true for everyone. I wish we had better answers and better choices. But we're trying to make the best choices possible.

My shingles and the 1-yo's rash are getting better. Thank you, in-laws.

7-27-20

I always feared you'd stop breathing.
You hear parents say it.

But until you experience it you can't logic yourself out of this primal need to hear your child breathe.

4 in the morning. On no sleep. A day of pressures ahead. Awake to hear you breathe.

That breath became a little more precious, a little more uncertain.

Coughs, rattles, wheezes, rapid movements up and down, up and down.

A million google searches about childhood asthma that don't inform me of anything new, anything of hope to cling to.

Symptoms. Negative tests. More symptoms. More tests?

I need you all and I isolate, isolate, isolate because it's the only mechanism I have.

I practice in the theoretical. The text. Ideologies, ideas, idioms, imaginations. Stretching myself, bending myself, breaking myself, pushing myself, writing myself thousands of pages of words to build worlds I defend with more words.

Now I defend life itself with words gleaned from hospital rooms, laboratories, body counts. No more metaphors. Words used to defend against inhumanity, but it kept spreading until the inhumanity was not moral inhumanity, but inhuman inhumanity. Unhuman. Dead humans.

The burdens I created to defend us from. Now I beg others to take on the smallest of burdens to keep us alive. I still try to get the words right. Not for a grade, a publication, a dissertation defense.

But to see breath.