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Caffeine During Quarantine; Or, Sabbaticaling in the Time of Corona

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Cover Page Footnote

Dedicated to Agnes Malkasian.

Caffeine During Quarantine; Or, Sabbaticaling in the Time of Corona

We are three women with a collective 51 years of service as faculty members at our university, trying to write our sabbatical reports for Spring 2020. It's tempting to make them very brief: "We survived." And with one important exception, the people we cared about survived too. We are still surviving. But there is more.

We came together as sabbaticalers on Saturday, March 28, when Beth sent an email to our small group with the subject line "Sabbaticaling in the Time of Corona" and a short message: "I've been thinking of you both. Would you be up for a Caffeine During Quarantine check-in via Zoom? If so, let me know and I'll set something up for us." Shannon responded within the hour, Michelle the next day, and our tiny band was formed.

Though our paths had crossed repeatedly and sometimes substantively during our years as colleagues, our lives are in many ways very different, personally and professionally: Michelle is a single woman living in NYC, whose life and work frequently take her back and forth to Cuba. Shannon is a single mother with two teens and an active behavioral neuroscience lab. Beth is a writer, a literacy researcher, and a married woman with primary caregiving responsibilities for her 91-year-old father. We recognize the advantages that our legible whiteness and our positions as tenured faculty members confer on each of us, even though our families' identities are more complex. Beth has attained the rank of Professor; Michelle and Shannon are actively working toward the same. Our paths to professional advancement are motivating factors for our collective, formed not out of an intentional plan but instead emerging out of a shared experience: the intense, compounding isolation of sabbaticaling in times of COVID.

By Monday, March 30, we were Zooming, coffee in hand, at 10 a.m. That initial conversation was part where-are-you, part how-are-you, part how-do-we-work-this-Zoom-thing. In the before-times, an end-of-March coffee update would have featured Michelle's scheduled research trip to Cuba, Shannon's lab trip to a regional meeting in Boston, Beth's presentation at a national conference in Milwaukee. Instead, with all of those events caught up in last-minute cancellations, we found each other facing very narrowed scopes: Shannon sat at a desk abutting the family sectional, occupied by the family dog; Beth was bundled up in her home office, a barely converted three-season porch with bad internet and worse insulation; Michelle had recently evacuated NYC with one pair of jeans, two sweaters, three hard drives containing an archive of materials, and

her passport. At various points, we each said aloud what should have been happening that wasn't happening and what was happening that shouldn't have been happening.

We bonded over an unarticulated yet profound sense of loss and a need to both support and be supported in our efforts to make sense of that loss and move toward healing. It was here we realized we had all heard from colleagues who considered us "lucky to be on sabbatical." They were of course struggling to make the mid-semester shift to online teaching, a genuinely overwhelming task. But we didn't feel lucky. While we had been spared some challenges of our abrupt campus shut-down, we grieved the sabbaticals we had earned and planned for so long. A telling exchange in that first Zoom session captured the essence of the heartache: Michelle, sitting cross-legged on the floor of her childhood bedroom in Massachusetts, trailed out in one long breath all it took to cancel her Cuba plans and leave NYC. Then she paused before saying, "But I'm blessed right?" Gesturing around her, she repeated, "I know I'm blessed." Shannon said, "You don't have to do that with us."

Like Michelle's, Shannon's Spring 2020 sabbatical had started off strong, with a clear set of professional and personal goals. She had recently returned from a trip to Paris with her teenage daughter and was back on campus finishing preparations with her lab for a conference presentation in Boston and with an additional group of students for a two-week study abroad research experience in Ireland. But the Boston conference was canceled two days before it started and, soon after, Shannon's children were sent home from school indefinitely. Her family entered a new world of online instruction, limited toilet paper, and diminishing supplies of staple foods and cleaning products. Their Canadian father began lockdown in Toronto, where he now resides. Shared parenting responsibilities, which were always unequal, became impossible with the new border restrictions. With two active teens, a family dog, and a small Cape, Shannon joined our initial Zoom having lost the clarity and momentum that characterized the early weeks of her sabbatical.

Right at the moment we thought our lives would be opening up—with the freedom to travel, conduct research, write without interruptions, wander—the world shut down. But this very first Zoom session offered an unexpected (and welcome) virtual space for us to acknowledge our claustrophobia, our unexpectedly intense lives, our contracted professional opportunities. From our perspective, the sabbatical we had waited for had come at the unluckiest time. Though it was hard to name our grief and make sense of what was happening around us, we began to create a space where it was okay to acknowledge our losses. Michelle's sabbatical report offers a poignant example, as she recounts her active life in NYC, her daily trips to the archives at NYU's Bobst library, and her treks to Manhattan's Neighborhood Network for a course on Adobe Premier Pro

editing. She notes on March 11, 2020, she went from the 18th floor of an 800-unit building to a split-level in the Boston suburbs. Trips to archives were over; the editing course abandoned. She writes, "I felt unable to think deeply, while also feeling deeply alone."

As Michelle's circumstances illustrate, COVID-19 hit the northeastern US, where our university is located, early and hard. No one had a framework for how to think about the effects. Campus closures were profoundly disorienting everywhere, but the continuity of Fairfield's Spring 2020 semester never seems to have been a serious question and general campus operations—everything from academics to residential living to academic support—have largely continued, with significant modifications, through the 2020-2021 academic year. For the most part, jobs and programs have been so far spared the cuts suffered by our colleagues and their campuses across the US. By any measure, our university is a privileged place.

Even so, the margins for professional advancement are razor thin, at our university as everywhere, especially for faculty from under-represented groups, while expectations for scholarly productivity, the very work we were struggling to do, are high. So, in that initial Zoom meeting, the most immediate responsibility we felt was to our colleagues. We wondered about others on sabbatical: How were they doing? We worried about those on pre-tenure research leave: What must this be like for them? We were concerned about the newest members of our campus community: How were they managing? We ended that first Zoom with a plan to check in with these colleagues, and we decided to meet again the next week to report back.

For the next month, motivated by the conviction that those of us on leave were not in fact lucky, we were determined to make the research impacts of COVID visible. We reached out to faculty committees, to administrators, to colleagues. We documented the struggles for others and moved our concerns into governance structures. And then, we let it go. As our Zoom sessions continued, we focused less on our responsibilities outside our group, which were a form of deferral, and more on our responsibilities to our group. We joked about putting on our own oxygen masks first and acknowledged we had to figure out what work remained for us to do—and how we were going to get it done.

A shared challenge that emerged, and required collective problem-solving, involved the abrupt shut-down of co-curricular learning spaces. All of us, even during our sabbaticals, had retained some involvement in centers, labs, and (in Michelle's case) museums. The Writing Center, which Beth directs, moved from 100% face-to-face to 100% remote; the lab work Shannon was conducting with a Chemistry colleague came to a screeching halt;

and the campus museum exhibition Michelle had been working on for two years—the one showcasing Cuban artists—was off limits once campus closed to visitors. Was two years of her work really circling the COVID drain?

Michelle was well prepared for scarcity and radical re-imaginings, however, thanks to her Cuba connections and extensive work with archives. As she writes in the last line of her sabbatical report: “This sabbatical threw my plans out the window in the face of COVID and I worked hard to create something different with what was left.” The something-different ended up being a Cuban archive right at Fairfield. Knowing the Cuban artists’ show would soon become invisible, she wrote, directed, and produced (with Cuban cinematographer and editor Javier Labrador) a short documentary film, [“Tracing Archives of Consciousness.”](#) Drawing on elements of the abridged video-editing course she took, collaborating with one of the artists whose work was featured in the exhibit, creating art that moved into the world in unexpected ways (including a blurb in the international art magazine [Art Daily](#))—some days Michelle felt like she was swimming in Jello. So did we all. But swimming is still swimming.

Much of the late spring, then, was about breathing, about exhaling into our changed worlds and inhaling in ways that expanded our minds and bodies. As our newsfeeds were filled with reports of mechanical ventilation and Beth developed pneumonia for which she is still nearly a year later being treated, our Zoom sessions were a form of *pranayama* (the yogic practice of breath control). Though we did not intentionally introduce mindfulness into our sessions, we came to understand logging in to our Zoom as a form of showing up on our mats. We encouraged these practices beyond our group, urging each other to take walks, to sign up for outdoor goat yoga classes, to connect with nature on a hike or an afternoon at the beach or a warm summer evening on the back deck. We talked each other off ledges and celebrated special occasions with cards and flowers and wine. We acknowledged that some things weren’t going to happen, and we helped each other grab hold of the things we shouldn’t let go. We vented, certainly, but we also searched for paths forward by carving out structured, shared time to write. We kept our cameras on, even during our private writing time, creating a small virtual community despite the disconnecting isolation. This became a practice, a way of bearing witness to each other’s realities and of honoring each other’s efforts to work with and through our research and personal challenges.

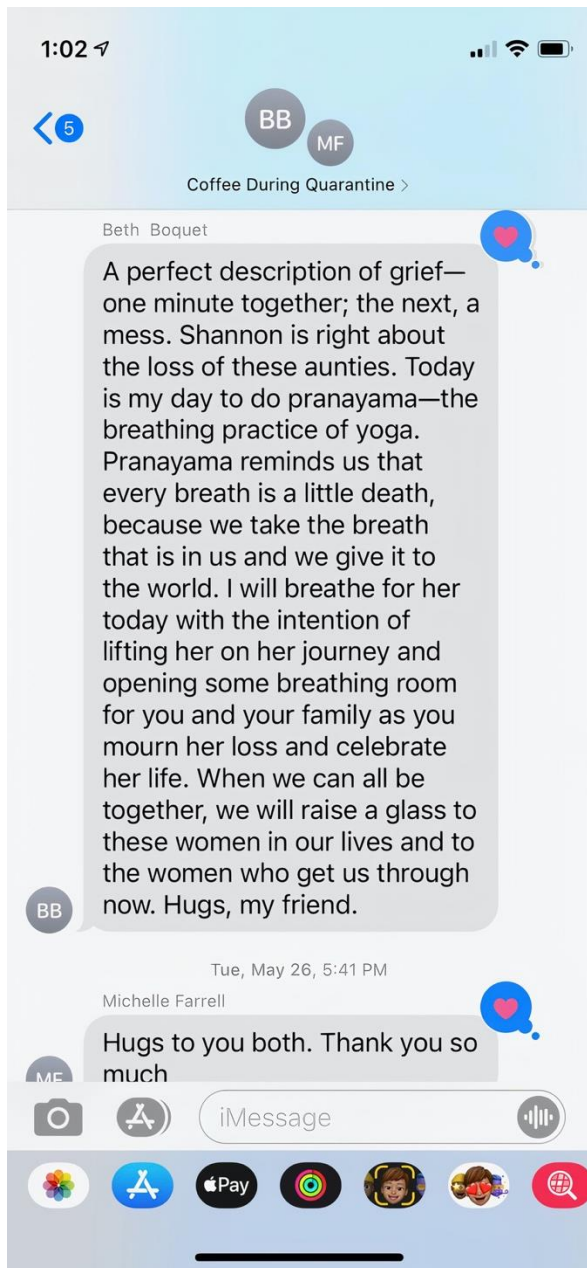
May was a crucial month for our group, one where we accompanied each other through personal loss, professional rejection, and renewed engagement. It is also when we began using text messages as a supplemental mode of communication. Initially we resorted to texts because it was an immediate way to alert others of a conflict with our writing group time. Soon, though, these texts began to allow for the expansion of the

interpersonal relationships underpinning our professional purpose. They document, in real time, the other priorities competing (and rightly so) for our time and attention, such as the morning of May 22, when Michelle sent a text message to our group telling us of a death in her family:

"My lovely writing group—I lost my beloved aunt yesterday, just when I was putting on PPE in her building. She was suffering the last week--but I am going to miss her. Sending huge hugs and thank you for your support in our writing and life. It was time for her—heaven is receiving a Scorpio dressed in red swearing in multiple languages—"

Shannon and Beth have both suffered the deep losses of important women in their lives, their mothers and their dearest aunts. We had, in only a few short weeks, learned so much about Michelle's spirited Auntie Agnes and we mourned this death with her while affirming the pride these women took in our independence and accomplishments. It was their great gift to us. As Beth wrote in her reply, "I'm so sorry to hear this, Michelle. The loss of these women in our lives is so profound. She was obviously tenacious—a wonderful quality. I love how you describe her here—You could be describing yourself! I can see why you loved her so. And she, you. Abrazos, mi amiga."

The following week, Michelle texted on the morning of the funeral: "I was so together yesterday. Today, a mess. If you have a second, light a candle and say a swear word so she has a good transition." To which Shannon replied, "I'll be sure to light multiple candles and bless her with the words of a trucker." Beth's response followed:



Over that same weekend, the personal and professional jammed right up against each other again in an email message from Shannon:

Subject: Re: CV, with suggestions
Date: Sunday, May 24, 2020 at 12:44:28 PM Eastern Daylight Time
From: Harding, Shannon M.
To: Boquet, Elizabeth H.

Thanks, Beth.

I'm definitely up for Monday and have a virtual poster presentation to work on.

Hard day yesterday. My paper was rejected (they didn't like the changes I made with the statistics) and Tom broke up with me unexpectedly. Rejections all around! Strategizing on how to get the paper in better shape for a review at a lower tier journal.

We don't have to talk about Tom but I just want you to know I'm in a fragile state. Another Coronavirus casualty.

The paper I can fix.

Looking forward to the meeting.

Shannon

Shannon's email underscores the accumulating losses we were beginning to experience and share. Michelle weighed in that she was up for our regular Monday meeting time, which fell between Auntie Agnes' passing and her funeral, so we showed up. We focused, in professional terms (because there was a lot of personal talk that day) on the significance of Shannon's rejected submission and on the question of her promotion application. Shannon felt discouraged. The deadline for notifying the dean's office of her intent to apply was pressing and Shannon announced to the group that, with this recent article rejection, her plan to go up for promotion was "off the table." Michelle and Beth were not convinced. "That can't happen," they said. "How do we make that not happen?" We had all been following the preliminary reporting on COVID impacts on professional advancement, for women and BIPOC especially. More time was not a guaranteed advantage. A strategy emerged: Take it one step at a time. "Just notify the dean of your intent to apply," Beth said, "Whether you're sure or not. You can always change your mind." Michelle agreed.

For several sessions, we worked this way, helping Shannon identify the next smallest step when the task of putting together the dossier felt overwhelming—beginning the initial rough draft during our group writing time, reviewing models of updated CVs, thinking about who could help organize materials. We discussed the economic costs of delay (promotion to Professor at our institution comes with a significant salary increase) and the data indicating that women tend to wait much longer than men to apply, even if they have equivalent cases. We assessed, honestly, that research productivity was likely to take a significant hit due to COVID and, since years in rank is part of the calculation at our university, the case in subsequent years might not necessarily be any stronger. There is a kairotic moment for these kinds of applications and we strongly felt this year, for Shannon, was the year.

On May 28, two months nearly to the day after our first Zoom meeting, Shannon notified the dean of her intent to apply:

Dear Dean Greenwald,

This letter is to inform you of my intent to apply for promotion to the rank of Professor. Below is a list of outside referees, a brief description of their accomplishments, and contact information for the external review of my scholarship.

Formalizing this decision marks the end of the beginning for our group. Only a few days later, we started to get pulled into summer and fall decision-making. In our June Zoom meetings, we struggled with maintaining sabbatical mindsets as we faced pressure to begin unusually early preparations for the fall. Still, we prioritized our scholarly work by continuing to commit to six weekly hours of Zoom writing and discussion. The familiar structure of our meetings created order during an unsettling time. Catching up and setting tangible goals in the first 30 minutes, then reporting back on our progress before signing off, were routine parts of our process. We continued to keep our cameras on throughout our Zoom sessions because being part of each other's realness—waving to Michelle's mom when she came out on the deck to water a planter, seeing Shannon's hand go up to grab the cup of coffee her daughter brought her from a favorite café, watching Beth's dog settle in on the trundle bed behind her—felt like an important piece of companionship in our process, even though we recognize opinions differ on this practice of camera use during Zoom.

This time allowed each of us to advance toward larger professional goals, bit by bit. For Michelle, that meant exploring whether to orient towards a book or a series of articles as the most realistic path to promotion, considering teaching and relocation options, and finishing up her qualification as a medical interpreter; for Shannon, it meant completing her promotion dossier, submitting two articles, making critical decisions about the timeline for her lab work, and assuming a new leadership role in our study abroad program; for Beth, whose large project would have been to co-lead an international summer institute on professional advancement for writing program administrators, it meant decentralizing this assistance—spreading it out across time and space—in order to help colleagues urgently in need of book manuscript reviews, reappointment recommendations, application materials, editorial advice, all newly in peril due to COVID. While pursuing diagnostics for her own illness and admitting it compromised her ability to advance the new research she was beginning when COVID hit, Beth also

began the Essential Skills Certificate course through the American Medical Writers Association to become a certified medical writer.

As we write this manuscript, we are nearly a year into the pandemic, and we are still showing up for each other—via Zoom, emails, texts, and anything else we can think of short of the promised in-person margaritas that for now remain deferred. Sometimes we still grieve and gripe, but more often we cheer a muted cheer, appropriate for COVID times. One or the other of us will say, “I don’t know if I can do it,” usually in the midst of doing it (whatever it is). The others respond, “You’re doing it! Look at you—You’re doing it!” When we met on Zoom to finalize this submission, Michelle appeared in a celebratory silver sequined top. We all laughed. Together, we scrolled through the manuscript, with tender hearts for the versions of ourselves we re-encountered in these stories. We talked honestly about the claustrophobia we are feeling, having gone nowhere in now nearly eleven months. To Michelle especially, still sitting cross-legged on the floor of her childhood bedroom, Shannon said, “Honestly, I don’t know how you’re doing it.” Michelle replied, “Am I doing it? I’m up ten pounds and I have sequins on over my track suit. Am I doing it?” “Yes,” we agreed, “You’re doing it.” The *it* is the making something with what is left. The *it* is the companionship in the struggle. The *it* is surviving. We are.