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Editor's Interlude

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Editor's Interlude

David Beard, Professor of Rhetoric, University of Minnesota Duluth

"Human lives depend upon a regularity to which each contributes... It explains the arrival of the fruit in the market each day, the lights in the street at night, the letters slipped under the front door, the matches in a match box all pointing in the same direction, music heard on the radio, smiles exchanged between strangers. The regularity has a beat, very distant, often inaudible, and at the same time similar to a heartbeat.

"No place for illusions here. The beat doesn't stop solitude, it doesn't cure pain, you can't telephone it - it's simply a reminder that you belong to a shared story."

--John Berger, From A to X

My summer class was online. This arrangement was not a result of the pandemic; nearly all summer courses have been online for a few years at the University of Minnesota Duluth. But I maintained regular office hours, on a drop-in basis, which meant sitting in front of the computer with my camera off until a student appeared in the Zoom session. Several students attended, regularly, in numbers far greater than the average summer class. About six weeks into the eight week session, one of them let slip why:

“I’m craving something normal. Showing up for class is normal.”

Midpandemic, my students were still negotiating living with their parents, having been sent home from dormitories. They were in an unusual position, many times, of working in “essential” jobs like retail, which meant going out into a world which could be dangerous and which meant coming home to very vulnerable adults or siblings. Nothing was normal. Coming to online office hours, a kind of “coming to class,” was normal.

I didn’t realize what a blessing a tenured position at a state university would be, in a pandemic. Normal was, for me, something I could (mostly) continue experiencing. (Our wages were temporarily cut, but we retained our jobs, while my friends and colleagues in Duluth, a town dependent on tourism, lost theirs.) Normal was something I could share with, maybe even create for, others, beginning with my students in weekly office hours.

Loss of normalcy was widespread.

In Duluth, our major newspaper was moving from daily to twice weekly production schedules, with attendant loss of staff; our shoestring alt-weekly newspaper was becoming a shoestring biweekly with a donor’s list in every issue, patrons who subsidized where advertising was no longer enough to keep the paper afloat.

My colleagues at the University of Wisconsin in Superior, across the bay, were seeing their wages cut through mandatory furlough days.

The loss of elective surgeries meant lost income at local hospitals, which meant layoffs at every level -- from kitchen worker to nurse on the front lines.

The retail and restaurant and hospitality industries were collapsing. Health care, tourism, and education were, are, the main engines of economic health of Duluth, MN, so it felt, for a while, like the whole community was suffering.

The pandemic cracked open some of the social inequities and racial inequalities in American life. The suffering of others became more painfully clear.

In the midst of this suffering, the CARES Act created granting opportunities within the National Endowment for the Humanities for organizations hurt by the pandemic. The grant was typically used to float organizations on their labor and rent and other expenses while shuttered in the pandemic -- good, useful expenditures that sustained the organizations.

Devaleena Das and I had a different idea. We could use the stability of UMD as a center to focus economic help to individuals whose income was lost in the pandemic. Our project reached out to individuals -- journalists, curators, artists, videographers, a hospice nurse, a musician working as a cook at an environmental education center (which shuttered), a playwright working at the non-profit theatre complex downtown (which shuttered). We could hire them, delivering grant funding directly to 14 community professionals.

The work we asked them to do was twofold -- to interview 10 people about their life under Covid and to create a work of art about their own experiences under Covid, informed by their experiences in the grant.

The concrete results were incredible -- the project covered a spectrum of interviewees, with the youngest being a recently-graduated high school student (just turning 18 and so old enough to sign the consent form), to several elders within our community. We have interviewed a spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientations, from diverse economic classes and professions. We have interviewed people who have believed that Covid was a political hoax and people who are recovering from the disease. We have secured interviews from Asian-heritage, African-heritage, and indigenous-heritage members of these communities, as well as the majority white population that makes up more than 90% of the residents of the Arrowhead. We have interviewed a spectrum of members of diverse religious communities. We have interviewed recent immigrants and lifelong residents of towns as small as Finland, MN (population 195) and as large as the major metropolitan area of our region, Duluth, MN. Interested readers can see examples of the materials collected here: <https://covidstories.d.umn.edu/>

The creative works were equally stunning. We received two scripts for plays, some long-form journalism, some digital paintings, some poetry, some zines. It's a remarkable collection in its diversity. In its diversity, it was also incredibly difficult to shepherd. Given freedom of expression, nearly all of our contractors froze. (They were, by and large, freelancers unaccustomed to working without directives or people in other fields who don't work with professional creations at all.) But eventually, they each found direction and their works can be found on the same website: <https://covidstories.d.umn.edu/>

While the project was innovative and its products useful for future research, the greatest surprise and joy was the impact on the individuals. For some of them, working on the grant project returned pieces of the regularity, the normalcy, we lost in the pandemic. In the exit evaluations, one author said “As a chronic extrovert who was plunged into a very anti-social world during the pandemic, I really missed having conversations with random people” -- an opportunity we created for them. Another said that “It was surprisingly therapeutic to talk to other people about their experiences.”

For the 14 professionals and 100 community interviewees, this project created some normalcy:
the opportunity to process the abnormal time of the pandemic with someone who will listen,
the opportunity to communicate with someone else during a pandemic that threw so many into isolation, and
the opportunity to have a task, a mission, a project, largely self-directed, on the table each day.

We are excited to share excerpts from this project, alongside art produced by DICTA (the Duluth Interdisciplinary Chirographic Technology Association, led by medievalist Krista Sue-Lo Twu) and collected in the Northeastern Minnesota COVID-19 Community Archive Project.