

## Feminist Mishmash: COVID-19 CCCC

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### THE KNOT.

A few months out, as I reflect on my pandemic journaling for the CCCC Documentarian project, Spring 2020, and informed by academic research (*Science*) and journalistic reporting (*The Atlantic*, *Nature*, *Forbes*, *Slate*, *The New York Times*) about the effects of social distancing on women, and on mothers, in particular, both personally and professionally, I see what I wrote in March through that lens.

In fact, I realize that I blithely wrote this, “There really aren’t any clear trends in what I say about my feelings. They jump around . . .” on April 2, as if in apology—because, well, women are taught to apologize, and it is a tough habit to break—and in apparent dismissal of my writing, even in repudiation of my emotions.

Rather than a dismissal, those words are, while not *The Point*, *A Point*. *My Point*.

The observations in my journals about what I planned, what I accomplished, and how I felt are a tangled hair knot: a scramble. They’re likely not a mash up, because that would be more intentional; they are not a hodge-podge because the things in them matter: they are a mishmash.

They reveal the snarl of daily life for parents—but especially mothers—in the United States. The knot is exacerbated by the pandemic, but it exists, always.

There are other, more important stories to tell, and to which to listen—those of adjunct faculty, worried about losing their jobs. Those of people with disabilities, worried their very lives would be (again) deprioritized. Those of people of color, once again used by the rest of us—disproportionately affected by infections and deaths by COVID-19 and by the economic pain of the pandemic.

But they can tell their stories, and I will read, and listen, and learn. This is my story—although it is not mine alone, for I am sure many will find their own daily realities reflected in it.

## JUMBLED

My journal responses are a jumble. They go back and forth between personal, family responsibilities, and professional responsibilities and accomplishments.

Here are a few examples:

Worked upstairs, walked with daughter, worked upstairs, took break went outside, to bedroom for sheets and laundry, to kitchen for dishes, worked upstairs, walked with husband, worked upstairs, walked with daughter, worked upstairs.

Or, in a much lengthier, more detailed passage:

I replied to late work from students. I succeeded in connecting with several students, and one preceptee, which was great. A student MIA since March 9 has replied to SOMEONE and we're trying to rope him back in. I recruited others to help gather data for the 5-year consultant. I did part of the Task Force work, which I think I can finish tomorrow. I walked with my husband to pay for and sign for our taxes. I walked with my 11-year-old, and have over 10,000 steps for the day—that and sunshine likely help my mood, too! I didn't have to help anyone with lunch today as we had leftovers again from last night. Both kids finished working on school work very early, so I had computer availability nearly all day. I made a Loom video to tell students about their homework and loaded it—three students have viewed it. I also set up a one hour drop-in-with-your-pet Zoom time during class time tomorrow. I talked to my peer mentor. Our provost sent out a message about class evals and tenure track faculty, and I asked my dean and union about adjunct faculty and teaching staff. Then, my dean and union officers talked with the provost and got her to agree that anyone can permanently delete this spring's evals if they like. That will help ease the concerns of so many of our adjunct faculty, who've been talking to me on Facebook and via email about how worried they are about not being hired again if their spring evals are bad. I also sent out an email about withdrawal as I've gotten lots of questions about it. I'm trying to walk a fine line, as program coordinator, to be present and connected, but also not annoy people or give them more work. I did make a Google Form to use potentially for withdrawals and sent it to a small group, haven't heard from them yet. I found online and ordered a beginning em-

broidery kit, and got a colleague who does speculative fiction to recommend a book (and she also recommended a camp) for my 13-year-old. I did two loads of laundry and ran and emptied the dishwasher twice, but now our sheets and dishes are clean. I also took the compost out, threw away the chair pads eaten by squirrels and put out others ones—not really the right size, but they’ll let people sit outside on nicer days. Didn’t call the parents, so need to do that still. Did review all of the personnel committee letters for new comments and revisions.

One day I observed,

Ended up basically jumping from one task to another, feeling as if I wasn’t really following a plan. Then, observed I felt surprisingly exhausted by midafternoon—emotionally drained—and was having trouble wanting to respond and to respond positively.

I don’t know why I found my emotional exhaustion surprising the day I wrote it. It certainly doesn’t seem surprising today! Of course jumping around from one activity to another like that feels exhausting—because such rapid-shifts-in-tasking are exhausting.

My husband also works from home. He has for several years; he is just now more at home, not in the “morning office”—a coffee shop—or a shared work space in Philadelphia, frequented once a week. I think in March he helped the kids get lunch once. Never breakfast. Never dinner for the family. But he rarely helps with dinner, although he is a better cook than I am—and isn’t up for breakfast. He issued one reminder to the girls to practice their band instruments, after I asked him to please do so, so I wouldn’t sound like a nag. I did the grocery shopping, took a daughter to the dentist, did our CSA pick ups, gathered materials for and talked to our tax accountant, and canceled appointments. He took one daughter to two in-person, social distancing, off-ice practices, picked up ice cream for me for Mother’s Day, curbside, and pizza—but those in May, not March. Not April. I checked the girls’ online grades. He did not, safe in the knowledge that I was doing so. I ordered materials for Easter baskets, made 90% of phone calls to both of our sets of parents, ordered graduation presents, and mailed books and cards. But, then, I’d do most of this work without the pandemic—a difference is that in normal life, the girls get their own lunches, and we’re not low on food requiring actual cooking rather than assembly.

He did other things—picked out a new lawn mower, and updated some financial records, for instance—redid a sound system, and more. But, as is typical in the division of men’s labor and women’s labor, most of his was one-time, while more of mine was recurring (dishwasher, cooking, laundry, daily check-ins about schoolwork). More of his was visible—a new lawn mower!—and more of mine was invisible (online delivery of a box of adhesive bandages).

I don’t think my husband has been emotionally exhausted, except maybe two days—related to tough professional days, like having to let a colleague know he was being furloughed.

Even just making sure everyone had an electronic device to do work or school was exhausting—and my husband NEVER gave up, never even thought to give up, either his laptop or phone to anyone else:

I did better at following my planned plan today than yesterday. That is probably because today isn’t a teaching day. Also, both kids finished school work very quickly so I had more computer time.

Or

I received texts or emails from nearly half the class, and my peer mentor struggled to answer questions in the Group Me. And I had a lag in response because my daughter was using my phone for her homework and didn’t notice the texts coming in right away. It was frustrating.

I’m emotionally exhausted regularly, in large part because of kinship work—both in the family, and the professional equivalent—the mentoring, formal and informal, and checking in with colleagues, that falls more to women and people of color and other marginalized groups in the workplace as well as at home. See the list of work/family items in Table 13.1 for some parallels.

**Table 13.1: Parallel activities in work/family duties**

Work	Family
Student is worried about her mom, as the student feels she must keep working at Dairy Queen, but her mom just finished with chemo and so is high risk.	Didn’t have to help anyone with lunch today as we had leftovers again from last night.

Work	Family
<p>Spent nearly an hour in the morning talking to a mentee, worried about the switch, hoping for pass/fail grading, worried about her student evals, and just needing to talk to another adult human who isn't as stressed as her husband currently is.</p>	<p>. . . plus I did get the chicken baked (and potatoes—easy as they require little prep and both go in the oven). Also cooked frozen cranberries into sauce and helped daughter make pumpkin muffins for more breakfast and snacking variety.</p>
<p>Start a list of faculty who can take over other classes if or when some of our faculty become sick and can't continue to teach.</p>	<p>Ran out of leftovers for lunch, and no bread, so had to help husband find frozen burrito.</p>
<p>Also texted with colleague who had excellent personal news.</p>	<p>Happy that my 11-year-old had a video chat with a friend while they ate popcorn and watched a movie together, then made forts together, and that my 13-year-old had a video chat with two friends and so was more animated, happy, etc. Letting the latter stay up much later than normal right now to do this (got off phone at 10 when normally lights out is around 9).</p>
<p>Our provost sent out a message about class evals and tenure track faculty, and I asked my dean and union about adjunct faculty and teaching staff. Then, my dean and union officers talked with the provost and got her to agree that anyone can permanently delete this spring's evals if they like. That will help ease the concerns of so many of our adjunct faculty, who've been talking to me on Facebook and via email about how worried they are about not being hired again if their spring evals are bad.</p>	<p>On couch with 11-year-old daughter, who is panicking about nothing to eat in the house. She will make a quesadilla—by nothing to eat, no frozen waffles or pancakes—plan to bake bread (also out) and make pancakes to freeze this weekend. She and I each already ate apple cinnamon oatmeal, and I have coffee.</p>
<p>One student joined [Zoom office hours] just to say he hadn't done his work because he and his family had to stop by the CDC and then go see his grandmother, dying in her nursing home. I could hear his parents arguing in the background.</p>	<p>Need to call in-laws or parents and check on them, family friend in Seattle to check on him, elderly neighbor.</p>

Work	Family
<p>My peer mentor is living on campus still [I helped him through the process, or he would have been homeless, as he is emancipated] which he said is eerie. He's been going out for food although he has a meal plan and could eat on campus. I think he enjoyed talking to someone! [He stayed on Zoom for nearly half an hour after class just to chat.]</p>	<p>Lend phone to daughter for Zoom meeting with her skating coach and other skaters (audio on her phone doesn't work).</p>
<p>I should have finished this [the Documentarian evening survey] last night, but I was exhausted, had a student call even after 9 p.m. (he couldn't call earlier in the day because of his National Guard duties) and didn't think I could do the survey justice last night.</p>	<p>Also did two loads of laundry—washing towels more frequently with virus (and we all have allergies so fear we wouldn't recognize early symptoms) so more laundry.</p>

#### UNRAVELED

Things were, and are, jumbled. But others unraveled. Professional opportunities disappeared—including the planned travel to and participation in CCCC, an inability to stay in attendance at a Zoom Teaching Circle Meeting because of two high-priority phone calls that interrupted it, and a planned in-person consultant visit for a five-year program review.

Some of these unravelings have led to more work—a stretched out, virtual consultant visit, still on-going, or advising that took place over a month instead of mostly in two days.

I can't get the conference—as a regular conference, with me away from work and home and focused on learning and listening and meeting people—back. There will be others, but never this one, in this way. It is a small loss—and worth the cost, to protect lives—but it is a real loss, perhaps more so because—in large part because of my parenting/family responsibilities—I don't attend CCCC annually, but instead more once every three years or so.

I also unraveled a bit with emotion—and that, too, often at least in part, gendered:

I spent an hour awake in the middle of the night ruminating about my children being orphans because we all get coronavirus

and my husband and I die. . . . I had to make a mental list to update making sure people know who should be the girls' guardians if we die.

Or

My 11-year-old noted that we can barely see our state (NJ) under the red circles outwards from us on the maps.

My husband has reported no such sleep disruptions, nor has he been the primary person sharing the world of the pandemic with the kids.

#### TANGLED

My days are always a bit of a tangle, with work and family intertwined . . . work and work out before breakfast, go to work, leave earlier to run kids to activities, and work on my laptop while they're there.

Physical distancing during the pandemic simply exacerbated that. Now, there were no times physically at the university during which I could be just a professional. To help meet my students' changing needs, I even relaxed normal boundaries for the work day and week that I maintain.

And demands of the home changed—to include, at times, teacher (for my middle school children), and dramatically increased cooking/related cleaning responsibilities.

Although in the first week of physical distancing, it seemed like I'd have more free time, not commuting, that time quickly was gobbled up—and now physical distancing brings with it so many new tasks that it takes as much or more time as the original job. I had to create a new online withdrawal process, answer questions about it, and remind people about it. I had to support adjunct and full-time faculty in my program shift to online teaching, as Program Coordinator. Instead of just explaining the day's homework in class in two minutes, I had to create short videos for students, at their request, about the homework. I had to differently prepare classes, redoing some lesson plans I've reused for at least a year or two, and spend more time teaching as if with a dozen independent studies, instead of one group. And that work continues—meetings to shift orientation and registration online, supporting faculty in preparing to potentially teach online for fall term, contacting students to change their grades, as needed, to Pass or No Credit.

## GRIEVING

One day I wrote, in my plans for the day,

Hope to not be so emotionally exhausted, but maybe that is part of living through a pandemic, perhaps especially as a program coordinator—as a leader with others leaning on me, or looking to me for questions I can't answer.

The same could be said about parenting in the pandemic. Will you go back to school? I don't know. Probably not. Can you go to summer camp? I don't know. Probably not. Will we go on vacation? I don't know. Probably not. Can you get your hair cut?

The pandemic has been a series of processing my own mourning, usually on my own, but sometimes with my family, a friend, or a colleague, and then helping others process it. I cut back on my news exposure after the day I wrote this:

The U.S went over 100,000 sick. AHHH!!!! And I read an article about the human toll in Italy that made me cry and cry, reading about families losing multiple members, Red Cross workers going to houses and removing sick people and disinfecting themselves before the next house, cremating bodies as coffins stack up.

I didn't write that my 11-year-old freaked out when she saw me crying over the article. I was the person deciding how much of the news to share with the girls.

My family has been lucky. My husband and I are both employed. Only one person in our immediate or extended family has, at this time, had COVID-19, although we've known many people with COVID by now. No one we know well has died, yet. There are smaller losses: my husband has taken a pay cut, a colleague and I made a pact to read only one the-death-of-higher-education article per day so as not to be paralyzed by fear about our careers, and friends and relatives have been furloughed or are unemployed.

Upon reflection, in April, I observed that I experienced five main stresses: 1) emotional responses to the growing number of sick and dead and stress of students and children and family members and colleagues, 2) stress caused by changed routines for everyone (students, children, me, husband), 3) stress caused by sharing electronic devices with kids (phone and laptop), 4) stress caused by additional/different



work (more laundry/cleaning/different and more cooking, different prepping and interactions with students/colleagues), 5) stress caused by worrying about/helping kids and colleagues and students and husband and self and parents and inlaws and elderly neighbors and additional emotional labor with students, colleagues, family members, kids.

I wrote:

Lots of stress, given the rapid change, and having to so often say “I don’t know—nobody knows.”

#### HOLDING ON

I think just accepting that we were—we still are—on a wild ride of change, and we can only just hold on—and we don’t even know if making it eight seconds will be enough—is about what I can do right now.

#### WORKS CONSULTED

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