

“Yes, and . . .”: Confronting Work, Miscarriage, and Grief during a Pandemic

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My quarantine officially began on March 6, 2020. I was six weeks pregnant, and I was terrified of experiencing yet another miscarriage. If I could have gone into hiding sooner, I would have, but I had to wait until spring break. The flu had been particularly bad on our campus and in our city for the month of February, and so I had been in mini isolation since February 25, traveling only between work and home. I was doing everything I could to prevent a miscarriage, and so I saw home as the safest place to be. I naively thought that viruses would greatly subside after spring break and that it would be safe to return to as normal of a life as possible. I'd also likely know the viability of my pregnancy at that point, and so I assumed that by mid-March, I would be able to relax a bit.

On March 11, we learned that the pregnancy had ended, a third consecutive miscarriage. I finally exhaled for the first time in three weeks. I no longer had to worry about a virus taking my baby; nature took care of that all on her own. I wasn't looking forward to the grieving process, but after five years of infertility, I wasn't new to grieving pregnancy loss or the loss of future dreams of children. I had spent so much time with infertility that pregnancy seemed scarier, but I know better. The real fear was another confirmation that I may never have children. I ended my spring break in the operating room on Friday the 13th.

When the lockdown officially began in Indiana on March 17, 2020, I was relieved. We had been granted a second spring break the week of March 16, but I knew that our university would likely shift to all online for the rest of the semester (and it did the following day), and so I naively thought that I would have the time and space to recover from the miscarriage. I rejoiced in my newfound freedom and purpose. I could work and grieve at my own pace in my home, and I

could devote as much time as I wanted to heal and plan for the future. I imagined that developing online work would be creative, generative, and, most importantly, an escape. I've found that it's important to try to create after a miscarriage. When you discover your body can't create like it's designed to, you try to find as many places for creativity as possible to escape the harsh reality of loss. I could reap the benefits of escaping into work in the comfort of my home all while grieving at a pace I needed.

I took part in the CCCC Documentarian experience as another form of escape. Two reflective surveys a day for four days seemed like the perfect way to connect with others, create new ideas, and reflect on my time during a pandemic. In the days leading up to the reflection experience, I found myself looking forward to it. I couldn't wait to record my days in a space that seemed more public. My pandemic experience was about to be shared with someone else, and that made my experience seem more important. I couldn't wait to see how the days would unfold as I thought about an alternate reality (what CCCC could have been) and a present, seemingly idyllic reality (working from home) during a pandemic.

Little did I know that the CCCC Documentarian surveys would make me confront the harsh realities of isolation during an already isolating time in my life. Miscarriage and infertility are isolating on their own. Adding forced isolation made the beginning of quarantine a more difficult time for me. Through the Documentarian reflections, I saw the barren state of my current predicament during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. I was isolated, alone, and waiting for death to return. All of my grief escape routes were stripped from me by the pandemic, and so I had to encounter the effects of grief and death face-to-face for the first time since my first miscarriage in 2015.

ESCAPE ROUTES BLOCKED: CONFRONTING (RE)PRODUCTIVITY

I began the reflection period stressed, angry, and afraid. With the official lockdown, all of my grief escape routes were taken away from me. I couldn't go into work. I couldn't go ice skating or to yoga classes. I couldn't even go for mindless retail therapy. Initially, I thought that being at home would provide a space for me to grieve appropriately and plan the next steps for growing our family. But with the lockdown, those places for denial, healing, and planning were shut down.

I couldn't escape and thwart death like I had hoped. I had just experienced death, but here it was again. In isolation, I felt like I was sitting and waiting for death to return to me.

Wednesday, March 25 (Morning): I'm stressed today. My husband is an essential worker. . . . We realized last night just how unsafe we are during this pandemic. One of his employees came in to work and announced that she had partied all week in Indianapolis, [and] while she was at it, she visited her brother who had tested positive for COVID-19. Even though I'm isolating (and have been since March 6), I feel like I'm just waiting for the virus to come to me. It's strange to know you're doing your part, but you're still at the mercy of others who aren't. . . . I felt like I was waiting for death to come rap on my door. . . . Also, I'm relieved I'm not pregnant anymore, which makes me feel guilty. I can't imagine dealing with a pandemic while pregnant, so I feel like that's one silver lining to an otherwise very sucky situation.

Before learning of my husband's renegade employee, I believed I was safe. I had not left my house in weeks, and my husband's company had taken great measures to increase social distancing at his pharmaceutical plant. With this news, though, I learned just how unsafe I was. COVID-19 could come into my home even though I was doing my part to control the virus's spread. I became paralyzed by fear and futility. I literally could not move away from the virus, and so I felt like I was sitting in my home not to escape death, but to wait for its arrival.

Social media amplified my apprehensions about the inescapability and inevitability of COVID-19 and death. A former sometimes-escape from the weariness of life, social media was now abuzz with COVID-19's rampage across the globe, New York and Italy in particular. My social media feeds were filled with retweets of terrifying news stories of the overwhelmed hospitals and morgues and scare-pieces about young adults dying from the disease. I understood the existence for these news articles: many young adults were not taking the virus seriously and were flouting stay-at-home orders. I also knew that my friends were reposting these articles because they wanted to feel like they had more control and power over the virus. I could not stop reading the news. If death was going to come to my door without my permission, then I needed to know everything I could about it to beat it. I became stressed and almost panicked by news and social media. One of the

questions in the survey asked, "What was one news item, headline, or event that impacted you today? Why?" Almost all of my responses to these questions were about COVID-19. My response to the news in social media from Thursday evening captures my emotional response to social media throughout the pandemic:

Thursday, March 26 (Evening): "What was one news item, headline, or event that impacted you today? Why?" THE SUPER STRESSFUL NYT ARTICLE ABOUT PEOPLE DYING FROM COVID19. . . . I know that this information is important. I know that there are people who are not taking this virus seriously. But I'm sitting at home, and I feel like I'm waiting for the virus to come to me because my husband has to go out in the world. It's terrifying. I have now banned myself from Twitter.

I don't know how many times I banned myself from social media and the news during the period of reflection and beyond, but it must have been at least a dozen times. In my Documentarian reflections, I addressed my avoidance or banning of social media five times. The more I read about the virus, the closer it felt. It was pressing on the walls of my home, my mind, and my heart. Everything I read was about death. Everything I thought about was death.

To top off the stress of the pandemic, the Documentarian reflections asked me to confront my productivity. I have always been embarrassed by my work ethic and productivity, so documenting my productivity daily and publicly made for a difficult week. When I realized that I was going to have to talk about work in every reflection, I was salty. I did not want to confront my struggling productivity during an already difficult time in my life. Even though I thought work would be a respite from grief and the pandemic, I quickly realized that working in the new conditions brought on by isolation in the middle of grief were not at all ideal. Furthermore, work, like the news of COVID-19, was ubiquitous because it was all online. I couldn't escape work. I felt like I had to be available to my students all of the time, and I felt like my course content had to be impeccable because of all the "free time" I had on my hands. Work further lost its appeal because all of its ego-boosting elements were stripped with the shift to digital and remote work. I couldn't see my students positively respond to my lessons and my jokes like I did every week. I couldn't hear what was working for them and what wasn't. I couldn't see my colleagues and laugh with

them in the halls. All I could do was create sub-par content and respond to the many pieces of invention that I had assigned when I thought work would be a freeing space for my heart.

Wednesday, April 25 (Evening): Today was not as productive as I had hoped. I was more introspective than I thought I would be. I oscillated between stressed and mopey, which I found strange. I assume it's both the stress of a pandemic and crashing hormones from a miscarriage. . . . I didn't live up to my expectations today, and I'm sad that I didn't even try. . . . I spent more time thinking about what could have been rather than what is right now in the present.

The miscarriage and infertility were obviously wrapped up in my conflicts with working during a pandemic. Throughout the Documentarian reflection period, I could not tell if my emotions stemmed from rapidly falling hormones, the stress of the pandemic, or both. I wished that my hormones were to blame for my lack of productivity because I felt silly for not being able to work very well during the pandemic. I could not extend any grace to myself on that front. I wanted to push through the hard things in life, just like I had pushed through pregnancy loss and infertility, and I found it embarrassing and pathetic that my work life was not stronger.

In response, I oscillated between extreme control and spiraling unproductivity and anxiety. The day that I thought was most productive (Thursday) was heavily planned out, largely in an effort to appear like I had it all together in the Documentarian reflections. I scheduled each hour of the working day with meetings, writing and research, creative endeavors, and play. By the end of the day, though, my newfound productivity was overshadowed by the seeming futility of my isolation efforts.

Thursday, March 26 (Evening): I was feeling good about my productive day, but stupid Twitter ruined that. I'm proud of my productivity, but I feel like it's the calm before the storm, that I'm doing this for no real reason. If I get sick, then this is all up-ended. It feels like I'm just trying to avoid the inevitable.

By Friday, my stress, fear, and desire for control reached a crescendo. All I wanted was control and relief, but all of my efforts at control made for a disappointing day. I tried to be purposeful with my

Friday, controlling every detail and every feeling, but I had student feedback on a very low-stakes assignment looming over my head. I was so stressed by the feedback, that I avoided it until 3:30 p.m., and in the end, it only took me thirty minutes. I mindlessly scrolled social media to avoid work, which only fueled my anxiety and stalled my productivity.

Friday, March 27 (Evening): How ridiculous to waste so much time dreading something so simple. That's the story of human life, though, isn't it?

Isolation and lack of escape routes made simple student feedback an onerous task. Through these reflections, I realized that it was time to try to let go of control and to let time and life be emergent. The more I stressed and obsessed about my current state of grief, stress, and isolation, the less I accomplished. By waiting for death, I had sealed my fate. I needed to shift directions.

TURNING POINTS: THE BENEFITS OF CONFRONTATION

Even though the Documentarian reflections had me confront the harder parts of my isolation experience and how that affected my productivity and mental health, the exercises in twice-daily reflection brought quite a bit of relief and even therapy to my days. In fact, whenever I reflect on the Documentarian experience, I think of the great relief I felt with each reflection. Through the power of writing, my stressors became more tangible; they were real, and they deserved my attention. I firmly believe that performing these reflections changed my outlook on both the pandemic and my infertility.

My first realization of a perspective shift came, from all places, a reflection on my miscarriage and infertility on Thursday night. A cohort-member from grad school texted me to let me know she was finally pregnant. In the exchange, she noted that she was worried that she'd be like me and just have miscarriage after miscarriage.

Thursday, March 26 (Evening): Today, I heard from a former graduate school cohort member that she was finally pregnant. She noted that she was so worried that she'd be like me: that it would take her forever to get pregnant, and then, when she finally did, she'd just have a miscarriage. Unfortunately, this is not the first time a "friend" has said this to me. So many women

don't want to be me, and they have no problem letting me know it. I don't know why they feel like that's something they should tell me. . . . I have a feeling [the conversation] was precipitated both by insecurity and by fear. She's likely fearful about what this pandemic means for her and her baby. I will not lie; I was relieved to know I would not have to worry about being pregnant during a pandemic anymore. But that's not really a consolation in the end, is it? She gets her baby in a few months. I don't.

Her words stung, "I don't want to be like you . . ." After five years of infertility and three miscarriages, it wasn't the first time I had heard those words. Whenever I hear those words, I immediately yell inside my head, "I don't want this to be my life either, but I really have no control over it!" I hate to admit that when I first learned about recurrent pregnancy loss and infertility, I had those same thoughts. When I was 11, my fifth-grade teacher experienced a miscarriage, and through the parent rumor-mill, I learned it wasn't the first time that had happened to her. I sorted out what miscarriage must mean based on the sex-ed class we took that year, and I decided that I never wanted to go through that traumatic physical and emotional experience once, let alone multiple times. I remember clearly thinking that I didn't want to be like her or other women like her. But now, I am.

The purposeful confrontation of grief in these reflections changed this exchange for me. For the first time, I thought, "Wait. Who wouldn't want the life I have?" Just because I can't have children, it doesn't mean that I don't or can't have a fulfilling life. I am not less than because I am infertile. What could I have been missing because I had been loathing pregnancy loss and infertility for so long? How much of my life had I wasted hating something that had made me so strong? Through infertility, I've learned that I should put my happiness in eternal things. If something can be taken from me, then it can never make me happy. I can see goodness, joy, and blessings in the big and the little things in my life, and I can celebrate those things. How much had I lost by being self-consumed by hating one hard thing in my life?

This mental shift was a pivotal moment during my acceptance of infertility. Because I could not move or escape grief and because I was isolated for an unknown amount of time, I realized that it was time for me to look at myself and love me for who I am and for what I have in the present moment. If I couldn't do that, then this time of isolation

would be unbearable. The lack of movement meant that I could not chase illusory things that could assuage my feelings of grief and being less-than everyone else.

After a disastrous Friday, I was determined to do better on Saturday, and so I declared that the day would be Self-Care Saturday. Throughout the day, my mentality toward the pandemic and infertility completely shifted away from death toward life.

Saturday, March 28 (Morning): I hope to accomplish self-care and relaxation today. I'm going to clean my house, and I'm going to shower and style my hair and paint my toes. I'm going to yoga. I have a FaceTime happy hour scheduled with a friend this afternoon, and I want to relax and do nothing after that. My hope is to love myself more than I did this week.

For the first time, I wrote about how I would care for myself. All of the previous reflections had futile hopes about productivity and escaping COVID-19. Saturday's hopes were purposeful and (relatively) achievable. I felt like I had been trying to perform all week. I wanted to be the perfect childless academic. So many tweets and hastily written articles were floating around at this time about how hard it was to be a parent in academe. Academic parents lamented that recent journals and edited collections would be comprised of pieces by childless academics. I felt a sinking feeling in my chest every time I saw a tweet or article that celebrated the childless professor. I don't have living children, but my time is filled with grieving the children I could have had and with the goals of beating infertility, either physically or through adoption. Work couldn't heal my pain, but reflection and changing my perspective could.

For Self-Care Saturday, I adopted the improv approach to a scene: "Yes, and . . ." I wanted my day to be filled with yesses, and I wanted to positively respond to any deviations from my "plans" or my preconceived notions of what Self-Care Saturday should look like. I took the day in stride, applauding the moments I had to care for myself through exercise, pampering, and relaxation. Even though I didn't record the moment in my reflections, I remember on my walk that I thought of Emily Dickinson's poem on stopping for death: "Because I could not stop for Death—/ He kindly stopped for me—." All week, I had stopped for death, but on my walk, I realized that I had decided not to stop for death. Death comes for us all, and death appears throughout

our lives in many different ways. I met death directly at the beginning of March with my miscarriage. I met death again indirectly in isolation, and that death was far scarier. I stopped living over something I had no control over. It was time to go about business as usual and not waste my time waiting for something that may or may not show up.

Saturday evening's reflections are my favorite from the Documentarian reflections. In these reflections, the stressors and griefs I encountered throughout the experience appear, but I responded differently to them.

Saturday, March 28 (Evening): I talked to my sister, a director of therapy at a hospital in Memphis. Memphis has the most cases of COVID-19 in the state of Tennessee (at the moment). I asked her about how stressed she was, since I know she's been in meetings about how her therapy spaces will be converted should there be a major medical crisis. She told me that she's been waking up every night for the past week scratching her face from the stress of it all. Scratching her face. She bought some melatonin today to try to find some help sleeping.

After talking to my sister, I realized how myopic my pandemic perspective was. Yes, the pandemic could come to my home, but there are people who are directly working with COVID-19, or who, like my sister, are preparing for COVID-19. I had wasted my week worrying about a possibility, when there are so many people dealing with the reality of the pandemic. I needed to think beyond the self. I desired to try to find some small ways of making the pandemic better for those around me. To do that, I needed to learn to accept the good and the bad in a day and to keep moving forward. In my final reflection on Saturday night, I moved closer to that acceptance.

Saturday, March 28 (Evening): I was spending my evening in my window room. The last time I spent a Saturday night in my window room was three weeks ago, when I was fighting an intense bout of "morning" sickness in the evening. I had to come into this room because it was so cool. I just sat and reflected on how lucky I was to be pregnant. And now, I'm sitting here, not pregnant. I thought it would be relaxing to be in here alone tonight, and it's not. It's the first time I've actively missed being pregnant. It's the first time I've felt like I've grieved. It's strange when grief

hits you. And this is the first time I've ever felt guilty for mourning a lost pregnancy. The other two times felt justified. This one doesn't. I have a very good life, and I love my life. I feel sadness and relief. I don't need a baby to be happy, but it sure would be an extra bit of fun in this life. After a pandemic.

I had never written that I didn't need children to be happy. I know that I had thought it, one thinks a lot of things when going through infertility, especially after five years, but I had never put those words in print before. I felt so free in that moment. Even though I was sad, I felt almost freed from the depression that came with miscarriage and infertility. I finally felt that I had power over a very hard thing in my life. I could control this story by how I react to what it does in my life; I don't need to let it keep writing my narrative. I could say, "Yes, and . . ." to infertility.

TRANSFORMATIVE TAKEAWAYS

In the few months since the Documentarian reflections, I've found myself wondering how eight reflections over the span of four days could change my perspective on infertility. At this moment, I believe it was the power of writing and the invisible audience that helped me craft more purposeful reflections.

I'm ashamed to admit that I have avoided journaling for the past five years. Since the moment I realized that we were likely dealing with infertility, I've been afraid to document most of my experiences. I tried to write about miscarriage and infertility, but I was so afraid that by writing about it, I would be putting it into stone that I was infertile, that writing made it permanent. My identity would be infertility only and forever.

With these reflections, though, I had to face infertility. I made the decision at the outset of the reflections to confront these hard moments. I wanted to see what would happen when I finally put the hard things into words. Would I be defined by them? Would I work through the hard things? Or would I learn how to live with them, accepting them as they are in that moment? Could I say "yes" to them and still be happy?

I also think that the invisible audience changed my reflections because I felt that I was heard. Someone was reading these on the other side. Someone saw my joys and my sorrows. Someone knew that I was struggling and working through it. Someone was listening to me. But

this someone wasn't responding, and because they weren't responding, I envisioned someone just sitting with my entries without passing any judgment on them. My reflections were acknowledged and valued, but they didn't make me perfect, and they didn't condemn me.

By forcing myself to be honest with the hard things and the good things during these reflections, I began to realize that these moments were simply moments. A day was not good or bad; it was just a day. My life is not defined by the day, but by how I respond to the day. If I could just say "Yes, and . . ." to each day, then I could move from one day to the next, attempting to live in the present moment. I'm not saying that I don't worry anymore, or that I don't over-obsess about being perfect, but I do try to not let the hard moments define me anymore. I do know one thing, though: I'm not sitting and waiting for death. Death is always close at hand. The more I try to avoid suffering and death, the more I suffer and die. I now try to turn my thoughts to those things that bring me eternal happiness, and I attempt to let the transitory joys and sorrows come and go. A day is just a day.