

The Density of Hollow Bones: A Narrative Reflection on the Pandemic

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Abstract: This reflection explores my personal experience as a field director managing the upheaval of students removed from field placement in the wake of the pandemic. Personal responses to the demands of work, motherhood, and self-care are narrated through the process of acknowledging loss and grief for students and me. Identification of hope and resilience in times of chaos provides a mechanism to support others as they traverse unexpected shifts in work, practice, and daily life.

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In March of 2020, my office, with its yawning window that overlooked a bustling campus and a heating vent that clunked a little too loudly, became a vacant room in a matter of minutes. As the pandemic loomed, I loaded books and files into a flimsy plastic cart that was poorly equipped to carry the weight of an academic career and hauled it to my car.

As I drove away from campus, I was grateful for some distance. My commute is cumbersome. I am a more efficient worker away from the distractions of an office setting. I prefer jeans and sneakers to dress pants and loafers. My dog would be less lonely, and I would have easier, quicker access to my son. Despite the impact of the pandemic, I was marginally comfortable.

Forty-five minutes later, the contents of my office were scattered across our spare room that houses the life documents I maintain but never reference. Items to be graded and drafts of research papers were organized in the filing cabinet next to tax documents and old continuing education certificates. I assessed the filing with ambivalence, confident in the quick return to my recently vacated faculty office.

My bedroom became a workspace out of pure necessity. It was the only room in the house where my substandard Wi-Fi would keep me latched to a virtual room without disrupting my son's elementary school's attempt to transition to online learning.

For weeks, I hunched over a rickety table that balanced my years-old laptop, enduring meeting after meeting. The early excitement I felt for the freedom of working from home calcified into the nagging aches that accompany a sedentary lifestyle. The physical pain in my hips and back, the burning sensation in my eyes that only comes from blue-light saturation, and the emotional onslaught of my students' academic needs etched a deep well of hurt.

For years, I have reflected upon the professional and social responsibility of being client-facing. As a client-facing professional, I must engage, empathize, think critically, and problem solve. The term I use for this conscious action is "being on." It is a state of giving, creating a welcoming space, and being an agent of service when required. It is a consistent presence maintained for others. During the early days of the pandemic, I was "on" constantly. Conveying

empathy and warmth to students and fellow professionals in typical circumstances can be exhausting. I felt myself straining to amplify those same skills in an effort to translate care across an online platform.

Despite years of responding to others in acute clinical crisis, I struggled to muster the strength to move through a day. While offering words of comfort or support, I felt vacant and scared. It is a feat to embolden others when the daily pressures of work and motherhood snuff the internal light of positivity.

As a mother, I felt empathy for our students with children. The demands of work and school combined with the pressures of parenthood churned together without any foreseeable end or additional support. As a frontline worker, my spouse was absent as he delivered supplies and resources to people in their homes. I was relegated to the role of playmate, cook, and educator for my child. It reminded me of the first days and months of motherhood, when the number of diapers changed becomes too many to count and showering is a chore. The beginnings of the pandemic felt the same—time moved too quickly and daily activities were completed in a haze of exhaustion.

My experience during the pandemic was not unlike other professional women with children. The stressors of caregiving—particularly for women with children displaced from school—combined with work and household responsibilities increased exponentially (Donner, 2020). I recently learned that *The New York Times* established “The Scream Line,” an open voicemail box where parents can voice their frustration (Grose, 2021). Anonymous venting, screaming, and tear-soaked disclosures exposed the raw nerve of women struggling to balance caregiving, household responsibilities, and managing professional expectations (Grose, 2021). Had I known about the line months ago, I might have participated.

While I struggled with my personal circumstances, I fully recognized that my position is one of privilege. The far-reaching consequences of the pandemic disproportionately impact families and communities of color, resulting in weakened social and community supports in the midst of crisis (Oppel et al., 2020). I had the privilege of a flexible work environment and maintained economic stability while guiding my child through his final days of first grade, a freedom that other women did not experience.

The impact of the pandemic on field education students was immediate and critical. Students were asked to leave their placements, effectively stalling their academic progression. Those learning in hospitals and care facilities were immediately displaced. Many students lost the ability to engage with their field instructors. The vast majority of them did not have the opportunity to appropriately terminate their placements, the simple act of professional closure eliminated. The status of intern, for many, resulted in a dismissal of the professional connection they built over the course of twenty-four weeks during their internship.

Given the swift termination of field education placements, gaps were identified in teaching strategies across courses. Classes that were face-to-face shifted to online. Students in field education were required to modify their learning to self-directed or remote professional learning

tasks. Research on the impact of COVID-19 identified an increase in anxiety, stress, and feeling overwhelmed while engaging in coursework and completing field-education requirements (Council on Social Work Education, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Deterioration of mental well-being for students and professionals is a theme that echoes through existing and emerging data on the impact of COVID-19 (Moawad, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

The emotional onslaught of fear, panic, grief, and anger mixed with the unanswerable question of “what happens next?” was present in every conversation, email, and weary expression. It was a palpable grief process. As I sat in my sad excuse for an office, a sentry stationed to guide my students through their tumultuous journey, I struggled to balance the needs of my students, my own family, and the physical agony of too many hours sitting at a computer.

In addition to the task of managing a professional career and caregiving, the responsibility of maintaining my status as a role model became an additional pressure. As a Director of Field Education, I was the person who my students would remember. I was also the person at the forefront of my son’s experience during the upheaval of the pandemic. How would any of them remember this time of isolation and uncertainty? As a cohort of future colleagues in social work, what would students take from this moment based on my professional presentation? As the parent engaged with my son twenty-four hours a day, how would he regard me when we emerged from the unseen hold of the pandemic that ruined our daily routines and robbed us of normalcy?

The dread that any spire within my personal wheelhouse would deem me incapable: my son, my husband, my colleagues, my students, even my dog, became an overwhelming gravity that suffocated my energy. Despite the daily practice of meditating, connecting with friends, and exercise, I splintered under the pressure. My focus lagged. Meetings were draining. I experienced waves of irritation and felt unnervingly alone despite an energetic seven-year-old boy and an anxious Labrador retriever constantly at my heels.

During a meeting in late April, stationed in my bedroom office, I shifted my gaze from the computer to the tree outside my window in an effort to rest my eyes. The maple tree that consumes a wide portion of the view was planted in my son’s honor a week before he was born. The tree is my favorite feature in our yard. It is a source of joy and happiness.

Desperate for relief, I traced the lines of the tree’s sparsely decorated limbs, detailing the new leaves that flapped in the breeze. Storm clouds had pressed in from the east while the sun blazed brightly to the west. The sky twisted from a bright blue into marbled grey, ushering in a powerful gust that slammed against my home and tested the strength of my unstable bandwidth.

The incoming front forced the limbs of the maple to thrash against itself. The bright green leaves quaked and warped under the pressure of the gusts. In the chaos of it all, I noticed a tiny beacon that would become my grounding focus amidst the plight of the pandemic: a female Baltimore oriole.

Against the exposed branches of the tree, the oriole's feathers blended seamlessly. She was camouflaged but exposed to the weather. Her spindly legs gripped the branch as she sank and soared with the lash of the limbs. Her stance never wavered, firmly grounded against the wind's invisible attack. Her light-brown wings never spread in an effort to steady her position. She endured the pummeling with stoic grace and unyielding ease. She accepted the climate of the moment and was resolute in her willingness to endure.

The oriole became the image I called to mind when my body hurt, or the grief of my students became too overwhelming. When I felt the anguish of one more assignment, one more meeting, or one more call to action, I envisioned the oriole. I visualized her firm stance against the pressure and reflected on the intricate skeletal structure of the avian species. I determined that, if a bird with hollow bones can maintain her stance in a tumultuous summer squall, I could find stability in the midst of a pandemic. With the help of the oriole, I released the need to brace against the gale and attempted to ride the pressures of the moment.

With my students, I focused on the only thing we can control in difficult moments: our responses. Acknowledging the limited resources, recognizing the unknown, allowing students to name their personal situation in whatever way they deemed appropriate—a mess, a disaster, heartbreaking, frustrating—became the branch to which I held firm. I assured them that while I did not have any direct answers, I knew the current crisis would pass and we would find solutions to the problems. My mantra became simple: We will figure it out. Regardless of the need, we could and would develop a plan to the best of our abilities. I decided that acceptance outweighed perfection. Grief and discomfort could be acknowledged without allowing them to fully ensnare. I held tight to my branches and moved with the unseen gusts knowing that all of it might ruffle my feathers, but I could endure.

After the close of the semester, I found a nest dangling from the limbs of the maple tree. I searched my mind for a time when I might have noticed birds leaving or returning to the nest but couldn't recall any. I tried to remember if I heard the chirping of her brood, but I didn't. I was unaware they nested in the maple, but the evidence was clear. It was the nest of a Baltimore oriole dangling from the limb directly in front of my bedroom window. It was the place she stood when I first saw her months before. She had marked her territory and claimed her home.

By the time I found the nest, it was empty. The oriole took the important articles with her as the chicks fledged, just as I gathered my things and moved on from my faculty office. What remained was the place: a space where life was born after enduring the trauma and onslaught of an unrelenting storm. When I am able to reopen my office door, the space that I have cultivated as my own, I hope to welcome my students back to a place where they feel accepted and supported until it is their time to leave the nest.

The anniversary of our displacement from normal life recently passed, and I still struggle with the stress imposed by the pandemic. I endure the daily pressures of being an at-home working professional mother with a young child enrolled in cyber school. The days still dip and press with expectations. My son and I have been in each other's company for over 365 days without more than a few hours reprieve. I know with certainty that this time together has not been

perfect, but it has bonded our relationship with more depth than I could have anticipated. We are eager for summer day trips and mini golf in a new season of vaccinations and moderated fun in a socially distanced world.

I also know that my passion and drive to support young adults pushing through college has never been stronger. This time has taught me the importance of acceptance and patience. The understanding that young adults are striving in new and dynamic ways is evident. The newest generation of professionals in the field have experienced a challenge unlike many before them. As an educator who has traversed the storm with them, I have evolved as a mentor and guide.

As I journeyed with students through the pandemic, we worked to recognize their increased ability to respond to crisis and unexpected shifts in professional environments. The unintended benefits of students' expulsion from their daily academic work became their answer to every professional interviewer's question, "How do you respond to crisis/high-stress situations/abrupt shifts in workplace expectations?" Unknowingly, they were living their answer. Students also recognized professional skills developed out of necessity during the pandemic, including their ability to use technology, seeking out social supports, and time management (Toth, et al., 2021).

An additional focus on planning preemptive measures as a mechanism to support faculty and students in the event of a potential disaster became the foundation for developing flexible learning opportunities (Krull & Duarte, 2018; Simeone, 2021). Within my professional work setting, ensuring in-class coursework could quickly transition to an online platform became a necessity. As the Director of Field Education, I worked with field internship supervisors to anticipate unplanned shifts in practicum as a means to reduce the abrupt termination of placement. Discussions focused on possible disruptions in field education secondary to the pandemic, or any disaster, allow for proactive planning and conscious problem solving.

In the fresh beginnings of spring, we are sending a new cohort of young professionals into the world after a full year of learning and living in the pandemic. They are eager to engage a workforce after a trying academic year. As they move away from the structure of academia, I hope they are able to reflect on this time and acknowledge not only the strife, but also their ultimate triumph.

I was pleased to learn that Baltimore orioles nest in the same location year after year. There is something organic in the call to return to a place. I will return to the office I have held for seven years as the oriole will return to her tree: both of us focused on cultivating the next brood of fledglings.

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