

COVID-19

Pandemic Pandemonium

In this evocative autoethnography I share my ordeal of living through stay-at-home orders from a global pandemic. As confinement takes over, I reflect on how life involves both a culture of sanity and a culture of crisis. I write autoethnographically to manage a modicum of sanity and to inspire others to share their own experiences. The autoethnography becomes “interventionist, seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or are denied a voice to speak.”¹ In the end, I discover how writing the autoethnography transforms, “writing, whether confessional or prose or poetry, was irrevocably linked with effort to maintain well-being.”² Autoethnography is a qualitative, transformative research method that provides self-critique, empathy, and vulnerability while being therapeutic.³ In the end, my autoethnography provides a deeper sense of the social and cultural issues involved when living through self-isolation during a pandemic.

* * *

I’m dizzy, blood pounds in my ears. My heart thuds and hands shake. My vision is blurry, as if I were looking through the wrong end of the telescope. Risky these days to go grocery shopping. COVID-19 everywhere. Stays on some surfaces for days and lives in air particles for hours. Some pharmacies and grocery stores set an hour for seniors and those with special needs. Is this safer or riskier for timid shoppers?

A slow deep breath. I focus. Here and there. A new calculus to avoid crowds, avoid others who careen too close to comfort zones. Suddenly, it’s a zombie world. Social and physical distancing. I debate, *leave the house or not?* Yesterday, in my grocery store, there were social distancing reminders on shopping carts for the two-meter rule. I was frantic, *hurry up, get in and out of store as fast as possible*. Nobody knows what’s happening in the world. Is it an epidemic? Not anymore. A pandemic says the infectious disease experts.

It’s 7 a.m. The drone of a plane shudders down my back. Unusual after the recent draconian travel restrictions. But my front tooth hurts, my nose plugs. Eyes swell as I open them. Each day, I prepare to stay home, indefinitely. Suddenly, I recall song lyrics about walls that cave in. If I get COVID-19, I’d like a call button to summon a nurse. But no private nurse

Journal of Autoethnography, Vol. 2, Issue 2, pp. 226–231, e-ISSN 2637-5192 © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2021.2.2.226>

for me. If I had a coronavirus ordeal, it would be without an accompanist. But knock on wood. I look around for familiar things. Anything to keep me sane. I try to figure out what has happened. Yet, everything has changed. The U.S.-Canada border has been closed to anyone but big cargo trucks. That's never happened before. Canada has grounded all but a few international flights, to stem the tide of newly infected travelers. That's never happened before.

Silent minutes pass as the nightmare begins. Pandemic, a new word that rolls off my tongue and echoes in my ears. For weeks, politicians had pooh-poohed the spreading virus. Chest-beating; disparage the worrisome reports from China. A retort of reports from leaders, "It's a hoax, it will go away," said the president. Other sources send a different message: *wash your hands, don't touch your face, keep your distance.*

Bullshit, I say. I learn the Chinese government had suppressed virus news and threatened the ophthalmologist who had first alerted others. Now he is a national hero and one of the first victims in February. Travelers transmit the disease around the world. Three days ago, 4,496 died; today 19,544. What will it be in three days?

I take showers because I must. Try to confirm that I've washed away germs. Yesterday, I even took an extra shower after grocery shopping. A shower gives me a feeling of power. Nobody knows where germs hide and for how long. Each time, I put on fresh clothes and put corona clothes into the laundry. I leave some outside clothes by the front door, for the next, possibly fatal, grocery trip.

How to keep up with the news? My heart rate accelerates as I digest the reports. I turn away, damned if I do, damned if I don't. A bone of contention with moving targets each day, each hour. Numbers spiral upward. It's chaos, madness on fire. A whole new vocabulary everybody hears: coronavirus, epidemic, pandemic, isolation, quarantine, self-quarantine, shelter-in-place, community spread through transmission, incubation period, fatality rate, asymptomatic, outbreak, high risk, vaccine, clinical trial, epidemiological link, flattening the curve, state of emergency, and social distancing. Though I hear live updates from health authorities, I need practical survival tips.

Slowly, I enter the kitchen. My sink has grocery items I sterilized overnight in soap and water: eggs, bread, potatoes, apples, oranges, canned salmon, basmati brown rice, margarine, magnesium vitamins, baby kale, canned pineapple, and chicken noodle soup. On the counter, a package of toilet paper, another of paper towels. Time to spray and spray and wipe the counter. Scrub away any hitch-hiking germs. Thoroughly, must clean and clean and rid every iota of coronavirus. Tears from the smell of bleach and hydrogen peroxide. There is much to learn about coronavirus and how it transmits from a sneeze, cough, or moist small talk. *Ab-choo* and droplets shoot into the air. It's alive on hands and spreads through a victim's eyes, nose, or mouth. The elderly and those with medical conditions are most at risk. Spray and spray, wipe and wipe. A new mantra: *wash your hands, don't touch your face, keep your distance.*

It's one fucking miserable world. When I first heard of a possible pandemic, I shrugged it off. Mom, however, collected canned food and toilet paper. Wise ol' Mom. She recalls wartime depression and others who lived through the Spanish flu. Too bad Mom and Dad live far from me as I live alone and helpless to stop the pandemic. Totally helpless. And I miss my old boring life. Dragged away from students, daughter, parents, friends, and neighbors, I am awake but trying to take deep breaths. I hear more lyrics from the same song about lying on a bathroom floor.

With goose bumps, I decide to brew some coffee. Good thing my daughter gave me her one-cup coffee maker and espresso machine when she bought a better coffee machine for herself. A fourteen-ounce cup in under two-and-a-half minutes. Just got into coffee after our Maui trip when the family was drinking joe. While the coffee brews, I begin to stew. Sweat webs down my legs. Walls close in as I look around. There is a dark shadow with the fast-spreading pandemic I could have never imagined. A tightness in my stomach; can't breathe. Pound, pound as I scream. Images blur; my inside becomes a choir of voices. But the coffee is ready. I take a sip. Drink and try to tune. Suddenly, the coffee chokes and chokes up bile. Quickly, I rush to the sink. Spit up; breathe. My face throbs as I gasp for air. A deep breath for mindfulness practice. Still, hard to focus. In only a few days, so much has changed.

A friend went for his daily walk in the countryside along the highway and saw only three vehicles pass, one a police car. Then, a flashing mobile highway sign, absent two days prior, warned him:

COVID19
STAY HOME

AVOID
GATHERINGS

KEEP 2M
DISTANCE

WASH YOUR HANDS

Two weeks ago, I was clapping in the audience for two teacher candidates conducting bands and orchestras at a school music concert. One said he felt so much adrenaline. At least three hundred people sat in the audience. Now, we have to stay six feet away from each other. We have to avoid social gatherings of more than ten people. Two weeks ago, I helped my boss with an interview in a small room. Now, no intimate meetings. Two weeks ago, I went to schools, used washrooms, touched stair bannisters, and shook hands. Now, schools are closed, and no physical contact. *Closed temporarily: we're practicing social distancing.*

It's a pandemic pandemonium. Supermarkets empty of rice, toilet paper, paper towels, and water bottles. A couple spent \$100,000 on supplies only to resell them online. There is a shortage of eggs, meat, flour, milk, chicken, and cleaning products. There are contradictory statements: don't hoard food but avoid shopping trips. Media headlines shout, "like a tornado occurred inside," as they show empty shelves in grocery stores: "this is what the apocalypse looks like." Pharmacy signs apologize and warn, "sold out of facial masks, hand sanitizers, rubbing alcohol." And the stock market rollercoasters. Airlines cancel flights with country travel bans. People must self-quarantine for fourteen days when they return.

There are social distance tips. Avoid public transportation or any scrums. People are permitted to pharmacies, grocery stores, doctor's office, and some outdoor areas. Strictly, takeout food only. Avoid others like the plague. Limit groups to those you live with or go

solo, but always, social distance. Probably, wear a face mask, wipe off desks, doorknobs, and computer equipment. Kill off sneezes or cough, make these flee. The virus lives longer on slick and shiny surfaces than on fabric or cardboard. If you must roam out of home, remove all duds and flood all exposed skin with water.

Concerts, conferences, festivals, religious gatherings, and any other social events have been cancelled. Church, school, sports, music, library, and restaurants suspended in a blink of an eye. Broadway musicals have been muted. The Las Vegas strip and Times Square are ghost towns. Now, long lineups outside supermarkets and hospitals with desperate people who want to stockpile or be tested. Health authorities give stay-at-home orders to avoid work, classes, and transit. Self-isolation is the order of the day. Social media sprout conspiracy theories and, by the way, have I washed my hands?

People take the pandemic more seriously now as many die. This is no ordinary flu; crematoriums hum like never before. A demand to incinerate the infected. Statistics become moving targets; way too many numbers to remember. Obsessively, I check the daily deaths to follow general trends. First single digits, then double digits, hundreds, thousands, and ten-hundred thousands with daily numbers doubling. Major cities become new epicenters as the virus moves westward. Non-essential businesses close. People line up outside emergency rooms for bids to be tested. Density becomes a death sentence. Stay-at-home orders 2 million, 20 million, then 200 million Americans. Travel bans cause leaders to work with airlines to repatriate those stranded from home. But these could carry the virus and a quarantine awaits. A severe health crisis caught many countries flatfooted. There is a dearth of critical personal protective equipment such as masks and gowns and gloves. Nurses and doctors use one mask for three or four shifts with no protection for vulnerable patients. With unsafe conditions for health workers in the front lines, some nurses quit.

This morning, I sit still. Isolating, I look out the window. But no sun, life is none. The ground turns, my insides burn as I try to move to improve. Sigh, another night with no sleep as I stream television shows. Last night, I choked. Heaved bits and pieces that floated in the toilet. Flushed. Slowly, I returned to bed and breathe away. For two nights, this happens. Now, a vision of my body in the window with sallow skin.

Moving, I get my jacket to go outside. Find a trail to follow. The drone of a plane startles me. *Must be essential travel*, I tattle. Hear my feet plow through leaves. I stare at the ground and forget where I am. Bring on willful amnesia to forget the pandemic. Deaths and more deaths. Isolation and recovery. I try to remember a working world, but it's a mess. I walk, stare, love the crackle of leaves under my feet. A sharp tumble of a small stone and I'm at a school that looks like a ghost town with weeds in the grass. Somewhere inside, there was life. Learning, living, playing, sharing, continue, continue to walk. The street drifts into a stretch of dead, yellow grass. With heavy feet, I lift one shoe and look. Yup, it's dog shit. My laugh calms me. As much as I want to forget, I'm in deep shit.

Again, I laugh and walk. A crescendo of air leads me on a path of dare. Smelling, there are pink blossoms. Spring could be awesome. Could be a delight. A familiar spot, I see a parking pillar by the church. Times before, I have postured on this pillar and watched the world go by. Slowly, I sit on the pillar. But suddenly, I hear the joyful yells of children. Screams soak in and echo, echo, and echo. Frivolity make me close my eyes and listen, feel

their fun. Pure lighthearted undone. Images in my head of kids that run through and around and out and back and out and back.

Suddenly, there is an unfamiliar something. Calm. Serenity on the pillar. A few weeks ago, I was a major multitasker as teacher, mother, daughter, friend, and neighbor. But now, schools are cancelled and businesses closed. Even weddings and funerals have been postponed. How do you postpone a funeral?

Memories, on New Year's Eve, my daughter, her boyfriend, her dad, and I were on a Maui beach together with thousands, watching fireworks. In countdown mode, we welcomed the New Year. Not a care in the world. Quietly, I thank my daughter for not a being nurse or doctor.

It's freezing but I wish for a cigarette. An entire carton of fags with the strongest nicotine rating for king-size menthols, my venom when young. I want to puff and puff the smoke filled with chemical compounds. Bring on the arsenic, benzene, carbon monoxide, and hydrogen cyanide. Let me die at least with a whiff of youthful sin in my lungs. Cough and cough. Fill them with cancerous tobacco before coronavirus microbe. More than anything, I need a wise pithy to erase the deep, dark hole that engulfs the world. It's chaos out there. And then I remember:

*May you live in interesting times,
this, too, shall pass.*

Then, my mood changes as I desire to avoid the world. Last week, I had planned to move closer to my parents, daughter, and workplace. Mom had done some apartment hunting near her house. I had visualized the first Sunday family dinner at my new home: a menu of pot roast with potatoes, carrots, and mushrooms, all cooked in the pressure cooker instant pot. Mom would bring salad while my daughter, her dad, and her boyfriend would bring tons of ice cream! It would be splendiferous.

But it's a horribly fucked-up, good-for-nothing waste of life I've worked for. Now, I shake away my family dinner plan dream. I get up and walk to a fir tree. The fury explodes inside me, and I attack the tree. I kick, punch, rip its thick bark and lower branches. I tear a branch into pieces, throw the shreds on the ground. Stomp, stomp, stomp until the branch breaks. I hear a voice but ignore it. Next branch, I kick and kick it away. The voice again, in another language, more insistent.

"Stop, stop!" I turn. And an elderly lady motions with her hand. Can't make out her face under the mask but her eyes say *enough!* She's small and looks like my mother. Her eyes order: Stop. Behave. Calm down. Cowed, I comply. I take deep breaths, gauge my rage. The lady is savvy. Her hand waves, bids to leave and I wave back. Okay, okay. My heart slows, and it's time to go back inside. But I am fragile; in my gut, I know something is terribly awry. I want to fight but can't. I look toward the lady again, and she continues to shoo me away.

Alright lady, I'll go. Her gloved hand and mask remind me that we suffer together. She walks further away, and I feel her strength and request to stop. *I'm okay,* I think as I nod in her direction, *and thank you, strange lady.* But my unease comes in waves that roll deep inside. I have not been this vulnerable since I was young. I slow down and breathe, slowly and deeply. I don't want to spiral downward into a pandemic rabbit hole. I want to live

more lessons of adulthood, of happiness, of love, of trust, of reason, of family, of friends, of dignity, of humanity, of integrity, of sanity—of everything.

I try to calm down, but worse-case scenarios paint a scary world. We have become extras in a sci-fi horror movie. Everyone stays at home; the curfew is enforced. In some cities, police patrol the streets. The death toll rises every day. The number of the infected continues to double while a chorus chants, *wash your hands, wash your hands*.

Shockingly, people can be asymptomatic and be infected without being sick. No fever, no chills, no cough, no shortness of breath at least for a week. Thus, there is a false sense of safety, so someone could spread the dead. Live your life as if you are already infected.

Travel by bus or plane is like Russian roulette. It is suicidal to sit in a sealed box with those who may be fit but contagious. Cruise ships float as petri dishes. Many advisory do's and don'ts. We are urged not to put seniors or ourselves in danger. No social or poker nights or friends for dinner. No playdates for kids. Instead, there are nightly 7 p.m. cheers, horns, cannon fires for health care workers. They are the heroes in this war.

Sun falls as night calls. Tired and spent, I force myself to walk while I take stock. Or just make some chow and head to bed. With heavy feet, I make my way through the streets. My heart beats fast, fast, fast. It takes strength to open my front door. Step inside, strip my clothes, leave the pile by the door. Don't touch anything. Clenching hands, up the stairs to shower. I use toilet paper to turn on hot water. *Wash away* chorus, kill coronavirus.

That evening, I get a text. And so, it begins. More questions from students. What happens after spring break with no school? What about their practicum credit? What about their undergraduate degree? Questions from my daughter about online course instructions. A lot of uncharted territory for teachers. A text from Mom to watch the updated news. But it's a mystery for authorities, with no answers yet. Nothing. What was on hold is now postponed. Darkness wraps darkness. As it's hard to know what's real and not real with no expectations, no judgments. Life is cancelled with a Walpole quote: "This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel." I empty my mind, glide beyond thought and inhabit my inside stoic. It beats and suppresses my inner neurotic; I step back and observe the new normal. Hope is always burning bright, though on the back burner. Surely, everything will fall back into place. Life will go on, with humanity humbled for a time. *Won't it?* ■

KAREN V. LEE, PhD, is lecturer, faculty advisor, area coordinator, and co-founder of the Teaching Initiative for Music Educators (TIME) cohort at the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Her research interests include issues of memoir, autoethnography, poetic inquiry, performance ethnography, creative-relational inquiry, women's life histories, writing practices, music/teacher education, and arts-based approaches to qualitative research. Her doctoral dissertation was a book of short stories titled *Riffs of Change: Musicians Becoming Music Educators*. She is a teacher, writer, musician, teacher/music educator, mother, daughter, and researcher. Currently, she teaches undergraduate and graduate students at the university in both traditional and online contexts alongside her academic and scholarly writing pursuits. In 2020, she received the Killam Teaching Prize.

NOTES

1. Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014).
2. bell hooks, *Wound of Passion: A Writing Life Paperback* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1999).
3. Dwayne Custer, "Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method," *The Qualitative Report* 19, no. 37 (2014): 1–13.