

ANXIETY, AMNESIA AND FINDING ONE'S INTELLECTUAL WAY THROUGH A PANDEMIC

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As we moved quickly from nervous anticipation to lockdown, and as my colleagues had to scramble over a weekend to move their teaching online, I felt incredibly fortunate that I was not teaching this term. I did not have to deal with the technological logistics of Zoom teaching, and the inevitable “is this thing on” fumbling.

My overwhelming sense of gratitude faded as I started to reflect on my place in the pandemic. Sure, I could just keep working on my book. That was, after all, what I supposed to be doing this semester. It felt... underwhelming. I got stuck on one thought: I had absolutely no useful skills in a pandemic. As an immune compromised 60 year old, all I could do was be a responsible citizen and stay home. I could use my superior online research skills for the hunting and gathering of groceries to sustain my family. It took a lot of time, and even more anxiety.

But I had no *socially* useful skills. Not only was I not a health care worker or an essential services provider, but even my areas of legal expertise seemed deeply unhelpful. Maybe if I knew something about health law, or privacy law, or technology law. International trade law or the law of emergencies. Nope. My areas - the legal regulation of family, sexuality and gender - just didn't seem to have any immediate purpose or traction.

As my university kept churning out reports of the crucial research being undertaken by my colleagues in public health, medicine, life sciences, all towards understanding the virus, my sense of relevance just continued to diminish. It got to the point I couldn't read the news bulletin or the media reports. Why hadn't I gone into science? I was reminded of a headline years ago, about one of my colleagues discovering a new galaxy, and asking myself, well, what did *you* do today?

I decided to reach out to my students. I had a few JDs doing directed research, and a sizable gang of doctoral students. I reached out to my students to see how they were doing and ask how I could help. It wasn't

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much. But it seemed to mean a lot to them. And then, I gathered my graduate students. On a whim, I proposed that we meet weekly for a virtual graduate workshop and present our work in progress. The response was overwhelming, and we set it up in a matter of hours. We are scattered across the country and around the globe. But, every week, we gather for an hour and half of intellectual engagement with each other's work. It didn't feel like much, but it was what I could do. And each week, it feels like a bit of an intellectual life-line for each of us.

One of my students presented their work through the lens of the current state of emergency. It was a breathtaking presentation, filled with critical insights and affects of both hope and despair at the future that we cannot yet know. It got me thinking. Well, it got us all thinking and the discussion was electric. Another student made an eloquent defense of the importance of critical thinking about law in the midst of the pandemic. I realized that they were absolutely right. We know stuff about law; about how it works, and how it doesn't work. We know about the hazards of legal naivety and the dangers of arbitrary power. I may not be an expert on privacy law and the new level of threat of surveillance capitalism (other than to know that it's a problem). But I do know that the world is changing before our eyes and we need to bring our critical skills to bear.

And I was reminded that I am a role model. There are many days, when the hot water tank breaks, and my kids need all the things, and I hate every word I wrote...I forget. My graduate students look to me for intellectual guidance, but also for personal and professional leadership. My intellectual legacy such as it is lies with them, not with anything I have ever written. They are the next generation of intellectual leaders. My role is to be the wind at their backs, to help them build their professional futures. And these futures suddenly felt that much more precarious. From the challenges of focusing on work, to differential care obligations at home, to a potentially terrible job market, the pandemic presents some unique challenges to graduate students. While I was trying to inspire them, keep them connected, affirm the importance of their projects and the possibilities of their futures, a funny thing happened. They inspired me.

So, no I won't be discovering a vaccine for the virus and I won't be discovering a new galaxy. But I have things to do. And I don't just mean cleaning out the garage and the Tupperware cupboard, which I have

already done. I have articles to write about the family law disasters coming in the wake of the pandemic, and the challenge of the rise of authoritarianism for gender and sexual rights, and yes, I need to finish my book on #MeToo and the regulation of sexual harm. I have doctoral chapters to read and letters of reference to write and workshops to organize. I shouldn't need to remind myself that ideas matter, but it seems as if in the midst of the pandemic, I had to. And now I can keep focusing on my little part of the world and keep trying to imagine ways to make it better.