

RESILIENCE WAS A BRIDGE TOO FAR: WONDER, ENDURANCE AND EXHAUSTION

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By any measure, March is a difficult month in Edmonton. The days are getting longer. Spring equinox comes and goes. Friends from temperate locales post pictures of blossoms. In Edmonton, spring remains aspirational. The ground is covered in snow and toques are essential. For those of us in post-secondary education, March can feel like the last sprint in the marathon of the academic year: adrenaline with an undertone of exhaustion. Papers are due. Exams are on the horizon. And in my civil procedure course, we still need to sort through the differences between a summary judgment application and a summary trial.

This March posed new challenges. On a Thursday morning, after spending 80 minutes running a mock questioning with my civil procedure students, I come upstairs to find a group of my colleagues clustered in the hallway by their offices. University administration has sent us an email asking us to be ready to move to remote delivery of our courses on 48 hours notice. The Faculty is abuzz. Will we have to? We speculate. Surely not! *Hopefully* not. Somebody cracks a joke about how we should be standing further apart, but we don't move. The heightened awareness of proximity to others will set in later. For now, we mingle.

That afternoon passes slowly. I can't concentrate. I scroll through Twitter looking for guidance or comfort. Maybe both. I refresh the page. I scroll more. At 2pm I teach bankruptcy and insolvency law. I tell my students that this might be our last in-person class. A student asks about what remote learning would mean for the exam. "I don't know. Please be patient. We're figuring this out as we go." In the coming days, I'll repeat this exchange a lot. Will we move to pass/fail? Will there still be a Dean's list? How will we prevent students from cheating on exams? I'll say: "It's a fluid situation. We'll figure it out. Please be patient."

Friday morning, I get in the car to drive my 20 month old to his daycare. I cry sad, scared tears. I wonder, "if university students aren't supposed to

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be congregating, why are daycares still open?" My toddler loves sticking his fingers in mouths: his, mine, anyone else who will let him. And hand washing at this stage looks more like a wrestling match than a hygienic practice. I decide to keep him home for the day. I think, maybe he's old enough now that he'll play by himself and let me get some work done. I am wrong.

We go grocery shopping. In another scene that I will repeat in the coming weeks, I push my cart past empty shelves where toilet paper, pasta, canned beans and flour would usually be stocked. I feel a rising sense of panic. Will there be enough? Are we to go hungry? But there's still a row of canned lima beans, untouched in the madness, so the situation can't be that bad, yet. Later, I find myself wondering about my students and how they are managing. When I was in law school, I didn't have room in my budget for panic buying groceries. How are they taming the threat of scarcity if not by carefully stocking their pantry with non-perishables?

By Saturday, the University decides to move all classes online. I send an email to my students outlining how I plan to deliver content remotely – we'll have live, online lectures during our regular time with recorded versions available afterwards. Hours later, the Chief Medical Officer closes daycares across the province. My 20 month old is going to be at home with me, indefinitely. I draft a new email to my students: "There's been a change of plans..." We move to pre-recorded lectures with abbreviated meetings during our regular class time. Children and pets welcome, mine included.

The next week poses a series of challenges: learning how to use new technology, letting go of my old schedule, adjusting to the growing list of restrictions on what we can do and where we can go. I spend my days chasing my son around our apartment and venturing out for bracing walks in the still-frigid river valley. In the evenings, I prepare for classes and record my lectures. I find myself wondering about my students. Am I doing them a service by trying to maintain some sense of normalcy and continuity? Or is it unreasonable to expect them to care about the difference between a summary judgment application and a summary trial given the global pandemic?

The Faculty grapples with whether or not to move to a pass/fail system for the semester. I invite my students to provide me with feedback and they

accept the invitation. I hear from parents juggling childcare with their schoolwork. I hear from children who are worried about their ill parents. I hear from people with depression and anxiety problems who are struggling with the pervading isolation and uncertainty. I hear from workers who have been laid off and aren't sure how they are going to pay for their groceries. My students play many roles outside of the classroom. These roles can always impact their ability to perform at school, but especially now. Their stories are heavy. I find myself wondering if they are going to be okay.

The first days of lockdown are distinctly memorable, but then they start to blur. I settle into a routine of sorts. Walking the neighbourhood with my son and dog. Trading off parenting duties with my spouse. Late nights prepping and delivering lectures. The unending monotony of cooking all our own meals: 21 breakfasts, lunches and dinners one week followed by 21 more the next. I start to think more about what I'm not doing. The Law Review fundraiser is cancelled. A conference in Toronto is cancelled. I cancel lunch plans with some former students. Last time I taught civil procedure, I took my students out for nachos and beers following our last class. Not this year. I cancel my book launch. My summer conferences are all – one after the other – cancelled. Our Faculty teaching workshop is cancelled. June convocation is moved online. I mourn these moments of community and togetherness.

I wonder about how to hold space for the grief of what's been lost while still recognizing my position of privilege. This theme – of grappling with loss but feeling almost guilty for being sad – becomes another common refrain in my conversations with students and colleagues. Over and over again I hear some version of: "I am not doing great, but I can hardly complain: others have it so much worse." This is true. The news is filled with stories of sacrifice and misery that dwarf my own. I listen to a radio story about medical providers, who isolate themselves from their families indefinitely to protect their children from the virus. I turn off the radio and hug my son. I read about children saying goodbye to parents over the phone, because they cannot be with them when they pass. I visit my parents in their backyard and smile at them across a 6-foot gap. As outbreaks race through two meat packing plants in the south of my province, my own relative privilege is brought into stark relief. Can a person both recognize the unfairness of a system that allows powerless workers to toil in unsafe conditions for meagre pay and also feel sad that

they missed the chance to drink cocktails with old students at a University fundraiser? The latter loss – my loss – seems trivial. I wonder if there is space enough in my heart to properly grieve all the losses, or if the trivial ones should be pruned to make room for more weighty concerns.

March turns into April. Snow melts. New snow falls. I deliver online review classes for my students. I answer emails filled with questions about an insolvency trustee's impeachment powers and the applicability of non-party disclosure rules to the Provincial Crown. I draft exams. I mark exams. I submit grades. And then suddenly, it's May. Tree buds appear. A few precocious tulips unfurl their cheerful blossoms. We unpack our shorts from a box at the back of our closet. We fish the sunscreen out from underneath the sink.

I reflect on the semester that was. I survived it. My students survived it. But did we grow during the process? Did we develop new skills and gain new insights? Resilience is the thing we are told to strive for. It is the thing we are to impart onto our students. This past semester gave us plenty of chances to show how well we can thrive during challenging times. I find myself wondering if I did enough to transform my Covid-19 lemons into pandemic lemonade. I'm unsure. As the semester unfolded, I was reminded about the things I value because of their absence: community, routine, sleep. I developed a deeper appreciation for the richness and complexity of my students' lives outside the classroom. I was impressed at how engaged they remained with the material, pandemic notwithstanding. I was touched by their patience and buoyed by the humour. At the same time, the semester posed many questions for which I have no answers. I am too tired right now to formulate answers. I am too tired right now to be resilient. And I wonder if we do ourselves a disservice by measuring ourselves against the high bar of resilience. Perhaps the most important thing about this past semester is that we endured it. Change arrived; we endured. Uncertainty took hold; we endured. It wasn't always pretty, but we endured. Maybe that's enough.