

THAT TIME OF YEAR

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“That time of year thou mayest in me behold” is from Sonnet 73, one of Shakespeare’s best-known sonnets. A metaphor for aging and death. It is not the most uplifting metaphor to be referencing during the time of COVID-19. Despite this seemingly bleak message, there is an alternate interpretation of the sonnet that is decidedly uplifting and hopeful. The sonnet, instead of presaging death, can symbolize life. As the author strides through the seasons, we can sense in that journey the cycle of life in all of its vagaries of beauty. We gain a deeper appreciation of life as we stroll through the “boughs which shake against the cold.” It is not such an ominous thought.

Shakespeare sonnets, quantum mechanics, British history, daily puzzles, Star Trek, colleagues, friends and family, and, best of all, teaching and learning are my life cycle events, neatly compressed into this strange time of COVID-19. The list is not exhaustive. There is in the background the ever-present fear of infection and the ever-present shadow of the news; all too easily accessible in the digital age. It is ironic that the virus has gone viral in cyberspace. It is difficult to pull oneself from the daily graphs, statistics and descriptions of what we are all enduring as we sit patiently inside, waiting for something to happen outside. We are not waiting for a miracle perhaps but a sign, no matter how small, that we are all going to come out of this okay.

The sign may be spring. I hear the “sweet birds” of Shakespeare singing. During Shakespeare’s time, as we incessantly read in the media, they too suffered from contagion and death. For two years the playhouses lay empty, banned from opening to control the outbreak of plague. Yet, life went on, and eventually it returned to full force. That is something to remember.

A sign of these times may also be the social mantra to “help prevent the spread.” I went into a form of self-isolation early into this “new normal.” My husband, who is in treatment for stage four lung cancer, needed the

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protection of home to stay healthy and safe. Quickly, we found strength in isolation as it became abundantly clear that being alone in our home did not mean being home alone. Text chat groups (which one friend labelled Corona Boredom), telephone calls, Zoom meetings, and online streaming of religious services became the social outing we all craved. That first week was a blur of a new kind of activity. It wasn't physical because the physicality of our space shrunk so rapidly. Rather it was of the mental kind; neurons firing at rapid speed and emotions careening from highs to lows.

Work became the sign of consistency; the anchor to both the new and old reality. Quickly pivoting from in-class teaching, where I was physically present, to remote teaching, where I was digitally presented, was a welcome challenge. I am constantly amazed at the adaptability of human beings; how quickly we can revise our path and lay down a new one. From the "ashes" of Shakespeare's sonnet, we can become stronger. That strength of character can only be created through the support of others. A quote from Thomas Paine is apt; "It is not in numbers, but in unity, that our great strength lies." My faculty colleagues provided exceptional outreach and support during this tentative time. Immediately, one colleague started a Slack App chat where we could post our ideas and questions on how we were approaching this online transition. This opportunity provided the support we needed to forge ahead as we created a new rendition of our courses. Most helpful was reading the experiences of colleagues after their first foray into online learning. To finish that Paine quote, "yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world." Although the first week was stressful, it was powerful too.

To my pleasant surprise, remote learning was energizing. The ability to be creative and provide a teaching and learning platform that each student could tailor to their own learning needs was an incredibly positive experience. I implemented some pedagogical practices that I previously promoted in varying degrees but had not implemented fully. For instance, I "flipped" the entire classroom, in the classical meaning of that term, by creating audio PowerPoints, accessible anytime and anywhere, through the course website. I continued with the scheduled classes via Zoom but re-envisioned the classes as an enhanced learning space for quick review, deep discussion and break out room problem solving.

I injected some much-needed fun into this newly imagined learning space by starting a Spotify music playlist with my students. Now for the big reveal – I teach criminal law to first year law students. This musical interlude allowed me to integrate course themes with music. One playlist, for instance was entitled justifications and excuses to highlight musically the defences of duress, necessity, self-defence and defence of property. Students added to the playlist as the days stretched into weeks. I invited other faculty members to provide suggestions. To lend a human touch to the criminal justice system, I invited my special Zoom guest, a local judge, to do the same.

Although this musical project represented the “fun” in the “fundamentals” of criminal law, it was also meaningful. One student suggested the Tragically Hip song called “Wheat Kings,” which told the story of David Milgard, who spent twenty-three years in prison before being exonerated. Earlier in the year, David Milgard was at our law school to speak of the plight of the wrongfully convicted. The song was a poignant reminder of what really matters and why we were all sticking to the law school plan even in this time of adversity. The playlist, which started as a fun addition to a stressful situation, brought us together in a way that a traditional class could not; to misquote the words and meaning of Shakespeare, if “music be the food of learning, play on.” In the time of COVID-19, play we must.

Another hopeful sign of renewal is the nearing end of the term. Wrapping up the semester brings a sense of closure. It marks not just the end of a specific period of time but celebrates our accomplishments. We have endured much but we have also triumphed, ready to take on the next challenge. For the students, however, instead of a joyful look toward the future, the term end brings uncertainty. Many students have lost their anchor as they lost their summer placements. They feel adrift; cut off from human contact and career prospects. But this is where we, faculty members, can make a difference. A colleague at another law school generously gave his time and effort to raise money to fund student summer internships. Our faculty is poised to hire a number of extra students to do research. In this COVID-19 time of scarcity, we have found more. Now, that, truly is something to celebrate.

The last sign of the times of COVID-19 is the sure knowledge that all of these new learnings, from teaching to friendship, will last. We must hold

onto these experiences, learn from them and integrate them into our “new” lives. This means doing what I am doing right now, which is writing, reflecting and engaging in the individual, collective and systemic impact of COVID-19. Without this, our isolation will be for naught. Instead of permitting the pandemic to define our lives, we can define our lives through the unique perspective COVID-19 has given us. This includes thinking about teaching and learning in a different way. We all, as knowledge sharers, can share more than our knowledge; we can share, at this fragile period in our lives, our wisdom as calibrated through the lens of new experiences and fresh approaches.

Sonnet 73 was written by William Shakespeare in 1609. We are now in 2020, some 411 years later. Over that stretch of time we have changed and grown in ways unimaginable even to the best playwright of all ages. Being alive in the time of COVID-19 is an experience unlike any other. The most vulnerable in our society – the elderly, the sick, the homeless and the institutionalized – are all at risk of harm. We see these vulnerabilities very clearly now and perceive how societal change can make meaningful differences in all of our lives.

I started this reflective piece with a slice of Shakespeare, and with a sonnet that suggests the end as opposed to the beginning. I end now with a Shakespearean beginning – not the beginning of a sonnet or play but the popular notion that Shakespeare was delightfully productive during what is known jarringly as the plague years. In fact, he may have written some of his most enduring plays, such as Antony and Cleopatra, King Lear and McBeth during that grim period. COVID-19 may be a barrier to the full enjoyment of our lives but we can also look at it in a different, more positive light; life in the time of COVID-19 can be a time of creative renewal when we stretch our imagination and look beyond those barriers.