



The Same Old New Normal

By Ryan Arron D'Souza

It feels normal. In the sense that mornings are the same.

I hear my upstairs neighbours navigating my ceiling while it is still dark outside. It is their morning routine: bathroom, kitchen, door, car. Their schedule has been a courteous alarm for months, but now it is concerning so early in the morning. I belong to the economic class that can work from home, and continue to earn a full cheque. It is comfortable, easy, and privileged. However, my neighbours are part of a different class. They are not essential workers, but their work is essential to their livelihood. While I spend the day at home to protect myself and others, my neighbours spend the day interacting with others in close-but-safe proximity to ensure they survive another day...economically. But we all will contribute to flattening the curve. I decrease my chances of getting infected, and my neighbours cannot afford to go to the hospital.

It feels normal. In the sense that conversations are the same.

I peruse through unread emails to identify all the conference calls. I make note of the times, and also calculate the time difference between Dubai, Eastern Standard

Time, and Western Standard Time. It is a process to settle on a time four people agree upon. But these are familial commitments that pre-date the pandemic. These ritual-like events are the quintessence of an immigrant's life. It is through conference calls that we remain part of each other's' lives: births, breakups, housewarmings, graduations, naturalizations, promotions, weddings. It is a kind of social distancing we voluntarily initiate to pursue a life better than the previous one.

I tidy up to prepare emotionally for the queued conference calls. I find the list of checked boxes to discuss, but I do not have the other list of productive activities I have been doing in quarantine. I do not know how to explain to people that life has been the same. We cover the work we are doing, and also spend time on how we are doing...emotionally. It is difficult to care about people describing uncertainties that I have been living with for seven years now. But this is not the type of social distancing that is advised. So I care. I invite them to think of the situation as physical distancing with social solidarity. It is something immigrants have been doing before advent of conference calls, or even calls. Besides, who knows more about solidarity than academics?

It feels normal. In the sense that systems are the same.

I find my keys on the kitchen counter, exactly where I left them two to three weeks ago. I have had nowhere to go, but now I need groceries. I scatter Florida's

geckos, lizards, and whatnot away from the footpath as I walk through desolate streets. It is as if an eerie calmness has engulfed the city. The supermarket too, the only place with people together, is possessed by a strange normalcy. I see hands slipped into gloves. I see faces hidden behind masks. Are these the hoarders? I pull the sleeves of my hoodie over my hands, but I am sceptical about pulling my t-shirt over my nose. After all, Brown (and Black) people are living through a different emergency during the pandemic.

I maintain a regular gait as I explore the aisles. I will not be outdoors for another few weeks, or month. But the supermarket is where the pandemic comes into perspective. I am confronted by a mountain of potatoes even though farmers dumped their harvest. I scan through cans of milk with furthest best-by date while children skip lunch again. I shake off cold-water droplets on the lettuce while families struggle to pay their water bill so as to be able to wash their hands for twenty seconds. I can purchase whatever I want while people line up at food banks. But, I suppose, that is better than a socialist breadline. Some will die from the virus, and many will die from hunger – as it has always been.

I recognise my favourite cashier even with a mask covering his face. I now understand why a person's eyes are blurred out to protect their identity. I ask him, as a dutiful academic, about his classes; he is to graduate at the end of the semester. I wonder about my students who will graduate into unemployment in a few months.

However, he does not know what to do with a degree in Public Health. I remind him, as if the man wearing gloves and a mask all day needs one, what he is doing right now is public health, and he could take on a different role with his degree. I am not convinced. Because, honestly, will we continue to value supermarket employees as integral to public health? But he seems persuaded. And, maybe, that is all that matters.

It feels normal. In the sense that nights are still the same.

I sit out on the porch, and sip cold whiskey. I am experimenting with falling asleep. I can choose melatonin and knock myself out, stay awake until two and eventually tire myself out, or achieve a level of tipsy that sinks my head into carefreeness. As the cornucopia of citrus and wood layers the roof of my mouth, a cloud of rancid smoke floats away. It is my neighbour on the porch above me smoking a cigarette before bed. We both need sleeping aids. I cannot sleep because I have pent-up energy. She cannot sleep because, well, she must find a way to stay alive and survive, or the other way around.

What is new for most of us, has been the same old for most of us.

