



Home Alone During a Pandemic

By Sumana Chattopadhyay

As I put my thoughts on paper, I struggle with a myriad of emotions. Life is stressful right now, there are many things on my to-do list and I have always struggled to put my feelings on paper. But this morning, someone from the Chronicle of Higher Education interviewed me about shared governance on my campus and asked me a bunch of candid questions about the emotions I have experienced navigating this COVID-19 reality and doing that interview somehow opened a floodgate and my emotions just came pouring out.

While writing this, I cannot help but go back to 2001 when I was a graduate student at IGIDR, Mumbai. I was working on my M.Phil thesis in economics back then and was contemplating the option of moving to the U.S. for a Ph.D. in communication. Tied to those memories are snapshots of my academic journey across borders, my journey as a single woman who decided to move to the U.S. to pursue her dream of doing research on media. When I made the decision in 2001 to leave my academic program in economics at an elite institution in India and apply to communication Ph.D. programs in the U.S., a lot of people thought I was crazy. But my parents were supportive and

believed in me and so did the University of Missouri who offered me a teaching assistantship despite not having a background in communication or journalism.

As I finished my Ph.D. program and moved from Missouri to Milwaukee to join a faculty position at Marquette University, I had no idea the Milwaukee and Marquette would both become my permanent home. Given my father's job, we lived in different places while I was growing up. So, when I got to Milwaukee, I finally put down my roots here, in this mid-western city by Lake Michigan. I have now spent almost fourteen years here - the longest I have spent at a place and this is the city where I find myself quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a story that has been unfolding since late December of 2019. I remember first hearing about it on the news while visiting my brother in the U.K. over Christmas break and then starting to hear more about it on the news, once I got back to the U.S., I remember encountering stories about Asian students on campus experiencing discrimination because of the way they looked and about the first case that happened in Wisconsin in February involving a traveler who had just come back from China. By the time, we got to Spring break, COVID-19 was a big part of our reality here in the U.S. and in Wisconsin. Our university decided to transition all teaching to remote learning during our Spring break and by mid-March we were all working remotely from home, teaching our classes virtually, and doing all our work meetings through Microsoft Teams.

Settling into this new normal was not that difficult at first. I was comfortable enough with technology to be able to transition to an online teaching format, my internet connection was not giving me trouble during my synchronous classes and my students also seemed to have adjusted reasonably well to the new normal. However, I developed some breathing issues, which amidst a respiratory virus pandemic, can become a stressful factor in one's life. I now know after weeks of having gone through this that those were sinuses acting up but as a single woman living alone, far away from family, it was a constant battle with anxiety for me particularly during those early weeks of the quarantine. I constantly kept thinking who would take care of me if I got the virus and fell sick, who would get me food, who would drive me to the hospital if I was too sick to drive, how I would hide this virus from my Mom when I did my daily Facetime call with her, if I did indeed contract it and became really sick with it. There was no way I was letting her get worried about me when she quarantined alone in Kolkata, India, dealing with her own set of anxieties.

Managing nine-hour workdays - where you are constantly in front of the screen either on a meeting or teaching - while navigating your own health anxieties is hard. Also, as Chair of the University Academic Senate, I have constantly felt responsible during this pandemic, for the well-being of my colleagues. Navigating the work situation while battling my health anxieties would have been hard were it not for my Buddhist faith and my faith community. My Buddhist faith enabled me to overcome my fear of the

virus and illness during this time, and my Buddhist friends became my support system during this quarantine. Through our Buddhist practice, we offer succor and hope to each other every day. We do regular check-ins with each other, sometimes multiple times on a day, and encourage each other. I have also started doing weekly Facetime calls with my girlfriends, most of whom now live in different cities in the U.S. These weekly calls have become a highlight of my weekends. This weekend, we are doing a zoom event to celebrate Rabindra Jayanti- a festival that Bengalis around the world participate in every May in remembrance of Rabindranath Tagore. Every day, I Facetime my Mom, and a few times during the week, I talk with my brother, sister in law, and my niece. I do happy hours or coffee hours virtually with colleagues and friends from work. I have now realized that while I continue my quarantine alone, I am not alone. Technology has brought my community to my doorstep and I feel closer to everyone despite the physical distance. I also feel a deep sense of appreciation for the blessings in my life- my wonderful family and friends, supportive colleagues, a workplace that values me, my health, and my Buddhist faith that keeps me hopeful every day.

