Comfort Through Connections

I opened the door to the Liberal Arts building, room 206, and quietly hurried to my seat, trying to not to make a ruckus. I was about two minutes late to my Technical Editing class and my Professor was already pouring over examples of ways poor editing leads the misinformed. She brought up COVID 19 and asked us if we had heard about it. At that time, about 75% of the class raised their hands, while the rest of the class paused with anticipation. She wrote a headline on the whiteboard that included a comparison of infected people in China versus infected people in the United States. The numbers side by side seemed outrageous! With just those numbers, it seemed as if China was doomed and the U.S. was just overreacting to misleading headlines with missing information.

“What are we missing from this news?” our Professor prompted. “What information is missing that can make all the difference in how this headline is interpreted?” Someone from the back spoke up,

“How many people are in China?”

Our Professor was thrilled with the question! She threw China’s population of 1,439,323,776 up on the board and then compared that to the U.S.’s 331,002, 651 people and gave us another couple of seconds to take it all in. She proceeded to tell us how misleading numbers can be when “big picture” numbers or proper research is neglected. We discussed as a class how the common cold was responsible, on average, for more deaths (at that time) than COVID 19. But other information was missing too, like the ages of people dying and whether they had other underlying health conditions that led to their deaths. Leading into this conversation, I was nervous because I knew little about COVID 19 and that unknown seemed scary. After class, I walked out feeling young, considerably healthy, and rest assured that I had nothing to worry about…that America had nothing to worry about…boy, was I wrong.

Before COVID 19 struck the world and threw her off her tilt, I was working two days a week as a beertender and going to school full time, fully focused on my five classes. I started therapy during Fall 2019, after realizing being an older transfer student wasn’t the only issue I was struggling with — I had bigger fish to fry. For the first time, I started therapy to begin the healing process of a long and painful opioid and prescription medication addiction of seven years, along with the trauma’s that led me down that path. I was signed up to meet once a week, every week, through the summer of 2020. I had a long road ahead of me. It was hard work, but I progressed and survived my first semester. I had a new hope going into the spring semester, working diligently on my therapy, staying on top of my classes, and learning how to love myself and be alone with myself and my emotions for the first time in a long time. Sounds dramatic, but it’s been one of the most important and trying experiences I’ve ever had. That was about mid-February. That was when things started to snowball downhill, fast!

I lost my volleyball scholarship after injuring my back, marking the beginning of my addiction back in 2011. For seven years, my addiction to Oxycontin, Xanax, and any other prescription or drug I could get my hands on, took over my life, causing me to lose everything. I’ve been working on my sobriety for three years now, reconnecting with my family and friends, and leaving my old life behind me. I moved to Long Beach last August with my younger sister (21 years old) and nothing but my car and my clothes. I spent my first semester sleeping on the couch or sharing my sister’s bed. I couldn’t find work until the end of November and I remember feeling tired, alone, and defeated. Things weren’t going how I imagined, and I was in a fog most of the semester. I continued diving deeper into my therapy, hoping for a quick fix. Fast forward to end of February. My back injury flared up worse than it has in about a year, and I was referred to the ER for pain management and injections. Following the back flare up (which always results in a desperation for pain relief by any means necessary) my therapist had to cancel our next two sessions due to a family emergency. I felt the fog rolling in again, only this time, it was heavier. That’s when things really started to change. That’s when the fog became a quiet storm.

After the first week of March, I remember hearing more and more about COVID 19 and the spiking numbers of people becoming infected in the U.S. We received information that a group of CSULB staff and students attended a conference in Washington where there was a report of an infected person. Despite my fog, I clearly remember a constant murmur of anxiety and fear buzzing through the hallways and in and out of classrooms. *No* *one* knew what was going to happen. No one knew how to proceed, and the world became a chaotic place of fear and abrupt changes. March 11, my sister stopped working and was furloughed March 20. My therapy sessions stopped for the next three weeks as the school adjusted to the conversion of online classes and meetings. Because my sister was no longer able to work, I had to pick up hours at the brewery to provide for the both of us. With the added pressure to work, keep up with classes, as well as experiencing a stall during a very pivotal time in therapy, I broke down. Not having the coping skills needed to work through these stressors alone, I relapsed, looking to numb my pain and worries in secret. Coming out of that relapse was harder than I expected, as I felt the shame, guilt, and utter disappointment take me to a place lower than I could handle. I began having pain in my chest and upper back and shoulders, to the point of exhaustion and concern. As a result of this breakdown, stress, and heavy workload, my body shut down and I came down with a cold. I was beat. I was drained. I felt defeated.

Of course, per instructions from a phone triage with a Dr. from CSULB’s student health center, my sister and I self-quarantined for the next three weeks. Fortunately for me, I was able to continue working as an Instructor and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) specialist for the afterschool program I had worked for back home, by creating lesson plans for staff and students online. I had no other choice but to work to survive these ever-changing times. After three weeks of quarantine with no fever, I returned to my job at the brewery and kept up with working 40-50 hours a week between my two jobs. My cold lingered on and my cough worsened as I continued pushing myself to get it all done. For the next week and a half, the pain in my chest and shoulders got worse and I began experiencing coughing fits that would stop me in my tracks, gasping for air. The situation became alarming when I started waking up in the middle of the night, unable to catch my breath, clutching my chest in intense pain, and heaving to the point of getting sick. It was time to get this checked out! Prior to this concerning development, I had tried being seen here in Long Beach, but was informed that I could only be seen back home because that’s where my health coverage was. The fear of not knowing what was going on with my health, combined with the stress of not being able to be seen, juggling two jobs, and slowly falling behind in school, sent me into a frenzy of anxiety. My chest tightened and the pain doubled. My sister quickly got my belongings, got me in the car, and headed to our hometown.

As I walked up to the clinic’s urgent care, I was greeted outside by a masked nurse, ready to take my temperature and inquire about my place of work. He slapped an orange sticker on my arm and asked me to check in next door where I would wait outside to be seen by a Dr. Because I was experiencing upper respiratory issues, they kept me secluded for health precautions. The Dr. explained that what had started out as just a simple cold, wound up settling in my chest, turning into bronchitis and pneumonia. The pain I was experiencing was a result of the stress and anxiety that had accumulated over the last several months. She prescribed me with antibiotics, cough syrup, a muscle relaxer, and an inhaler, and sent me on my way. My last set of instructions were to come back for a chest x-ray if my symptoms continued or worsened after 10 days. Getting my medication was yet another 30-minute drive north, as all other pharmacies were on back order for the medications I needed. We returned home to Long Beach after a very stressful day of traveling and waiting. I took my meds, checked in with Professors, and then collapsed, allowing my body to rest for the next three days (my only days off). This was my body telling me to slow down and focus on my health.

At this point, school had taken a back seat to work, getting my health in order, and getting my head right. The majority of my Professors were organized, understanding, supportive, and considered the varying obstacles and hardships each student was facing. Unfortunately, I *did* have a rather bad experience with one of my Professors. After sharing a long and detailed email about the struggles I was going through, he responded with a brief email, apologizing for not being able to say more about the situation, but that I *did* sign up for the times of this class and knew the expectations, so he expected me to keep up. He also mentioned that if I were unable to keep up with the class, I could always drop. This was coming from the Professor who held our class meetings on an open Word document and tried getting us to meet at different times. I felt humiliated and discouraged. Another Professor I have for two classes, was going through her own struggles and communicated everything via email and word document. She did her best and communicated when she could, but it made it extremely hard to stay on track with both classes and know what was going on. Due dates changed sporadically, zoom meetings were touch and go, and school, for the most part, became inconsistent. Learning became an independent effort that I was unprepared for and managing my time was a constant battle. I started meeting again with my therapist and went through several agonizing and exhausting sessions. If it hadn’t been for therapy during this pandemic and the other Professors who showed compassion and the willingness to work with my hectic schedule, I know I wouldn’t have been able to bounce back the way I did. Despite originally being defeated by the unforeseen changes from this worldwide health crisis, I was able to make a positive comeback and get my health back in order.

This last month could only be described as enlightening. After pushing through my tough therapy sessions and connecting with some of my friends, Professors, and peers, I realized there were A LOT more people struggling than I knew! It was comforting to know that I wasn’t alone. Work picked up for me even more as my hometown job reached out to ask me if I could create short videos teaching Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills for kids and their families to practice at home. That’s when the conversations and connections started happening that gave me life. I realized that I needed to practice what I was preaching…self-care! The videos wound up being a great way for my sister and I to get out of our funk and work together on a project that brought a little joy and a little laughter to others, while also becoming more consistent with our own self-care. I began including friends who I felt needed some love and attention and the feedback I got was extremely heartwarming. We had conversations that reflected the epiphanies they were having about their emotions and feelings while practicing these SEL skills. They started realizing how important these skills were, especially in quarantine. The videos were working! Not only that, but this experience taught me that it was okaythat I had those bad days. It was okay to open-up and ask for help. It taught me to reach out when I needed help or support, and that I be honest and vulnerable because it could give someone else insight or encourage others to do the same. I had a couple of Professors setting up breakout rooms during Zoom meetings, which allowed students to interact with each other and connect. Those same Professors were reaching out consistently and beginning class meetings or communication with, “how’s everyone doing today? How’s everyone’s health?” They genuinely cared and showed their unwavering support by encouraging me to focus on my health and look to them if I needed more support. The love and sense of community that began surrounding me rejuvenated my soul and gave me the strength to focus on the positive. Things were looking up!

As I reflect on my journey during the “Time of the Coronavirus,” I realize how much stronger this experience has made me. It broke me down and shook me to my core in the beginning, but it also created an unexpected opportunity for love and kindness to shine through. Even though I’m not completely back on track with everything, I’m working harder every day to prioritize the important things. I know I’m bound to have bad days ahead, but at least now I know I have an incredible support system of friends, Professor’s, family, and community, as well as the self-love to bring me back out of it. If I’ve learned anything during this “Time of the Coronavirus”, it’s that we need to love and support each other. In times like these, the unknown stirs a lot of fear, anger, and frustration, so it is crucial we pay attention to what we give power to.