

When Pandemics Cause Flashbacks

It wasn't until the Coronavirus of 2019 hit, that I began to remember uneasy feelings. Loneliness and fear. I have become engulfed in the rush of life and its constant movement. Life — she has a way of being beautiful. Upon starting my first year of community college I began to forget the feeling of loneliness. I had a place to share my intellectual feelings and grow, and to develop a sense of self and identity. I did not know what I wanted to be when I was growing up. I knew being a mother was a passion I had always dreamt of. Living the picture-perfect image of the American Dream was all I had ever envisioned; that is until I went to college.

When I began at Long Beach City College I thought undeniably I wanted to be a music teacher. I was involved in the theatre arts in middle and high school. I was a choir girl loud and proud. It was a team that felt like a family. But after taking a few courses I knew I did not want to be stagnant in teaching the same songs year in and year out. I did not want to have a position that was not challenging intellectually. So from there, I switched my major to Kinesiology. At the age of five, I was diagnosed with Junior Rheumatoid Arthritis and remember the cloudy fog of realization that my life as a kid was over before it even began. Loneliness started on the first day of kindergarten. Dear reader, have you ever sprained an ankle? Stubbed a toe on the corner of a dresser? Do you remember the needle-sharp pain that shot through your body when you accidentally applied pressure trying to walk? Or those few seconds of fear with the thought of a broken toe? Reminisce in that pain for me. Remember that fear. That was the physical pain I felt every day, in every single joint in my body.

I envied the elderly. They get pain in their hips and their fingers. But the problem with me was my arthritis was in my blood — meaning I had it everywhere. Therefore, the slightest movement felt as though I had fallen down a flight of stairs. I was a five-year-old child who could not play outside. When first being diagnosed I could hardly walk to the restroom by myself, let alone chase a fellow peer on the playground. How was I supposed to grab hold of the monkey bars without fear of falling and breaking an ankle or arm? I do not blame the children for staying away from me. It was a social food chain and I did not belong to the obvious characteristics of a child. It did not stop me from sitting behind the bookshelf in the classroom and cry nearly every day during recess.

I found comfort in the classroom and my teachers. I did not mind setting up the desk for the next activity or being the one who got to pick the story during storytime. I was a teacher's pet. I can't say I was a particularly smart student. My lack of social activity did not bring me closer to literature, but I did feel closer to the classroom atmosphere as a whole. As I moved on to first grade and every other grade in elementary school, I spent my lunch period helping the kindergarten teachers and their students. I would help students write their names, I would read during storytime, and the teachers did not mind at all. If anything, they encouraged me to return the following day and shared with me the itinerary for that time. I woke up each morning and started to take notice of the sun. I began to see the color of the grass and knew the butterfly feeling of excitement. I wasn't alone anymore. I was greeted by name by the students as I stepped into the door. I was a part of a safe environment. And although I did not

know on a deeper level that these teachers were digging me out of a pit of loneliness, I reflect on it now only after being reminded of what it is like to be alone during this recent quarantine season.

I have been lucky enough to have kept my current job throughout this pandemic. But financial security does not take away fear. It does not stop the mind from reliving memories of doubt and insecurities. My classrooms, teachers, and peers were what kept my mind at bay. Creative writing poetry in Professor Locklin's class helped me through the mourning I went through when a close friend of mine committed suicide. During that time I woke up nearly every night with night terrors. I saw my friend in my dreams, felt his sadness, experienced his loneliness and began to blame myself for not seeing the signs. But through writing, through an environment that was kind, accepting, and open. I was able to share my sadness and fear with my classmates. We all began to mourn together despite them never having met my friend. For this, I was grateful beyond what words could share. All I can say is that the nights no longer ached with heavy breathing and trembling hands. I no longer felt numb, but rather warm and accepted. I felt as though I was allowed to feel pain — for a while, I thought I wasn't because I knew others felt more than I did. But now I know that all pain is worth feeling, worth mention.

With face-to-face classes being postponed I have had a lot of time alone at home. This time has not been used to learn a new hobby, binge-watching TV shows, or reading books. Instead, I have once again fallen victim to my own mind and have led myself in a pit of negative thoughts. I have begun to nitpick at my body shape, compare

myself to others I see on social media. I have begun to have doubts about my worth in my very serious and loving relationship. My thoughts keep looping on repeat as did the Raven squawking “Nevermore” to Poe. He had the grief of his love Lenore, — and I have grief with all paths I wish I had taken differently. But as I began to dig myself out of my own head was I able to realize that school was my true home.

Within the classroom, I was able to escape the outside world. I began to share intellectual thoughts and share ideas of progression within our school systems. Yes, classrooms are a place to learn skills, plan lessons, learn from the mistakes of previous teaching years, and promote a more culturally responsive environment. Although implementing more literature written by ethnic writers is important, and being able to formulate lessons that effectively teach ESL students, it is also important not to lose sight of the student’s mental state when entering the classroom. My classrooms from elementary all throughout college have helped me feel as though I belong. They helped me feel as though I was valued and have something to offer within that environment. I did not feel as though I had that type of safe environment at home and certainly not my own head. But within the classroom all that changed.

This pandemic has helped me realize that becoming a teacher is not only about teaching the literacy skills needed to promote change within this world but to also provide a safe environment that students can call home. Teaching for me means being that role model for my students, and allowing them to feel safe to be themselves and share their ideas. I want every student to feel valued, smart, beautiful, and help them find a sense of self. Being a teacher means helping create an environment that is an

escape and coping mechanism for those students who need a place to forget life's challenges and focus on bettering their future through education. I want to create an atmosphere that emits nothing but respect, comfort, and safety. In being a teacher, I can help students forget the feeling of loneliness and fear.