

A Breather during the Time of Breathlessness

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SIPPING MY MORNING COFFEE after the governor's announcement that our state would effectively shut down for two weeks, I struggled to recall a time when I'd paused for that long. When I wasn't doing multiple things at once, my mind like a web browser with a thousand tabs open. Planning family meals for my next overnight call. Whittling words off an abstract before article submission. Checking a patient's chart to see whether the reason for his sudden deterioration had surfaced. Signing the kids up for a last-minute camp after realizing school vacation falls on my service week.

High school, college, working in a laboratory, postbaccalaureate classes when I set my sights on medical school. Each summer was filled with scholarly activities to get me where I was going. Residency, fellowship, and an MPH, with a wedding, three kids, two dogs, and a bearded dragon peppered in-between. Perhaps I stopped, briefly, during my first maternity leave. I can recall moments where I focused only on the task at hand, learning to raise a new life. Because my firstborn's birth occurred during my second year of fellowship, however, it lasted a mere eight weeks. Thereafter, a daily seven-mile 45-minute commute and a grouping of meetings seemingly arranged to destroy research productivity when not on service or managing administrative debacles. Caring for my dad during his last week of life and returning to work three days after his funeral. Every vacation beginning with an unease that I didn't get that article out or finish that grant. Or, if I did manage to check those boxes, a sense of dread several days into the break that I was somehow already behind on the next tasks.

On the day our governor issues a stay-at-home order, however, I feel a sense of lightness. It occurs to me that I was scheduled to be away at a national conference, which means I have no clinical commitments. Confronted with this unexpected and lengthy window of stillness, I find myself almost giddy, like that childhood feeling when your elementary school calls to announce a snow day. How could I feel such freedom during a pandemic when so many stand to lose their lives or their livelihood? A sense of guilt washes over me for not being overrun with patients like my adult ICU colleagues because, for whatever reason, kids are not getting as sick. At least not at the moment.

I return to the present calling on my well-honed compartmentalization skills. I spend the long weekend ticking off different boxes from an alternative to-do list. I plant the dahlia tubers that I dug up from dad's garden after he died almost two years ago. I make homemade gnocchi with my kids using my grandmother's recipe. I box up old baby

clothes finally acknowledging that my childbearing years are over. I realize how lovely it is to spend time with my family without an agenda. I start this narrative.

Over the ensuing two weeks, trepidation creeps in as I become privy to the predictions for COVID-19's Massachusetts engagement: how many will be hospitalized, how many are likely to die. I learn to Zoom as I help plan how to transition our PICU to care for adults if our colleagues across town become overwhelmed. I coordinate contingency staffing in case my coworkers become sick. I allow myself to think, only briefly, about what happens if I become sick.

This notion propels me to set aside time each day to be present. I watch my youngest color, without planning dinner or looking up a long-forgotten syndrome on my iPhone. I hang out with my eldest as she makes cookies, not worrying about the mess, but instead listening intently to the latest teen drama. I hold my son's bearded dragon while playing ROBLOX, without once entertaining the likelihood that one of us will contract Salmonella.

With each passing day, it becomes clearer to me that that my breather is coming to a close. Meetings are cropping up to discuss how to reopen the hospital to elective admissions. Our PICU is beginning to fill with medically complex children as well as some critically ill with COVID-19.

My hope, when this pandemic ends, is that we emerge with a new appreciation for the here and now. My wish for myself, and all my colleagues around the globe who balance their clinical, research, administrative, and personal lives on a razor's edge, is that we are able to take a daily breather from the endless to-do list. That we take the time to be present for the things that truly matter. As I don my personal protective equipment (PPE) to enter the room of an adolescent with COVID-19, I pause as I am reminded of Eleanor Roosevelt's quote. "Yesterday is history, tomorrow a mystery and today is a gift, that is why it is called the present."

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