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Writing as Inquiry during a Pandemic

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Abstract

Standing on a knife's edge is to write words that cut. We can enter such spaces by witnessing and encountering the COVID 19 pandemic's devastating impacts. The suffering that ensues may lead to an emptiness that feels as if words have abandoned us. These unspoken words may build up inside, and eventually explode like a full dam, it's power, bursting a hole in the fabric of our lives. The release can be experienced as a *loss* that becomes an *opening*. Riding this intense wave of affect to wherever it takes us, is to *write as inquiry* within a pandemic.

No Words

No words. My mind empties as I think of a close colleague whose academic contract had not been renewed. She had been employed for twelve years on a series of short-term contracts, a single parent with two young children, and had her own ill mother to look after. "I can always come back when things get easier," she says, trying to reassure herself. "Sure," I reply, wondering about future prospects in academia. An ongoing academic position was rare at the best of times, but now, with the declining student numbers and teaching being transferred online overnight, the situation felt incredibly grim. The frantic balancing act that had once appeared untenable had come to an end, but rather than bringing relief, it opened a gaping crevasse. If not the security or legitimacy of tenure, at least she had had an income to support herself and her family. Any aspirations for an academic career have disappeared in a wisp of smoke, leaving the question of how she will get through these times.

"I have no words," my colleague repeats as she packs her books into boxes. "No words," I say, echoing back our mutual emptiness. How many years had she devoted to this place? During these swiftly passing years she had given birth to children, left a difficult marriage and had entered middle age. As I contemplate these passing moments, words have departed, leaving only the kind of silence that catches in your throat and leaves you mute. During our final meeting, her silence is momentarily broken, and emotions spill out of her. "One day, when the time is right, I will write about it all, and I will let you know when I do." This fragile promise is threatened by a heaviness that pushes down on us. She is silent again and her despair is infectious. Hours later I sit in front of my laptop, trying to capture the turmoil inside. It has been weeks since I have attempted to write anything beyond the administrative. There has been no time and space for it. An empty screen flickers before me, deepening the belief that there is nothing to say. I have become helpless with the thought that writing cannot save anyone.

Writing feels increasingly challenging with the pandemic. The field vision narrows as the media and daily conversation fixates on the pandemic's impact. Vitality peters out as human interaction becomes limited. Energy is consumed by a hyper alertness to new clusters of infection; there is little room to consider anything else, and even though six months have passed since the initial lockdown, fears of contracting COVID have intensified, rather than abated. Then there are the people, like my colleague who work in the arts, who have lost both a career and a dream overnight. The recovery process appears dim as pragmatism rules. There is a plan to exponentially increase the costs of humanities degrees, which would see an up to 113% increase in cost, from \$20,400 to \$43,500 (Boseley, 2020). Their more fortunate counterparts, however, who study in areas of workforce demand, such as math, health and agriculture would have their course fees substantially reduced, in some cases, as high as 62% (Boseley, 2020). This announcement has sealed the nail on her coffin. Major job losses have been tabled for the university, making me fear for staff in sectors that have been made vulnerable, such as my colleague. When she had received the phone call informing her of the decision not to renew her contract, she had not been surprised. Academic institutions were moving into damage control modes to minimise the pandemic's costs.

Writing from this place of *no words*

It is difficult to move from this state of inertia. Words are hard to grasp as there are little fresh thoughts flowing through. There is no cool breeze that can catch the sails of my boat and it remains suspended, frozen to the spot. Fear has narrowed down the scope of possibility, limiting thought to the basic necessities. If only something would happen to activate my engines, or sense of vitality, which has stalled. This brings me to the question posed by Snowber, whose research is inspired by the question, “how can we bring desire, passion, and longing to the root of the acts of living and being?” (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003, p.247). I ask myself this same question, wondering whether such elements can be found during a pandemic. Snowber cites the literature of Luce Irigaray (1992), who speaks “of the limit becoming the wound or the place for the sky to open up” (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003, p.247). I think about this phrase as I try to register its paradoxical meaning. The wound is both the *limit* and the *open* spaces of the sky. Snowber intuitively registers this paradox as she understands that desire is uncovered or generated through a *struggle*. The desire for something else motivates the struggle, as the fact that *things are not as they should be* drives action. Our desires further crystallize as they gain definition through struggling. Desire, intent and purpose become clear through pushing against a resistance, as the *what should be* becomes clearer through *what it is not*.

Struggle can also form a tension that springboards into an *abandonment* or *release*. Abandonment consists of a letting go, which can be felt as a sense of release. It is a release from the struggle, as well as all that has motivated the struggle. You relinquish control of the outcome, allowing what will be, to be. Moreover, the greater the pain and struggle, the more profound the release becomes. These thoughts reverberate in the question of whether the open spaces of the sky can be found within the stark and painful present. A similar insight leads Snowber to explore the “relationship between pain and release, transcendence and immanence, finiteness and infinity” (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003, p.247). Snowber’s words resonate with the parting comment made by my colleague as she left her office, *when the time is ready, I will write all about it*. Although she could not see into the future, she sensed that the words, when they eventually came, would be unleashed like a flood. Distilled through suffering, they would flow vibrantly and cut with clarity. Cixous (1993) believed that vitality was born from this point of struggle, as life’s extremities presented the most fertile ground for insights and discovery. She relayed the “extraordinary vital stream” (p.11) possessed by “mortally wounded writers” who had the liminal sight of those who stood at the edge of life and death. This intersection between the living and the dead was where “cowardice and courage are so close to each other they might fly into the flames if they were to say one word more” (Cixous, 1993, p. 37). Cixous (1993) referred to this place as a source of *truth*, in which it was possible to conjure up words that were so intense and extreme that the pain evoked felt like joy.

To write words that cut is to sit on the edge of a knife, as words themselves are derived from the same mettle as their maker. To craft words that can shake up comes from having one’s own world shaken. Broyard (1992), a journalist, finds himself in such a world as he writes about how his cancer diagnosis awakens an acute desire for life, as he explains, “I am filled with desire-to live, to write, to do everything. Desire itself is a kind of immortality” (p. 32). The process of living becomes “eloquen[t]” as every encounter feels “vivid, multicolored and sharply drawn” (p. 32). His failing body brings clarity, as well as an unquenchable thirst to live. It is as Snowber surmises, desire is born from pain and struggle (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003). He stands within the fading light of the day and notices how bright the colours are. The sky is radiant as vibrant orange and pink hues appear electric next to the encroaching darkness of the night sky. The *release* comes as he *abandons* himself to this vibrant moment when he feels utterly alive. In this way, a loss can become an opening to the skies above.

As I reflect on Snowber’s words, I can see how pain may lead to an *abandonment* that becomes a *release*. I had sensed pain’s paradoxical potential during one such difficult time when I had injured my back. The

injury had awakened me to the alternate universe of fragility. *I would not live forever after all.* The body was no longer able to do, nor exist in taken for granted ways as I could barely get up and put on my clothes, let alone sit in front of the computer for hours on end or stand for long periods of time lecturing to students. With a debilitated body, I no longer knew who I was and the work that I was obsessively committed to no longer seemed to matter. During this time of struggling to come to terms with these realisations, I wrote:

The injured body is my heartbreak. I observe and test its new broken boundaries, listening and examining it with my fingers. I depict its pain in visceral ways to transform my debilitating fears into something less frightening. There is relief at being set free from a fearful existence (Yoo, 2019, p.1104).

The breakdown of the everyday, familiar routines sent me into a tailspin. Work appeared irrelevant as the body could not even manage the most basic tasks. But what emerged from the struggle came an *abandonment* that felt like *release*. There was a release from having to *do* and this gave me the permission to simply *be*. From my struggles with the body grew an understanding of the material body, and the immaterial part of my essence speaking through it. It was possible to override the broken body through speaking from this place of immortal words or words that “might fly into the flames” if one more was to be added (Cixous, 1993, p. 37). In the struggle to grasp what my transience represented, I could see myself struggling towards the intransient and the timeless, as I reflected:

Words have the power to do that, to bring about a state of reassurance, or expansiveness, a forgetfulness of self and body, a disregard for the pain of wear and tear, causing time to expand and allowing the walls of reality to crumble. As I search for such immortal words, I wonder whether I write to escape my body, to erase the prospect of future losses that keeps me awake at night. I write to suspend awareness and to retain the sensation of something long after the physical encounter has passed, so as not to be caught unaware (Yoo, 2019, p.1105).

There is much loss as my colleague grieves her imagined future and the possibility of what could have been; she helplessly observes the embers of her past academic life dying out and the ensuing desolation makes her feel as if she has been abandoned. No words can sustain her as she flees her office with her box of possessions. There are no words to express the intense emotions that flood her brain. Words are equally inadequate for describing the indomitable human spirit that can emerge to wipe the fears away and to start again. The inexpressible, which percolates within her struggle, may one day allow her to tap into a strength and vibrance that will bring her to a place of ‘truth.’ Cixous (1993) had once explained that the losses incurred by exiting known worlds were not all about loss, as they also acted as potential doorways into unknown possibilities. All of this I know, but I still struggle to understand this fine line between a *loss* and an *opening*.

Standing on a knife's edge

Time stops for no one. I am conscious of this maxim as I complete the paperwork that continues through the storm. It needs to be done to safeguard the future of our academic courses, even though none of it seems to matter next to the pandemic’s devastation. This realisation makes it difficult to concentrate. *Push through. Push through,* I urge myself. Even as I fill in the blank spaces of each document, I think about what lies ahead. Will the academy be able to outlive the pandemic? Who among my colleagues will remain standing; who will be expendable? *At least I still have work for now.* With the closures of schools, my focus disintegrates even further. The boundaries between motherhood and work life have always felt tenuous, but now they are on the brink of collapse. My heart has raced each day from the moment I wake, as I scramble to find spaces to work amongst the schooling, cooking and cleaning, as each moment is filled with some kind of movement or sound. The stillness, when it comes, does not last long enough to

sustain concentration. With such thoughts, I find myself lying awake, blinking through the night, as I stand on a knife's edge.

The silence cannot continue forever. I know that one day the dam will burst and that there will be an outpouring of grief and bewilderment over the changing world. What has been will no longer continue and tomorrow will look different. Abandoning the world as we know can be a release by allowing us to move into the expansiveness of the unknown, and to pursue forms of knowing that “convey[s] the mystery of the immaterial parts of the self, which lies neither here nor there, but everywhere, and is not black and white but nuanced and poles apart, flowing like color and emotion, more often felt than thought, and awakened by a pain, suffering, and joy” (Yoo, 2020). Within these empty in-between spaces of the pandemic, in which words are momentarily gone, we may find the agency to choose which path to take. Riding this wave of uncertainty and hope is to *write as inquiry* within a pandemic and to author words that cut.

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