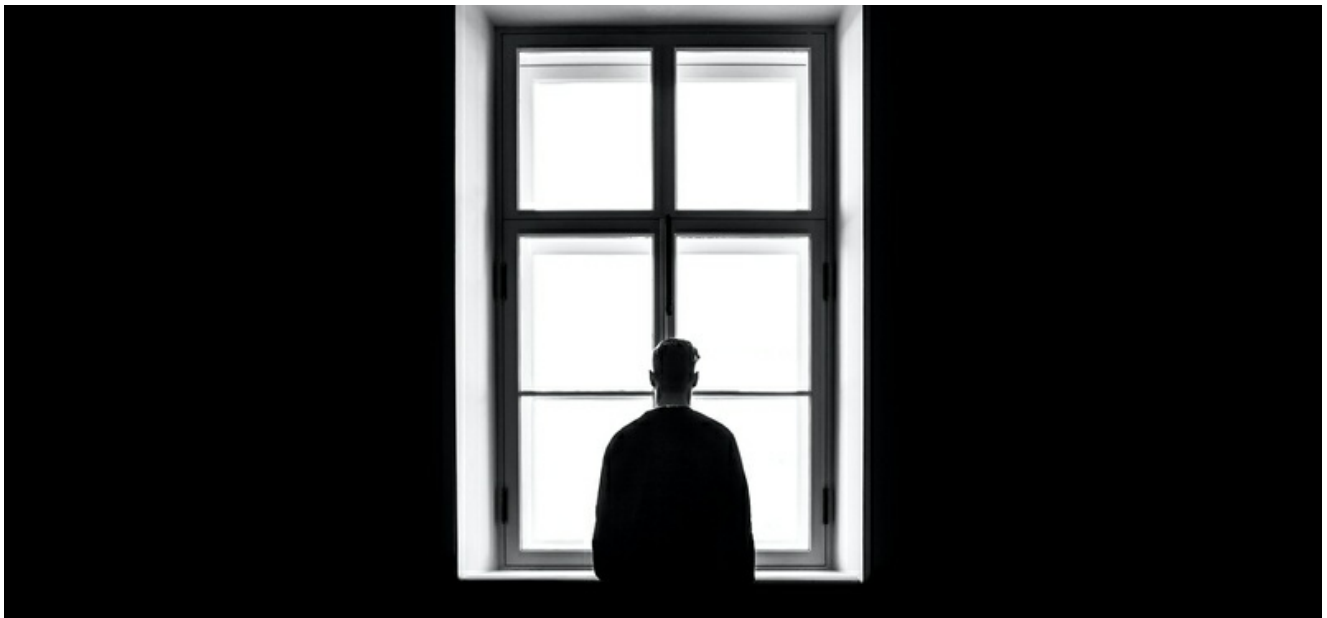# Teaching Through a Bout With Covid-19

Photo by Sasha Freemind on Unsplash

By Shachar Pinsker

On Friday, March 13, the novel coronavirus went from being a mysterious illness that had upended my teaching to something that invaded my home and health.

Two days earlier, I had received a message from the president of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor telling us to cancel classes for a couple of days and to resume teaching the following Monday "remotely, in alternative formats." My recent research and writing concern on sociability — in public places like coffeehouses — and its crucial role in the production of modern culture. Given that I was unlikely to meet face to face with my students or colleagues for the foreseeable future, I was about to experience the importance of sociability firsthand.

Like many faculty members that week, I attended workshops on remote teaching that had been quickly organized by our instructional-technology office. I was trying to learn the pros and cons of various teaching platforms and methods in a desperate attempt to salvage my courses. Meanwhile, my oldest son was traveling back home from his own campus after his spring-break plans collapsed. My wife, a busy caterer in a university town, discovered that all of her events had been suspended until further notice. My youngest son's public school closed abruptly.

All of that was unsettling enough. But things became far more complicated and difficult that Friday, when my older son was the first to show symptoms of Covid-19. He was tested, and a week later the results came back positive. By that point, our entire family had contracted the virus.

Living in Michigan — one of the states hardest hit by the novel coronavirus — made it difficult for all of us to be tested. There weren't enough tests, and they were reserved for folks who'd been hospitalized and for health-care workers. A nurse on a Covid-19 hotline told us to stay home and to treat and monitor our symptoms. My family members became sick in an asynchronous manner, and each of us had slightly different symptoms.

While many of my colleagues shared pictures on social media of their Zoom backgrounds, as well as their concerns about how to appear in front of their students on the screen, I was consumed by a different set of fears — like the fact that I lacked a reliable thermometer at home (stores had run out of them).

I experienced continuous fever, chills, and a dry cough. It was difficult to breathe and impossible to sleep. When I did manage to sleep, I would wake up sweating in the middle of the night. I did not know what to do. Should I go to the emergency room of our excellent, but overwhelmed, university hospital? Or try to receive medical help remotely until health professionals could examine me in person?

I also had to ask myself another tough question: What was I supposed to tell my anxious students, who were dealing with multiple problems of their own? Some were still on campus, while others were in transit to places around the country and the world. Some (as I later learned) were sick with Covid-19, too, or were taking care of family members with the virus.

Lacking the necessary information and the ability to judge my situation rationally and professionally — as any trained and experienced scholar would do in normal times — I was unable to make an informed decision about whether to go to the hospital and what to do about my teaching.

The default was to stay home and keep up with my teaching, which in retrospect turned out to be a very good decision. The alternative — spending hours watching and reading the nonstop news cycle, dominated by numbers of sick people and those who'd died — would have induced even more angst. In the midst of all that, I lost one of my closest friends, a writer and owner of a bookstore-cafe beloved by the community.

Compared with all of the misery and pain caused by Covid-19, reading and watching the course materials that I'd assigned my students, while paying close attention to their questions and comments on Canvas, was not a bad option. It was challenging to work while I was sick and worrying about my family, but it also kept me sane and somewhat focused.

I told my students, my graduate teaching assistant, and my department chairs and directors that I was not feeling well. I didn't mention that I thought it was Covid-19 because it hadn't been diagnosed at that point. And I announced to my classes on Canvas that we would use asynchronous methods of learning for a while, which was highly recommended by experts, anyway. After a few days, I decided to try to meet students in synchronous online sessions, and discovered that — however poorly they mimicked in-person classes — it was a real pleasure to see my students' faces and hear their voices. I suspect they were also happy to see and hear me, no matter how frail I looked and sounded.

Either way, synchronous or asynchronous, it felt good to be engaged with literary and historical texts and in the realm of teaching, thinking, asking, and answering questions. Work actually proved a good distraction from my health issues, and helped me get through the worst days of Covid-19.

I was still confused and weak at times. I lost not only my senses of smell and taste — for some reason, everything tasted and smelled like coconut — but also my sense of time passing. The rigid and routine schedule of virtual classes, office hours, administrative meetings, and research check-ins was the only thing that kept me from losing a measure of what day and time it was. Our sons had recovered more quickly than did my wife and I, and were able to take care of us. When I was finally able to see a doctor, it wasn't surprising that I tested positive for the virus. By that point, I already felt somewhat better.

More than a month later, I can report that my family and I have recovered. The public-health experts considered our case "mild," which is extremely lucky, considering how many people fell gravely ill and how many lost their lives or their loved ones.

Nevertheless, the experience of being sick with Covid-19 left deep and lasting scars. My recovery was extremely slow, and many physical and mental symptoms lingered. I fear they may reappear. That is true not only individually for those of us who were sick with the virus, but also collectively as a society.

The experience of isolation and social distancing in 2020 shows that we can still spend time online, read, write, and be in touch with one another with digital tools. But without the proximity in space, we lose much of the conviviality that fosters the exchange of ideas, learning, creativity, and growth.

I wish I could identify the big lesson we should all take from this crisis, but I cannot. In fact, I do not think anyone can right now. As I make plans to teach and do research in the fall semester, I face difficult choices. The experience of Covid-19 taught me that we must learn to live with illness and extreme uncertainty, and we must do so with resilience and grit. Experimentation, learning, intellectual curiosity and engagement, communication, compassion, and honesty — the hallmarks of a liberal education — are essential to pass over to the other side.

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