

# Counting From Zero

Building a liberal arts CS program in the age of ubiquity

## Covid-19 and the grief process

Articles published by the [Harvard Business Review](#), Psychology Today, and [NPR](#) point out we are all grieving over the changes that social distancing brings to our lives. This morning my colleague Amy Csizmar Dalal's blog post about recognizing her grief made me reflect on how I am grieving as well.

My grief was apparent to me over two weeks ago. My family had a vacation planned, and even after my husband and I had agreed we could not go, it took me several days to cancel our flights and hotel reservations. As I wrote to Academic Mamas\* on Facebook,

*Who else is canceling spring break vacation plans? It was not too hard to cancel reservations for two conference trips, and I'm expecting to cancel one more. But oh, the vacation. I need some time to mourn before I can bring myself to do it.*

But Amy's post reminded me it's not only the vacation I've been grieving over. As I am adapting to Washington's "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" order, I'm also grieving the loss or interruption of:

- My two-year-old daughter's relationships with friends and teachers at day care – not to mention her babysitter and grandparents;
- Plans for the remainder of my sabbatical – including not only those conference trips, but full days to work uninterrupted;
- My identity as a teacher-scholar, as it's subsumed into a more housewifely role;
- Women's progress towards equality in the workplace, as my experience may be part of a larger pattern;
- Simple everyday routines.

I'm starting to build new routines, including a two hour "work day" while my husband puts our daughter down for her nap. There are some things to like about these new routines: I'm spending more time with my daughter. I get to see how she is learning to "read" independently, playing make believe, and developing a love of Daniel Tiger (all three things she has done while I am composing this blog post). I get to cook dinner sometimes again, which had been impossible when she needed to cling to me at the end of the work day. I'm taking long walks,

baking cookies, and picking up old craft projects again. We are enjoying our backyard and finally building new beds for our vegetable gardens. (I was already wearing comfy clothes – I've been on sabbatical, after all!)

But the grief is still an ongoing process, and some days have been emotional roller coasters. The Psychology Today article reminds me of the common stages of grief:

**Denial** led us almost to Portland for the SIGCSE 2020 Annual Technical Symposium on Computer Science Education, even as many colleagues were cancelling their travel plans. We got cold feet during the second leg of the trip, from my in-laws' house to turning around at Cascade Locks, after our daughter threw up for the second time in two days. We are pretty sure it was motion sickness, but it gave us the impetus to back out of plans we were starting to feel uneasy about.

Am I still in denial? No and yes. I recognize that social distancing could go on for 18 months or more, and I'm starting to think about preparing for the ~~possibility~~ **likelihood** of online teaching in the fall. I can't imagine my daughter not seeing her grandparents in person for that long, and I don't know what we'll do about it. And I'm hoping against hope that we'll find a way to return to outside child care that makes sense under social distancing.

**Anger** was all too present yesterday morning, as I tried to work while caring for my daughter. She happily played with water in the sink for ten minutes or so while I composed an email to my dean, but that was bracketed by a trip to the potty and a trip upstairs to change into a dry shirt. I kept trying to read email on my phone, and kept being interrupted for perfectly reasonable things! I got myself so worked up that he saw me at lunch time, my husband offered to take the afternoon off work to give me a break.

My naptime work hours were a necessary reset, in which I took a long walk and checked several things off my work to-do list. In the afternoon, I surrendered my expectations of work (see "acceptance," below) and enjoyed playing with my daughter. I resolved to set work aside and put things on my to-do list until my next work time – unless my daughter is content to play by herself, as she is now. But this was not the first episode of anger and frustration, and I'm sure it will come back.

Perhaps surprisingly, I am feeling a lot of frustration that I am not teaching right now. Social isolation should be good for a sabbatical, right? But I have been desperate for opportunities to connect and to feel like I am contributing something beyond staying home. It's been an ongoing process to turn that anger in a positive direction and find ways I can support my students and colleagues despite having no teaching assignments. For example, I'm looking forward to resuming our weekly CS Lunch via videoconferencing tomorrow. And writing this blog post has been incredibly cathartic.

**Bargaining?** Yeah, there was bargaining – trips for coffee and pastries (takeout, of course!); drinking wine with my parents across our two-meter-long outdoor table as my daughter played nearby; working from my office in a near-empty building; taking my daughter to day care even as I became increasingly uneasy with it, until the "Stay Home" order came. That's done with for now—although my husband points out there would not be *much* risk to hiring one person to care for our child at home.

There has also been some quite literal bargaining with my husband for our current work and child care arrangements. And that bargaining has been ongoing as our understanding of our work and personal needs evolve. Our current arrangement: He gets our daughter up in the morning Monday and Friday and stays with her until I'm ready to face the day; I get her up Tuesday through Thursday. He joins us for lunch at 11:30, puts our daughter down for her nap, listens for her to wake up, and goes to get her so that I have a few minutes' warning to wrap up before resuming child care duties. I get a break at the end of the work day (either to go for a quick walk or to cook dinner) and we trade off bedtime.

**Despair** is present. I feel no motivation to work on my scholarship. It just doesn't seem like it matters right now. I don't know how I am going to pull myself together for those upcoming conferences that have now moved online.

I despair at images of death and the anticipation of future deaths. I despair at news of soaring gun sales, racist Zoombombings, and domestic violence. I despair at our dysfunctional federal government. I despair at the thought of 18 months or more of social distancing, and what it might mean (already does mean) for those less fortunate than I.

I despair at what COVID-19 might mean for the future of higher education.

But I'm also reaching **acceptance**. I am developing new daily routines. I am enjoying the time with my daughter. I am thinking ahead to months of social distancing and what new routines we might need to make it sustainable. I am finding ways to feel productive in this new reality – even if for now it is more about personal projects and maintaining departmental community than it is about my research. I am accepting that [it's okay to be unproductive](#) for now, and it's okay to be uncertain about what scholarship will make sense in an eventual "new normal." I am sharing my hopes and fears.

I've learned that the more I surrender to the unpredictability of caring for a toddler, the better it goes and the better I feel. It's a distinctly uncomfortable acceptance, but for now it is my reality.

Since Whitman moved to online learning, my colleague John Stratton has been signing his emails with a wish for "peace and grace." While I don't share his religious convictions, I do share this particular sentiment. I hope you are coping with the stages of grief, and finding some measure of acceptance. Peace and grace to you all.

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