

# Counting From Zero

Building a liberal arts CS program in the age of ubiquity

## Reflections on five weeks of staying home

Yesterday was a good day. The weather was perfect: not too warm, cool, cloudy, or windy. My daughter and I took a walk in the park and splashed in our backyard pool (5'5", inflatable). We talked with her babysitter on Google Meet. I spent a couple of hours clearing my email inbox and taking care of some paperwork, while my daughter played by herself in the morning and watched extra episodes of *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* in the afternoon. I sat on the back patio during a long conversation with my closest colleague, and I took a walk during a shorter call with my longtime peer mentor. I wore a new pair of sandals, ordered online from the manufacturer at 50% off after a large retail order was cancelled. My Apple Watch says I got a full hour of exercise (though it also says I climbed 44 flights of stairs, which I know is not true). My husband picked up lunch from a taco truck and cooked Ottolenghi's shakshuka for our dinner outside by the creek with a bottle of wine. My daughter's bedtime was easy, and I had a little time to relax before bed.

This morning I woke early, took a shower, and started writing this before I heard the calls of "Mommy!" I'm about to publish as lunchtime approaches.

Yesterday was a snapshot of life in the pandemic, work and home all intermingled and mutually contingent. Work is fragmented, too, and sometimes when I am "at home" my mind is elsewhere, trying to remember my last thought for long enough to write it down. (I wrote and revised this paragraph a sentence at a time, at first standing at the kitchen counter between unloading the dishwasher and tending to my daughter.) I still feel sad at the loss of my sabbatical and guilty about not producing much, even as I am grateful that I was not teaching and so work is largely at my discretion.

When I can accept my situation as it is, I'm coming to enjoy spending whole days with my daughter. I've largely gotten over feeling useless; staying home and caring for my family is enough for now. At the same time, I'm grateful when she is content to play by herself so I can think my own thoughts. That time is extra, beyond the two hours daily my husband and I have negotiated so that I can leave the house to exercise and schedule uninterrupted online meetings. I've [salvaged some disastrous days](#), as well.

We've finally settled into some weekly routines, which mostly center on communications beyond the household: FaceTime with my parents Monday and Friday afternoons, Zoom with my in-laws every other Saturday morning, Google Meet with our babysitter on Tuesday afternoons, grocery shopping early on alternate Mondays, Friday bread delivery and produce pickup. The butcher delivers Tuesday or Thursday, and of course my husband and I have weekly work meetings.

Beyond the conundrum of working at home, I'm noticing there is little opportunity to be "neither at home nor at work," as the Crowded House lyric goes. Such opportunities must be planned and negotiated, and there is no "third place" to go to. Even as we spend even more time on social media, friendships are surely suffering.

But there are some small pleasures that break the routine and make me feel less like I'm living the same day over and over: my child's delight at a new toy (and my own delight at receiving an order from our local plant nursery), a local restaurant's pop-up dinner (takeout only, of course), a chance conversation (from ten feet away), an email exchange with my new colleague or an admitted student.

I'm also realizing that even as shelter-in-place drags on with no end in sight, these new routines cannot last. The forcing function is work. I have summer research students starting (remotely) in just a few weeks. I've barely thought about how I will manage that, but I know it will be hard to support them if I can only count on two hours to care for them and for myself. It will take time to adapt my pedagogy to [teaching online](#) or the socially distanced classroom (though I'm increasingly [skeptical that college campuses will open this fall](#)). Beyond that, I'm scheduled to teach a course that is new to me, *Theory of Computation*; even without the pandemic I know I will need to devote time to studying over the summer to make it through the fall. I will need to be able to concentrate far more than I can right now.

Our longtime student babysitter is about to graduate. Yesterday we talked about what comes next, and now we are all taking the next week to think about whether we are open to a live-in employment relationship. I recognize it's a tremendous privilege to have this option. Full-time child care makes economic sense for my family, even now; it's hard to imagine giving up weekend and evening time together to make a split-shift possible even though I know that's what many families are doing. It will be a pleasure and a wrench to get back to work. But it still feels burdensome to think of another person sharing our house.

I don't know how to end this. There is no end, or at least the end is still some time in the unknowable future. And much as it may seem this has gone on forever, it's still just the beginning. The only constant is change.

Next week I hope to make my semi-annual post on pre-registration; it's going to be a doozy. (Here's [the last](#), before everything changed.)

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