

Living a Life Worth Living with my Dog during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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How it is that animals understand things I do not know, but it is certain that they do understand. Perhaps there is a language which is not made of words and everything in the world understands it. Perhaps there is a soul hidden in everything and it can always speak, without even making a sound, to another soul.

- Frances Hodgson Burnett (1888),
"A Little Princess"

To say that I was devastated was an understatement. It was around 3 in the morning, and I had been sobbing when I found out that my then-fiancé had been with another woman while we were in a long-distance relationship. I had arrived home a couple of hours ago from a trip to Japan where I presented a paper at an international conference for the first time. Exhausted from the trip, I felt so overwhelmed that I did not even know how to prepare for my presentations at a local conference that morning. All of these happened in November 2019, around three days before the first reported COVID-19 case in Wuhan in China.



This was Luna during that fateful morning of November 14, 2019.

At that time, the world probably did not fathom the magnitude of the impact that COVID-19 would have on everyone, including myself.

While I was crying, Luna, our 6-year-old female Dachshund, snuck inside my room and immediately approached me. She walked towards me without hesitation since the door to my room was slightly ajar. She gently nudged my knees and hand like she was asking me to carry her. I hugged her tightly while I was crying. I had no idea if she knew I had been inconsolable, but she never squirmed under my tight embrace nor gave signs that she wanted me to stop. When I could not yet fully process what happened, Luna was there to listen — even if she probably could not understand a single thing. I poured my all into her until I had calmed down, enough for me to start working on the presentations for the upcoming conference that morning.

I was about to present my research about the impact of pets and companion animals on mental health and well-being during the conference last November 2020. Growing up, I always had a soft spot for pets, especially

dogs. I cannot remember moments when I did not live and interact with any pets, whether they were the furry kinds like dogs, rabbits, and guinea pigs or scaly ones like fishes and the occasional live shrimp. You can even spot the dogs we had in the past in some of my toddler pictures. These were some of the tangible proofs that I was probably attracted with much fervor and *gigil* to these furry companions. Therefore, I think that it was only appropriate that I found my way into incorporating my love for animals in several of my research work, including my master's thesis. Looking back on this two-day conference, it was unimaginable how I managed those days without much sleep and with puffy eyes cleverly concealed by my trusty makeup. But somehow, I did. Perhaps I had to thank Luna's attempt at hugs and comfort for most of these.



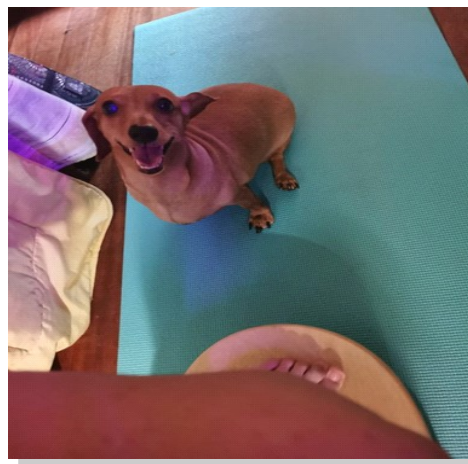
I was holding one of our Dachshund puppies back in 1995.

Little did I know that would not be the last time I would be profusely thanking my dog for the companionship and more importantly, for the will to live and survive the next few months. When President Rodrigo Duterte announced that Metro Manila would be under the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) on March 16, my parents and I decided to pack most of my belongings in my condo unit at Quezon City. There was a possibility that I might not be able to come back for them during the lockdown. I had been living on my own for the past three years in Quezon City and was occasionally visiting my parents at

home in Rizal. However, I had already gone back to Cainta for around a month after my ex-fiancé decided to break up with me back in February 2020. My mother was worried by the thought of me living all alone in the condo after that incident. The idea of going back home and staying with my parents for a prolonged time after living away from home for quite some

time was not that exciting. I loved the freedom and the space I have in my place in the city despite its massive downside of prohibiting pets within the premises of the condo. However, the presence of our dogs, most especially Luna, thankfully made up for that tradeoff of giving up my independence to live with my parents once again.

The first few days of the ECQ were bearable. I was still able to do my tasks and continue with my routine even with the work suspensions. Likewise, I was going on with my preparations for my thesis proposal defense. It was scheduled on the last week of March 2020, but was postponed to a later date because of the ECQ. I was still my "old" self, trying my best to stay on top of my duties as a graduate student, a teacher, a clinician-in-training, and a researcher like what I had been managing to do during the past years. The difference was that this time, I was doing all of them from the comforts of my home. With my mother working from home too, our whole family had established a routine in which we all ate breakfast together. Luna would usually go down from my parent's room as soon as she sensed that we were all awake and about to go down to the dining room for breakfast. If I woke up a little later than usual, she would patiently wait for me at the bottom of the stairs. You could feel her excitement when she saw me, as if she said, "Rise and shine! Good morning!" Luna did this without any yaps, but I could feel the pure joy rippling through that long but stubby body of hers.



(Left) Luna was waiting at the bottom of the stairs for me to go down and eat breakfast with my parents. (Right) Luna was watching me balance on my balance board.

Luna became my unofficial officemate while I was working from home during the first three months of the ECQ. My schedule revolved around being open for communication with my current students that semester, volunteering to provide psychosocial support services, doing my research work, preparing for my thesis proposal defense, and finally, even completing freelance work. My day began by eating breakfast with my family and then going to my room to proceed with my morning tasks. I noticed that Luna preferred napping with my father in the mornings and before hanging out with me in the afternoon when I was already back in my room after lunch. Without looking at the door, I knew she was walking toward me because I could hear the gentle *tip-tap* of her paws and nails on the floor. Luna would peer at me and sit beside me until I paid attention to her because Luna wanted to nap on my bed. She usually slept until she let me know that she wanted to go down the bed by standing close to the edge of my mattress. Whenever I



Luna was sleeping on my bed while I was working on my thesis proposal defense.

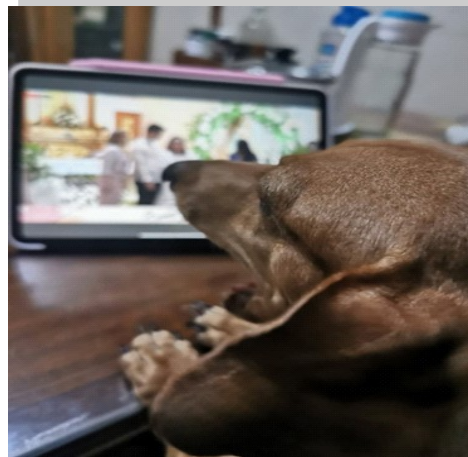
felt sleepy while working on my thesis, I would look at Luna napping and wished I could join her too. Fortunately for me and my work, a few moments of gazing at her and stroking her belly was enough for me to power through my remaining tasks for the day. As my unofficial officemate, there were times that Luna accompanied me in my online commitments: work meetings, classes, and even some of my psychotherapy sessions with my clients. And just in case anyone wonders, she rarely barked during these instances. I could proudly say that Luna maintained confidentiality during my psychotherapy sessions too. And when I had finished my work for the day and would do my workout routine, Luna would sit on my yoga mat to relax. Sometimes, there seemed to be wonder on her face, perhaps thinking about what I was doing at that moment.

Aside from easing up again on the routine of living with my parents and my work-from-home setup, I was somehow also on top of being a fur sister to my beloved Luna. It was the perfect time and situation for me to build a routine with Luna by strengthening the existing tricks that she knew and then teaching her different commands. I had already taught Luna the basic commands such as 'sit' and 'paw' (compared to saying 'shake hands' because our Luna, of course, has furry paws). Luna needed more practice and consistency on top of a lot of patience on my end. Luna was able to master commands like 'paw' and 'other paw,' 'roll over,' 'where's the treat?', 'stay,' and even 'come' for the most of 2020. Luna learned that we would be playing after dinner time, which gave the consistency that allowed her to master these different commands and tricks. Despite these, Luna maintained her signature stubbornness whenever she asserted her wants, such as not wanting to go outside or just wanting to eat her treats in peace without her hooman sister asking where it was.

Beyond the joy I had gotten from spending more time with Luna, perhaps the most important reason for my gratitude was her presence during the bleakest months of quarantine around the second to the third quarters of 2020. With Metro Manila and Rizal fluctuating in between quarantine classifications and with medical professionals calling for staying home as much as possible, there was no opportunity for me to visit and see my friends and colleagues in person. Additionally, my parents are already senior citizens, and my mother was technically a government front liner despite her age and health risks. I did not want to risk the health of both of my parents by going out of our house while there were quarantine restrictions. The overall situation of the lockdown was already conducive for people to isolate themselves, which was not ideal for maintaining optimum mental health and well-being. As mental health professionals, we called for people to physically distance themselves while continuing to socialize in the safest way possible – by connecting through the power of the internet. I was fortunate enough to be in the position to connect and reconnect with my friends from high school and college, as well as with my other colleagues, acquaintances, and even new friends through the constant Zoomustahan, Discord game nights, and other forms of kuwentuhan. I could say that Luna was successful in cheering up my friends and even colleagues whenever I showed her to them during our video calls.

Despite the attempts to enhance connections in the middle of a pandemic, I gradually isolated myself from the people around me. A failed effort to reconnect with my ex prompted my spiral into multiple episodes of anxiety and depression. There were countless nights that I begged out loud to the universe to force myself to sleep during the ungodly hours of the morning, so I could quiet all my intrusive thoughts and questions that continued to haunt me. There were days that I wished I did not wake up to escape facing how terrible my past actions were. Apart from these, I had quit volunteering to provide psychosocial support services because I felt like I was not in the best shape to provide quality services to my clients and patients. I had also lost the drive to edit my thesis manuscript even though I had successfully defended my proposal already. Almost all the signs of anxiety and depression were like a checklist that I was ticking religiously. Not only did I recognize them as part of my training, but my two friends had the same observations too. There was no sugarcoating that these months in 2020 were a difficult period of my life, with the pandemic rubbing salt on my metaphorical wounds.

Eventually, I gathered the remaining energy I had to seek my therapist and continue with our sessions, with the last one occurring prior to the lockdowns. Admitting that I needed help and going to therapy was already the first step, but being able to translate the reflections into actions and practices outside the sessions was an enormous hurdle that I had to overcome. I was faced with a difficult pill to swallow where it could be hard to escape while trapped in this vortex of unhelpful thoughts that drags you back towards the past. It was like a vicious unseen force that did not leave you any room to yearn for any future. My clients and patients had described this similar experience to me in our sessions, but I had never imagined going through it. I even gave in to stigmatizing myself to my chagrin, which was ironic since I am training to be a clinician someday. I just did what I could during those times. I attended my therapy sessions even on days that I did not want to and did not have energy, did my personal homework for therapy, reinforced my skills, taught my students as best as I could despite the limitations and the unfortunate circumstances of remote learning, and even looked for alternate job opportunities so I could financially support myself. Mindfulness practice and exercises helped me escape the trap of rumination. Providentially, Luna was one of my anchors that helped me stay in the present instead of drowning in my past.



(Left) During the days that I did not have any energy to go out of bed, Luna would come in and sleep with me. (Right) Luna was accompanying me while I watched the first virtual wedding that I attended during the quarantine.

It was a blessing that Luna never missed seeking me in my room to ask for snuggles, kisses, hugs, and a lot of attention. All of these helped me pull myself back to the present moment. I would often close the door to my room, especially during extremely low periods when I did not even want to go out of my room to eat and would sleep the whole day instead. Gone was the family routine we had established during the first three months of quarantine. My mother was aware of how terrible my situation was. She would let Luna inside my room because she would find our sausage dog looking at my door, waiting patiently outside, probably wondering what happened to me and my daily routine. She seemed to know if I only wanted to sleep in for the day because she would nestle close to me under my blanket as soon as I carried her to my bed. In these instances, I recalled lying down on my bed with these unhelpful thoughts in my head dissipating once I brushed my fingers on Luna's fur and felt her warmth beside me. I suddenly found myself staying in the here and now and became more mindful of the experience of having Luna beside me rather than letting myself consumed with ruminating. On nights when Luna chose to sleep with me, I easily fell asleep as long as I focused on her deep breaths and occasional soft snores. I was also terrified of being asked by my friends how I was managing post-breakup. Fortunately, Luna's presence helped me manage my apprehensions in interacting with

other people aside from my two trusted friends. This was most evident when I virtually attended the wedding of my two friends. I was still on the edge whenever the topic of relationships and marriages were discussed or even briefly mentioned, but holding Luna at that time helped me stay in the present moment and appreciate how beautiful the union was of my two friends.

It is safe to say that 2020 was extraordinary for everyone. It gave us losses and grief, and admittedly even some profound insights and realizations about how fleeting life and relationships could be. I can relate one of these insights to a particular line in one of the articles I cited in my thesis manuscript. In an anecdote in the study of Archer (1997), one participant said that the dog was the only member of the family who could make life worth living. The participant further elaborates that this relationship with their dog was “always there, always loving, and completely uncritical” (Archer, 1997, p. 253). This relationship or the human-animal bond formed between a pet dog and its owner shows a relationship that is unconditional and non-judgmental. As I reflect on these words more than a year since I started appreciating the bond I formed with Luna, I find it remarkable how genuinely this speaks for me. On days that I was full of loathing and resentment for myself, Luna was there to make me feel that I was the most important person in her world. It did not matter if my father was her favorite person. The way Luna’s eyes sparkled whenever she sensed me helped in more ways than I could ever imagine in fighting for that will to survive and live to see another day. I knew she would still want to hang out with me even on days I did not want to be left alone with my thoughts and myself. And I also knew she would be waiting for me downstairs and would greet me with the sloppiest kisses and warmest hugs I truly deserve. My automatic thoughts used to say that maybe I did not deserve that kind of attention from her. However, her presence alone overpowered this because it made me feel the non-judgmental connection and unconditional positive regard. What was important was the time we spent together in the present, and that alone was enough for me. Because in this world riddled with a year-long pandemic, heartaches, and political unrest, she made me feel that I can still try to live a life worth living.

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