

The Thing with Isolation

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Has the sky been this dark? This question popped into my head as my feet were pressed against the wall below my window, while my back was flat on the ground. I was feeling the soft vibrations from the ac of the unit below mine. It was flowing from the soles of my feet to the rest of my body. I must have been lying down for quite some time since I could already feel the uneven surface of my yoga mat slowly imprinting on my back. In front of me, by my window, was the blank, dark, night sky. No moon. No stars. Just black and blank. Has it really been this dark? I kept asking myself.

My last memory of the world outside was when I went to the gym 20 or so floors below where I am. That was February of 2020. With my health condition, it is best that I keep myself isolated. In this seclusion, time has been nothing but relative to me. For example, the number of times I played my song of the day replaced minutes in measuring my time. Shower? Five times. Writing a final school paper? Roughly 960 times. One working day? 160 times. My song of the day provided a welcome distraction to the rather unfamiliar voices around and inside me. You see, the thing with my situation is that the longer I isolate myself, the more I am compelled to be intimate with myself, something I have been avoiding for the longest time.

2020 should have been a big year for me. I was finally turning 30. I was finally bidding my youth goodbye. But can one really say goodbye to someone whom one does not fully know? After all, "good riddance" is not the same as "goodbye." For the last 20 or so years of my life, I have been many things to many people, a dutiful son to my parents, a reliable friend to my peers, and

a tough but loving teacher to my students. But what have I been to myself? Until this isolation, life has been nothing but a dizzying shift to and from these roles.

On account of one of my roles, the dimensions of my work as a college administrator and a faculty member were drastically changed during this pandemic. I had to learn how to produce videos, navigate html, and screen capture my problem demonstrations, which were beyond my pre-pandemic competencies as a university staff. However, the technical challenges that I have been facing are less significant compared to the relational ones. It is so hard to work with people these days, I said to myself. Have you asked yourself though, how hard it is to work with you? a part of me answered back.

Before the pandemic, I was driven by that intoxicating sense of achievement. If I must guess, this may have been due to the misplaced energy from my youth. Along the way, some people avoided working with me because of this. Apparently, I was hard to work with. I think I tend to push people to the goal rather than bringing the goal closer to them. To be frank, the former seemed easier. I may have been transactional at best. What they did not know was that I was hardest on myself, if not most unkind. For example, I have this habit of writing notes to myself, berating myself from the littlest to the grandest of my failures. In this isolation, I have come to realize that the process of achievement, including the relationships that one builds, is as important as achievement itself.

I remember my mother and my father telling me that I was a particularly sensitive child, something that I unconsciously wanted to outgrow. In hindsight, this must have been the reason why I abandoned my aspirations for a corporate career. In my early 20s, I was eyeing to become one of the youngest partners in a public accounting firm. A month into my first assignment, I remember hiding inside one of the cubicles in the restroom. It must have been past 12 midnight. Everyone, save for our team, was gone. My eyes could not stay open despite my nth cup of coffee, largely due to the two to three hours of sleep I had been getting the past few weeks. I wanted to go home but I could not. Without any warning, I was surprised by the warm stream of water unconsciously flowing down my cheeks. Why are my cheeks contracting like this, I asked myself? I finally gave in and cried. You have to

be stronger, I told myself. You have to feel less and do more. My emotions are nothing but nuisances to my process, I kept reminding myself back then. Little did I know that my emotions are largely the processes that drive the achievement of my goals, whether technical or relational.

The thing that I will not forget about this isolation is how I relearned the meaning of compassion and care. This pandemic has placed me at the receiving end of other people's compassion and care. Particularly, my mother and my sister have been nothing but understanding of my bouts. Due to being closer to them than before, I have started to appreciate their little ways, from them seeing past my outbursts to them listening to my ever-convoluted ramblings about work.

I will not forget a time I was so mad at something; I cannot remember what I was mad about but I can clearly recall how mad I was. I slammed my worktable so hard that the sound must have vibrated through the walls of our unit. I heard my mother and my sister rushing to my door but stopping, as if gauging whether they should check on me or not. Moments after, my mother said that she was afraid for me, not of me, but for me. What were you feeling earlier? she asked. It took me time to answer that question.

What was I feeling? Was I really angry? Was I disappointed? Was I helpless? Or was I confused? Why am I feeling this way? How should I feel instead next time? For the last three or four months, these have been my questions every time I feel that rush of anger inside me. In trying to answer these questions, I have learned to understand myself more. In understanding myself, in turn, I have learned to care more.

The thing with isolation is that we are forced to see beyond our roles, our duties, and even our emotions. Through this distance, we are able to realize how human we are, how similar and how different we are from others. Another thing about isolation is that we start to realize that care, just like light, comes from different places. Care and comfort can come from inside us, from others, or from the mere thought that everything has been and is being ordained in this universe. In the midst of being physically secluded, we learn to value human warmth and compassion. The thing with isolation is that it can make us closer to ourselves and to others, despite this distance. Even in this proximity, we learn and relearn to be more human.

No, it used to be not as dark, it should not be, I told myself. Despite the comforting sensation provided by the floor and my melancholy, I decided to get up. I rolled my mat and approached the window. This time I looked down. There they were, the flickers of light coming from all over north of Metro Manila. I could see the one from my favorite church, the one from a mall, and the one from the newly constructed highway that runs from north to south. Oftentimes, light is where we need it to be, we just have to keep looking. May our lights be brighter, ourselves be braver, and our days be better.