

BREVITY's Nonfiction Blog

(SOMEWHAT) DAILY NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF LITERARY NONFICTION

On Teaching and Writing From a Distance

April 10, 2020 § 12 Comments

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4 Votes

By Meg McGovern

It's not often—or ever, before all of this—you get an email saying schools will be closed indefinitely. That word feels so permanent now.

On March 12th, students arrived off their buses at the middle school where I teach Language Arts. The building bustled with activity. Lockers were opened and closed, halls echoed with footsteps as students made their way to their classrooms, teachers chatted with each other, and laughter rang through the halls. The bell rang and the two-minute warning was announced. It was business as usual. Students and faculty stopped in place to say the Pledge of Allegiance, the building otherwise silent. After the normal announcements, the principal's voice came over the loudspeaker advising students to take their chrome books and chargers home at the end of the day. Anyone who didn't have one or the other, or both, were told to report to the Learning Commons. A whisper of concern filtered among students and staff. At noon, the announcement was made again. By 12:40 p.m., our lives changed with an email from the superintendent. By 2:40 p.m., the hallways were empty except for staff members standing in disbelief, trying to figure out what had just happened.



The next morning, I rose as usual at 5:15 a.m., I could have slept late, but my mind spun like a top hurling into an unknown space. No school buses screeched to a stop across the street at 6:30 a.m. to signal it was time to head across town to school. No bell would ring, classrooms and hallways would be

empty, and life as we knew it would change. I walked around the house in a daze. Should I work on my MFA project, grade papers, catch up on the bills, do the taxes, or just sit and read while I had the chance. I could have crossed things off my to do list, but I hadn't figured out this new routine, so I sat on the couch with Gia, my yellow lab, and did nothing.

"Distance Learning" began a few days later. Administrators and teachers rallied to get teaching online up and running. Faculty and department meetings were set up on Google Meets. "How to" seminars were launched for staff to get up to speed with technology to teach from their computers. Teachers created, planned, shared lessons and schedules. Students sat around kitchen tables across the country doing schoolwork with their parents in the place of their teachers.

I sat at my desk from 7:30 a.m., until 5:00 p.m., nonstop, without getting to my MFA third semester project like I had promised. My eyes burned, and my whole body ached. In my classroom, I am ordinarily in constant motion, sitting only to grade papers, to conference with students about their writing, and to eat lunch with my colleagues. It was difficult on a normal day to come home and begin my own writing, but this, setting up assignments and grading in Google Classroom, responding to students, and recording myself to provide instructions, was killing my ability to get anything else accomplished. If this was my new normal, my workspace and schedule needed adjustments.

Productivity for me, means an organized teaching and writing space. My desk can be an eclectic conglomeration of bills to be paid, to do lists, papers to grade, books to read, books to write up in my MFA Bibliography, journals, and index cards with ideas. Something had to change, so I spent a weekend going through piles of papers, sorting, dumping, purging. I organized MFA materials into semester binders and teaching materials into another. I organized my computer files, and my books into baskets by semester and genre. Even Gia's toys went into a basket under my desk. Finally, I had space to teach and write.

Without routine, life can catapult into bad habits and result in poor time management. As a teacher and writer, I could work around the clock without leaving my desk. The reality of indefinite "Distance Teaching" has forced me to create a new structure and give myself permission to take breaks. My day now starts with writing early in the morning before checking in with my students at 8:30 a.m. My alarm still goes off at 5:15 a.m., but now I am at my desk, in my PJs, with a fresh cup of coffee and my computer by 6:00 a.m., writing while everyone else is sleeping. When the school day begins, I've worked on essays for my MFA and feel productive. Taking breaks from the screen every hour or so is essential for my mental and physical health, so I've set my Fitbit with reminders to get up and stretch, start a load of laundry, chat with a friend, or get some fresh air. My husband and I shut down our computers at 5:00 p.m. to take a long walk with Gia. We cook and have dinner as a family. Afterwards, I have time to write or read MFA related books and essays then relax before bedtime.

The Coronavirus has asked us to change the way we work and live. It has asked us to evaluate and focus on what is most important. Family and good health have become priority. For the unforeseeable future, we are homebound and have new routines. It's not the same as the face to face contact with students, family and friends, but for now, I am happy to do what I am passionate about from a distance.

Meg Keeshan McGovern (<http://www.megkmcgovern.com/>) is an author, educator, and speaker in Connecticut. Her book, *We're Good, The Power of Faith, Hope & Determination* was published in 2018. She is pursuing an MFA in nonfiction writing at Fairfield University.

Tagged: Covid-19

§ 12 Responses to *On Teaching and Writing From a Distance*

-  shizakhan0027 (<http://httpsshizakhan0027.wordpress.com>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 7:25 am (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102278>)

mam you wrote an amazing article     

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102278#respond>)

-  wearegoodweb (<http://wearegoodweb.wordpress.com>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 6:11 pm (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102394>)

Thanks for reading.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102394#respond>)

-  Abby (<http://www.lovingthesimplethings.com>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 8:47 am (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102295>)

Love this article! I agree with you. We are definitely living in a different time. Taking breaks is very important or we could burn out as well – physically from sitting all day, mentally from brain overload and staring at a computer screen all day is not good. I am a former educator, and I think this pandemic might force education to take a different direction altogether.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102295#respond>)

-  janpriddyoregon (<http://janpriddyoregon.wordpress.com>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 9:51 am (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102309>)

I read your comment aloud and my husband thought I'd written it. I agree. There is no going back.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102309#respond>)

-  janpriddyoregon (<http://janpriddyoregon.wordpress.com>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 9:50 am (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102308>)

Right there where your teaching day runs from 8:30 in the morning and ends at 5pm—I never was able to do that as a teacher. Not even during the years I worked through my MFA.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102308#respond>)

-  teechpurple says:
April 10, 2020 at 10:41 am (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102318>)

An excellent read. Congrats Meg! I really enjoyed reading about your new normal.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102318#respond>)

-  venessawrites (<http://venessaanderson.wordpress.com>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 11:03 am (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102320>)

This definitely rings true! I feel like I'm right there with you Meg. Still trying to figure out how to best fit in the writing.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102320#respond>)

- Donna Beatty says:
April 10, 2020 at 2:00 pm (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102347>)

So proud of you Meg, for this published essay. Any teacher can relate to what you said in your writing, and you said it so beautifully. Thanks.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102347#respond>)

-  Susan Keefe (<http://www.truecrimemama.com>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 2:50 pm (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102358>)

I enjoyed your blog. My son is an elementary school teacher, teaching remotely as is my daughter-in-law. They have 3 young children at home too, so they understand the need for order and routine, neither of which comes naturally to them! Be well.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102358#respond>)

- Stacy E Holden (<https://stacyeholden.com/>) says:
April 10, 2020 at 6:44 pm (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-102403>)

"Without routine, life can catapult into bad habits and result in poor time management." Yes, yes, and yes! Glad you found a routine that suits.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=102403#respond>)

-  lgood67334 (<http://www.writeradvice.com>) says:
April 13, 2020 at 2:21 pm (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-103008>)

Your writing is as organized as your workspace. Is there any time left for feeling stunned and lost or have you risen above that? Just wondering if you have an additional secret. Thanks!

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=103008#respond>)

-  Meg McGovern (<http://www.mkmcgovern.com/>) says:
April 17, 2020 at 8:58 am (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/#comment-103838>)

I have adjusted to a new routine, but I really miss my family, colleagues, students, and friends. When I feel unmotivated, I take extra breaks, an extra walk, call a friend, read a book for pleasure, or just sit outside and enjoy the spring air. It's really important to take care of your mind and body during this pandemic.

Reply (<https://brevity.wordpress.com/2020/04/10/from-a-distance/?replytocom=103838#respond>)

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