

# Finding Belongingness Through Community in the First Year of COVID-19

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**Abstract:** March 2020 to March 2021 marked the first year of COVID-19. Here, two faculty members—one an administrator, the other a social work professor—at a large public university in Texas reflect upon our journey and offer a narrative of how we navigated the pandemic. Our separate paths crossed, and ultimately converged, through the Office of Faculty Development. One year later, in retrospect, we realize that our story is a shared one of reconnecting on both the institutional and individual levels. We each sought and found, through distinct roles and different routes, a supportive community and sense of belonging. This helped us to survive and eventually to thrive despite the challenges, changes, and choices COVID-19 posed. Since development is an ongoing process, we end with how our story continues.

**Keywords:** faculty development, personal development, reflections

## Introduction

COVID-19 disrupted and upended faculty work at universities and colleges abruptly in March 2020. In an April 2020 survey of United States college and university administrators and faculty (N=897), 56 percent of faculty respondents reported using new teaching methods, and 93 percent made at least one modification to course expectations, such as eliminating assignments or redesigning grading schema (Johnson et al., 2020). In addition to rapid course redesign, faculty were also called on to provide empathetic support for students in distress. Cordaro (2020) posits faculty who provided emotional support for students and colleagues were at an increased risk for compassion fatigue during COVID-19.

Faculty development offices were called upon to provide support for faculty members who had to hard-pivot their courses online. In addition, many faculty developers went beyond providing support for online teaching and learning. Bessette and McGowan (2020) speak to the role faculty developers played in supporting faculty during the pandemic, observing that affective skills such as compassion and empathy were crucial to providing needed support to faculty. Many faculty development programs served as hubs and communities, enabling faculty to connect on a professional and personal level. Communities of practice are sustained by the commitment, passion, and expertise of their members (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). In addition, they can be a vehicle for both professional and personal connection.

What follows is our story. We present our narratives as separate views of the same points in time. As our stories intertwine, the narrative provides a multi-layered view of how we navigated our professional lives during COVID-19 and how we found supportive communities through faculty development.

## **Mid-March-May 2020**

### *Catherine*

It happened just before 6 p.m. on Friday the 13th of March 2020, the day before spring break started. The hallway was largely deserted with only a few faculty members still working. I liked to stay late on Friday evening, since I enjoyed this quiet time at the end of the week. It was reinforcing to complete accumulated tasks that remained undone and to feel (sort of) caught up, and this week was no different. The semester was going well, and I looked forward to a relaxing break.

I remember seeing it as I was sitting in stunned disbelief, staring out of my office window, and wondering what I was going to do. I had not anticipated anything so drastic, and I was completely unprepared. It was still very early in the pandemic, and although the news was evolving rapidly and alarmingly, this email was far more unsettling. I turned back to my computer and read the memo from the provost again. Spring break would be extended by one week so all faculty could transition their courses to a remote synchronous format. I had absolutely no idea how to do this, and a very limited amount of time to figure it out.

Shortly after reading the email, I decided to walk down the hall to the workroom, just to engage in some momentary denial. I ran into a younger faculty member who had taught online previously; she asked if I had seen the email and inquired about my reaction. We chatted a bit, my mind in a whirl, and she offered to help me get started over spring break via Zoom. I had only ever used Zoom before to set up an occasional meeting, and I could not fathom teaching that way. Regardless, my colleague was reassuring, and I felt some slight relief from my overall sense of impending doom.

My school has been delivering a fully accredited, asynchronous, online graduate degree program for over two decades. Teaching online was optional, and I had always avoided it since I could not imagine that it was a good fit with my skills. I had heard from some faculty about negative experiences, which made it even less appealing. I already actively used Tracs, our current learning management system (LMS), as the platform for my in-person classes. I had attended training for online teaching and been certified by the university, but this was only to be better informed. At this point, I did not even fully realize that remote synchronous teaching was distinct from online asynchronous teaching. I did not understand how my computer would be the virtual classroom, or how Zoom would be my personal interface with students. That was yet to be experienced. Now, I was confronting the unanticipated consequences of my long-standing avoidance.

Adding to this distress, I had already been feeling detached from the school for various reasons, unmoored from my usual sense of belonging. This was an exceedingly odd state for me, as I had worked at the university for thirty years and always felt strongly connected. I had spent the past four years in a half-time university-level position as director of faculty development (FD), which

was a richly rewarding role. I had an office in the administrative building and reported directly to the associate provost, and I had gained a broad view of higher education, the university, and faculty relations. I met and engaged daily with faculty from across campus through implementing programs to support their career success.

Although I achieved a workable balance with my two roles, I stepped down as director during summer 2019. The position was being converted to full-time administration, which did not match my talents or goals. I returned as a full-time professor to the school that fall semester. I had contributed to the search for the new FD director, Candace Hastings, and I was excited to welcome her to campus. I chaired the newly formed FD advisory committee (FDAC), which allowed me to stay somewhat involved. The FDAC met periodically, and members were invited to participate in several ongoing FD programs. This service filled a bit of the void in the net of collegial connections that I had enjoyed as director and now sorely missed.

During the 2019-2020 academic year, the director of the school proposed that, in addition to teaching, I provide some faculty development for our non-tenure-line faculty in support of limited scholarly activities. While this was not required as part of the faculty job description, it had the potential of advancing their individual career goals. This was a generous offer that had the potential of helping me to also find my new place and purpose in the school. I was grateful for this opportunity since it gave me a chance to continue engaging in meaningful mentoring. After much exploration, a few faculty members identified promising projects to pursue. Despite this positive note, I still felt the absence of FD and my campus-wide engagement. The school had undergone significant changes during my part-time absence, and my transition back was unexpectedly rough.

The academic year presented other professional challenges that further contributed to my growing sense of displacement. Following a particularly jarring incident in a committee meeting at the school in early March, I realized that I should seek support elsewhere and fast. I was adrift and needed help. A spontaneous yet fortuitous encounter with Candace while walking across campus (how soon that would no longer be possible) was instrumental in assisting me to articulate my dilemma. Candace was empathetic and shared some of her own history that helped me to see a bigger perspective. Along with the support of a few trusted friends who understood academia, I endeavored to keep my bearing. Little did I know how quickly things would change further and get much worse.

Following spring break, the rest of the spring 2020 semester went by in a blur that I barely remember. The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, abrupt pivot to remote teaching, struggles with technology, and quarantine at home exacerbated my sense of displacement and isolation. Like so many others, this crisis forced me into survival mode: focusing on the work, learning Zoom and other techno tricks, teaching my classes synchronously, supporting my students in their own distress, and finishing the semester intact. After wrapping up some school committee duties by the end of May, I looked forward to a recuperative summer break.

## ***Candace***

During the week of March 9, there had been talk of the state and university's response to the increase in COVID-19 cases in Texas. On March 9, we received an email from the provost advising faculty and departments to develop a 30-day remote teaching contingency. Our university is known for its culture of care. We love our beautiful campus. I was only six months into the job, but I had already fallen in love with crossing the spring-fed river that runs through our university to go to lunchtime yoga, and having sidewalk conversations with colleagues, including Catherine. Engaging with students and each other face-to-face has always been the hallmark of our being.

On March 13, our university president announced that our university was going immediately to remote learning until April 13 due to the spread of COVID-19. Spring break was extended one week to allow faculty two weeks to move their classes online for remote teaching. That day, I took a colleague to lunch to celebrate her first week on the job. It was a beautiful day to eat outside; however, even in the span of that one week, I had become more self-conscious about navigating spaces and people as COVID-19 started to permeate my life. COVID-19 was a cloud above my head on this bright sunny day when I should have been enjoying lunch and good conversation.

Later that day, the associate provost came to my office to explain the remote teaching plan. She said, "I know you have a background in teaching and learning. Faculty will need help in moving to remote teaching. *How can you help?*" My job to that point had been developing long-range faculty support programs, not rapid-fire solutions to teaching crises. Within an hour, I sent her a list of six workshops to be included in an email from the provost outlining training opportunities. The phrase "How can you help?" became my mantra for a year. Those words gave me the courage and strength I would need to do what was to come.

I delivered a total of 16 workshops in those next two weeks. Fortunately, I was an experienced online instructor and had spent a good portion of my career consulting and advising faculty how to teach online. But moving a face-to-face class online in a matter of a week or two? Even experienced faculty were scrambling. During the workshops, faculty were anxious, but they also showed tremendous commitment and energy. We were fueled by adrenaline and hope. After all, this was only supposed to be a temporary move. Surely, we could do anything for a few weeks! We were blissfully naïve. Looking back, I am not sure we would have even wanted to know that this would be the beginning of a long, hard ride for all of us.

The role of FD changed dramatically from that point on. But the mantra "How can I help?"—or, "How can *we* help?"—guided our decision-making and priorities. We pivoted quickly into new roles and tried to answer that question every day. The FD administrative assistant is a technical genius and a voracious learner. If there was something she did not know how to do, she figured it out. She explored all the ins and outs of Zoom. She even made handouts for faculty. We were a small but mighty team; every day we had new challenges thrown our way, but we tackled them

one by one.

Many universities have teaching and learning centers with multiple full-time staff members. At our university, we do not have a teaching and learning center. In fact, before my arrival, Catherine had served as the director of FD in a part-time appointment.

Luckily, FD was not alone in its efforts. Distance Learning, IT, and FD shared training responsibilities. Before this time, our units rarely interacted. Immediately we compiled resources and made presentations together. We talked daily, strategizing about meeting needs and coordinating our efforts. We leaned on each other. We were punch-drunk tired and laughed to keep from crying. We forged healthy partnerships and friendships. I will always treasure my colleagues in the trenches during COVID-19. We were the caregivers, taking care of each other.

Surprisingly, I did not feel overwhelmed. Rather, I finally felt like I had a purpose. In tough times, I am much more of a Martha than a Mary, to use a biblical reference. Staying busy doing purposeful work kept me afloat. It kept my own demons at bay. I worked long hours and tried not to think of much of anything at all. I came home every day, took my dog for a run through campus, and worked in the garden—anything to quiet my mind and gather strength for the next day, as each evening became a little lonelier.

I would like to say that I was answering the question of how I could help when we developed our first learning communities, but it was also to quell my own longing to belong. We called them “learning” communities, but they were born out of the sense of abrupt isolation many of us felt during those first weeks of remote teaching. Our associate provost put me in touch with a professor who had reached out to her, asking how she could be helpful. We connected immediately and started shaping our faculty community. More importantly, we became dear friends.

Every Friday during the lunch hour, faculty met for “Let’s Do Lunch!” (LDL). We focused on remote teaching strategies, with the goal of creating a community of care online. We shared our successes and our “bloopers” with pride. For instance, an Italian instructor was “Zoom-bombed” on the very first day of remote instruction. A random man dropped into her class, hidden in the shadows, slowly smoking a cigarette. To hear her tell the story was priceless—we were laughing to the point of tears. Our meetings also featured games such as “pandemic bingo,” where the top prize was a six-pack of toilet paper rolls, delivered personally to the winner’s front porch. Each week, we tried to anticipate what was on the hearts and minds of our faculty, and this created time and space for us to support each other.

By sharing stories in our community of care, we forged resilience within ourselves and gained trust in each other. Later, as the pandemic spread, the community only grew stronger as situations grew more dire, as we were stretched and challenged in ways we never thought possible. We were able to see each other in our humanness. Some faculty had children running around in the background in Zoom. Some were working out of their kitchens. We were all trying

to figure out how to make things work, and LDL meant come as you are, whenever you can, wherever you are.

That spring I was also concerned about the disruption of research and writing that faculty had experienced, so I started a weekly Zoom faculty writing group called “Write Watchers.” Many of the Write Watchers group members were juggling childcare or eldercare while trying to keep a handle on their scholarly lives from home. In Write Watchers, the first few minutes were spent connecting, settling in, and setting goals. Then we turned off our mics and cameras and wrote, alone, yet together. At the end of our time, we talked about successes and challenges, because Write Watchers was not just space to write. It was a source of support. When we faced rejections, or days we just simply could take no more, we shared strategies and encouraged each other to keep moving in a trusted and sacred space.

## **Summer 2020**

### *Catherine*

While the transition to remote teaching in spring had been daunting, like everyone else, I made a successful switch to the “new normal.” My classes had gone well; I overcame my initial anxiety, expanded my skills, and gained confidence with this unfamiliar format. I was relieved that I would never have to teach this way again. I was hardly aware that the pandemic was just getting started. I adjusted to the solitude of working at home, and I came to appreciate the flexibility that it provided. Summer was here! I felt such a huge relief. I would have a hiatus for the first time in 27 years and I could just collapse.

Yet that is not what happened. The murder of George Floyd on Memorial Day (May 25) ignited national protests over racial inequality and calls for police reform. While I assumed that the university might come together in some collective action, things went in a different direction. My instinct was to contact several trusted colleagues and to speak honestly about my concerns over this crisis. Their wise counsel was invaluable in helping me to pursue my own self-directed, goal-oriented, and future-focused perspective. Candace reminded me of LDL, a learning community that FD had initiated in March, after the “switch.” I was not able to attend LDL sessions in the spring due to my schedule, so now I joined; the group lived up to its FD description by Candace as a place for “continuity, connection, and compassion.” Along with the support of a few trusted friends, I maintained my equilibrium, although I was stuck in a lonely place and still felt on shaky ground.

A few weeks later, on June 16, then-President Trump issued an executive order on policing that explicitly mentioned including social workers in responses involving mental health, homelessness, and addiction. While I did not share his politics, it spurred the social worker in me to engage in productive activity to pursue real solutions to these pressing issues. I reached out to like-minded faculty colleagues in my school and the School of Criminal Justice, as well as a community advocate. We established the Police Social Work Group (PSWG) to explore this

approach at the national, state, and local levels through education, policy, and research. This proved to be a collegial, thoughtful, and respectful group that provided me with another supportive community. I was reminded yet again of the power for change provided by a functional social environment that meets the specific needs of a particular individual. Along with LDL, the PSWG became a safe refuge during an extremely difficult, emotional time.

I choose to structure my life using a transpersonal orientation in which I integrate various spiritual perspectives into an eclectic, holistic approach. I regard it as my responsibility to take care of my own needs and to address my own conflicts. During a crisis, in the presence of positive support, I believe we can forge a stronger identity and be of greater service to others. It was through the steady destruction of my familiar world by the underlying pandemic, sociocultural conflict, academic politics, and personal upheaval that I was able to begin reimagining my identity and redirecting my career with a clearer sense of who I was now, what I wanted moving forward, and how I would proceed. I had no clue that this struggle was far from resolved, that it would require such protracted and intense self-reflection, and that it would involve so much renewal over a long, hot Texas summer.

### *Candace*

In May, I remember feeling weary. We realized COVID-19 was not going away any time soon. Summer classes were all going to be delivered online. I worked with the Distance Learning team to help create content for an online certification course faculty would need to take before teaching online for the summer and fall. After work, I still took my dog for a run on the empty campus. As the sun went down, I would lie in a hammock in my backyard, look at my garden and the sky, trying to empty my mind. I did not watch TV. I did not talk to anybody. It was exhilarating to be at the frontlines of helping people. But the lack of control, the trajectory of our lives, was so unpredictable. “How can I help?” started to feel like, “How long can I maintain the energy to be helpful?”

On May 25, in the midst of the fears and anxiety surrounding the pandemic and the move to online teaching, George Floyd was killed as Officer Derek Chauvin pinned him down by holding a knee on his neck for an excruciating nine and a half minutes. I do not intend here to minimize the importance of remembering other Black victims of police violence, particularly oft-forgotten Black women (for which the #SayHerName movement was created) such as Breonna Taylor, but the George Floyd case was a national catalyst, sparking protests throughout the country. One of our own university students was shot by police during a peaceful protest. Our students and faculty of color were not alright. None of us was alright.

I was appointed to a faculty and staff morale task force that summer to better understand the experiences of faculty and staff and to make recommendations to administrative leadership on strategies for supporting faculty and staff during COVID-19. We developed surveys and ran focus groups. We heard from mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. People were afraid for their jobs because of budget cuts, but they were also afraid for their lives due to COVID-19. One

focus group member summed up what so many felt: “I love my job, but I am not willing to die for it.”

In July, I got COVID-19. I had a fever for a week, lost my appetite completely for two weeks, and had a raging headache for a solid month. But there was no time to be sick. I was working from home, so I took one or two days off. I powered through so no one would notice. Plus, many of my colleagues faced much more difficult and painful battles.

I soon realized, however, that I could not meet the needs of faculty without help. I found faculty experts and gave them stipends to lead learning communities on teaching large classes and assessing student learning online. In addition, many faculty were transitioning to a new LMS, Canvas, which also became a focus of many of our conversations.

I was still asking “How can I help?” but the answers started becoming less obvious and harder to manage. I read a book called *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* by Vivek Murthy (2020) about how belonging can save our lives, and how engaging in constructive social relationships improves our physical and emotional well-being. The paradox is that the human connection we craved that summer also posed the greatest risk of killing us. It became even more important to figure out how to sustain social connectedness online going into the fall.

Our university had made plans to return to face-to-face classes in the fall, and in June began exploring equipping all classrooms with cameras and microphones to accommodate multiple teaching scenarios, including what was termed “hy-flex” classes. Late in the summer, I ran workshops on teaching in multiple modalities.

In addition, there was a heightened sense of anxiety about engaging with students in the classroom who might refuse to wear a mask. I brought in a faculty expert to teach the faculty de-escalation strategies. Amid pandemic worries, faculty expressed concerns about how to talk to students about the George Floyd incident and the protests over systematic racial injustice. I engaged experts to run sessions on how to talk to students about race and ethnicity. The upcoming presidential election also produced anxiety among faculty.

Such a change: Faculty who once longed to engage students in the classroom were now afraid of engaging in the classroom with those same students. In addition, there was palpable fatigue and malaise. What a difference the summer made in all our psyches! As the pandemic wore on, faculty were losing family members, and many had become ill themselves. We wanted to think that things would be back to normal, not knowing there would be no more “normal.” We went into fall with high anxiety and low expectations, but we were determined to persevere.



## **Fall 2020**

### ***Catherine***

The summer had not been the recharging interlude that I had expected (far from it); however, it had brought its own rewards. I found two functional communities in FD's LDL and the PSWG, both of which offered the collegiality that I sorely needed. Although the university had announced the return of in-person classes in the fall, I received an age-related accommodation to continue teaching synchronously since there was no vaccine yet. I contacted Candace at the end of the summer asking for potential workshops on facilitating genuine (albeit difficult) conversations on current pressing social justice issues. I wanted to better meet the needs of my students at where they were in their own lives. She indicated that she had already recognized this need and that several workshops were in preparation.

The main teaching challenge that I faced at the onset of the fall semester was initiating my classes via Zoom rather than switching over midway as I had done in the spring. This was a "heavy lift" that presented a different set of obstacles. I was utilizing Tracs more fully than in the past and wanted to further expand my use of Zoom and other technology in teaching. The university was transitioning to Canvas as our new LMS, and faculty had the option to further postpone adapting it until spring. While I had attended some Canvas trainings over the summer, I decided to delay changing over since I had heard how complicated and demanding it was. I decided that I already had enough challenges and other more pressing tasks and promising goals.

Unfortunately, I could not participate in LDL in the fall due to my class schedule. I attended numerous FD workshops, however, which offered an alternate supportive peer community. Further, given the serious social justice issues faced by the country, I wanted to adapt my teaching to incorporate more relevant content and facilitative processes. FD workshops provided legitimate training on diversity, equity, and inclusion by expert speakers. I continued to meet weekly with the PSWG; we identified meaningful activities with measurable outcomes. I kept in close contact with trusted friends and valued colleagues across campus. I pursued, achieved, and maintained a much healthier work-life balance.

In mid-October, I saw the announcement for the *Reflections* special issue on COVID-19. I reached out to Candace, and we decided to collaborate on a manuscript around our separate perspectives on the pandemic as experienced through our shared connection to FD. This turned out to be a highly significant turning point in my evolving regenerative process. Although we would not get started for a while, the potential of this project was energizing. It would become a regular and enjoyable source of support and collaboration.

November 3 brought the presidential election. Although pleased by the outcome, I was distressed by the deep divisions in the country. I was perplexed over how we would ever heal and find common middle ground. Habitually, I turned to work, put my head down (faced the computer), and focused on my classes and students. As so often in the past, I derived a sense of

calm from feeling competent about what I did, despite the unsteady times. The pandemic dragged on (as we all did), with no good news and no end in sight. At last, the semester was over, and I could finally shut down the computer and myself for a while.

### ***Candace***

In addition to running new faculty orientation and other programs for faculty in the fall, I was scheduled to teach research methods face-to-face to graduate students in the College of Education. Half the students wanted to attend via Zoom, and the other half wanted to be in the classroom. I have taught online, and I have taught face-to-face. I have even taught to two different classroom sites simultaneously. However, I have never taught a class with some students in front of me, in masks, and the other students logged into Zoom.

I realized early on that my 30 years of teaching did not really prepare me for this new experience. I had taught this course before and felt confident. I soon realized that any semblance of security I had in my abilities went straight out the window that first week of class.

First, to make this work, I had to haul in my own laptop and extension cords to class so I could have one camera on me and the room camera on the students. Not everyone who came to the face-to-face class brought a laptop and, in masks, it was hard for the Zoom students to hear individual students speak. Everything, and I mean everything, took twice as long and never worked quite right.

Even though we all found the modality to be challenging, I spent time at the beginning of the semester asking the class to develop agreed-upon behavior and communication guidelines. That activity set a generous and respectful, cooperative tone, creating a space we all wanted to be in. Our most important agreement was that we would be generously graceful to ourselves and to each other. We all needed that grace at different times in the semester.

Another approach that helped me was my “ungrading” system. In research methods, students write parts of a research proposal on a topic of their choice. They either received full credit on the assignment, or they were required to implement my targeted feedback to revise the parts of the proposal that did not meet the learning outcomes. Setting the course up this way altered my positionality from judge to coach. In their evaluations at the end of the semester, students said the system took away some of the anxiety they were feeling that semester, and it created a more authentic learning experience for them.

It was still hard. Period. I never felt caught up and they did not either. But we managed; we managed together. And I have to say teaching last fall was one of the most transformative teaching experiences I have had in my career. It was impossible to go on autopilot. Every day was different. Everyone had their ups and downs—even me.

I hit a breaking point in November. My twelve-year-old rat terrier had cancer, and I knew she

was close to the end. One night I wanted to teach from home so I could be with her, but I was torn. I did not want to disappoint the students who were scheduled to be in the classroom that evening. I arranged for my daughter to stay with the dog and, when I went to class, all the students were on Zoom though none of them let me know. I was upset, more with myself than with them, for not just doing what I needed to do for myself. I felt, in that moment, completely unappreciated, and I did not know why I was giving so much. My dog died the next day in my arms.

I think many faculty hit that wall like I did at some point in teaching during COVID-19. In LDL, I heard story after story from faculty who showed up and sacrificed so much for their students, but felt it was never enough to help them all. Many students were having such a difficult time as well. I knew in my heart my students were not being dismissive of my needs—I just could not be “Super Teacher” anymore.

The next week, one of the students on Zoom poked me a little because I was late getting something into Canvas. I stopped. I was not angry. I took a breath and chose my words deliberately, “I know things are difficult for you all right now. And I totally get it. But what I need you to know is that students are not the only ones who are living in a pandemic. I’m living in a pandemic, too, which means that I am experiencing many of the traumas you are. And this week, this week, I’m having a really hard time. I need the grace we promised each other at the beginning of the semester.” My honesty shocked the students, but it also changed our relationship. I always really wanted to be very strong for my students, to be somebody they could lean on. But, you know, it worked out for me to be a human, too.

That class required me to be fully present. I was still not always at my best when I was fully present, but it challenged me to be mindful about being in the moment, about being person-centered instead of content-centered. And the students still learned. In fact, many of them thrived. We celebrated our resilience and our community on that last day of class.

So much happened that fall; it was a bit of a blur. It was the pandemic part three, and it kept dragging on.

## **January-February 2021**

### ***Catherine***

Like most faculty, I successfully navigated the fall semester, although it was exhausting in ways that we did not fully appreciate at the time. The pandemic was still going full force and, along with students, we were feeling the strain. Nevertheless, I was cautiously optimistic about starting the spring semester since I thought I had achieved a certain equilibrium despite the overall stress. The winter break provided a much needed respite from the long haul of the previous semesters. However, the contentious national politics became more divisive, culminating in the unbelievable assault of the Capitol on January 6. Regardless, I was determined to start fresh, and

I felt ready to power up for the spring.

That feeling was short-lived, however, when I tried to set up my courses in early January. I had taught these courses before, so I had a false sense of security. Faculty were now forced to use Canvas as our LMS, which was exponentially more complex than Tracs. Despite having attended training and seeking self-help online, I was totally lost once I attempted to use the platform. Looking at the Canvas homepage on my computer screen, my emotional reaction was immediate and intense; I was overwhelmed and could not process what I needed to do. In my entire career, I had never felt so helpless, which was beyond distressing, not to mention the added strain of starting my classes in a few weeks. In addition to my synchronous course, I was teaching an online course and developing another online course for the first time. I was quite excited about this new direction; however, there were complications. I was using new editions of texts, which were substantially revised, requiring major updates in all courses. Further, I could not find the online course template I was supposed to use since it had not been migrated from the previous LMS as planned.

It was a perfect “virtual” storm, and the computer screen was now a source of extreme stress (panic, really), far outweighing any prior experience. IT support had limited its hours and had long wait times. I had so much work to do in so little time with no viable help. This was a completely alien place to be, especially for a seasoned faculty member. We are accustomed to being competent and in control. I do not remember ever feeling so hopeless in my job. I had to take stock. Eventually, through multiple inquiries, I located support through Distance Learning. I booked individual consultations with instructional designers daily, often multiple ones. I slowly, very slowly, so slowly began to find my way. Time is such a limited resource, and figuring out all the correct little buttons to click on hidden pages in Canvas was consuming massive amounts of it. My skills gradually increased, although I still needed occasional help, and I never felt fully confident with this new LMS.

By early February, however, my classes were successfully launched, although I was still taking it one day at a time with Canvas. The pandemic was wearing on all of us, and the grinding stress of it was impacting students, although their effort to stay focused and move forward was clearly evident. Their patience with my technology fumbles on Zoom and Canvas was commendable, and I appreciated them as fellow learners more than ever. With a different schedule, I was able to attend LDL occasionally; seeing friendly familiar faces and hearing similar, relatable stories was like an oasis amidst the endless expanse of the minutia of Canvas. And the PSWG continued to enhance our collaborative project.

Then, on February 13, out of nowhere, Texas was hit by Winter Storm Uri, widely described in the media as a 500-year event. This unprecedented ice storm caused a one-week man-made failure of the independent power grid with massive outages across the state. The extreme frigid conditions lasted for five days. The university, along with everything else, shut down. Classes were cancelled for a week and a half, although the storm’s immediate negative impact lasted much longer. I personally experienced lengthy intermittent (eight to 14 hour) power outages

each day, as well as a boil-water notice for several additional days. As it turned out, my situation was far better than that of many other Texans.

This crisis resulted in exponential stress and immense disruption that took a physical and emotional toll on everyone beyond the already exhausting pandemic and unrelenting social turmoil. It seemed to drain any remaining reserves of energy and optimism. It was a devastating blow to students, since they not only felt the accumulated strain, but many experienced personal and familial problems, one after another. They encountered financial losses, property damage, displacement, internet disruptions, and on and on. I reached out to let them know that I was available to offer academic support, and I received a flood of replies. While they were managing to cope with it all, they appreciated my reassurances. I streamlined assignments, extended deadlines, offered alternative formats, and increased flexibility, all of which helped them to stay on track.

Along with fellow faculty, I struggled to adjust my course calendars and content due to lost time (two cancelled class sessions) and connectivity (many students were without reliable power or steady internet) while maintaining academic standards. The students were remarkably adaptive, attending class, submitting papers, and communicating with me, but they seemed depleted. The small adjustments made a big impact; we were able to regroup and to persevere. But the latest iteration of “new COVID-19 normal” was now “after the storm, new COVID-19 normal.” I could hardly believe that, in response to these necessary adjustments, I would have to redo my Canvas sites after I had worked so diligently to get them organized in the first place. In addition to having to post revised assignments, rubrics, due dates, etc., Canvas has many specific embedded links that had to be corrected for each separate change. This is an extremely tedious process, and there is no room for error. It was back to the doldrums of Canvas for me.

Meanwhile, faculty do more than teach. I had kept up my high level of service, yet I needed to attend to my scholarship. I had numerous writing projects and looming deadlines. So, at the end of February, I joined another FD learning community, Write Watchers. They met twice a week for focused writing time and mutual support. I directed my energy toward short-term goals. Since Candace conducted the sessions, it allowed us to meet regularly to work on this article. I continued to attend occasional LDL sessions and FD workshops, and the PSWG remained a bright spot of collegiality. Unbelievably, there were still several weeks to mid-term, yet it felt as if the semester should be long over.

### ***Candace***

Spring tends to bring a feeling of hopefulness, and that is how my spring started. We had news that we might be able to get the vaccine, even on our campus. We continued our programming. I did a few workshops for those faculty who had not been teaching in the fall, or because they were moving to Zoom teaching. I ran a workshop for faculty on how to document the impact of COVID-19 on performance reports—these are the types of events I was used to working on prior to COVID-19. It looked as if we were moving out of the pandemic and reclaiming our lives.

That was, until the snowstorm.

In mid-February, Texas experienced one of the most severe snowstorms in the state's history. The snow and ice storm crippled our power infrastructure. Classes were canceled for a week and a half. Most faculty, staff, and students went without power and water for at least a day or two. Some were without power and water for a week or more. On top of the pandemic. We had thought a pandemic was bad, but now, all at once, we were living on the bottom two rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: physiological and safety needs.

Since communication was difficult because of the power outages, news about students was infrequent. In addition, many faculty and staff were tending to their own broken pipes and power/water problems. As I regained power and internet, I started hearing stories about students not having enough food and living in apartments with no power or water. On the Saturday after the storm, I started emailing people to try to arrange a presentation with our Vice President of Student Affairs and a faculty member in our counseling program. They graciously agreed and, with two days' notice, I hosted a Zoom presentation called "After the Storm: What Students Need Right Now."

Almost 200 faculty and staff attended that presentation, faculty and staff who had gone without power and water themselves. So many of the attendees and presenters had some type of damage they had to tend to. However, they put aside their own needs to find out how to support student needs as we came back from the storm. Virtual or not, our resilient community of care showed up.

## **March 2021**

### ***Catherine***

Now, here I am, exactly one year later, Friday, March 12, staring at my computer screen again and once more looking out the window in disbelief. Rather than seeing an email portending a stressful change or attending an unsettling meeting, I am reading a message of hope: confirmation for my first COVID-19 vaccine appointment. Instead of looking out of my office window, I am at home, still quarantined. My only contacts are via Zoom—no hallway, no workroom, no running into a helpful colleague in the hallway.

So many times, like so many other people, I often wondered if I would ever get here. I managed to adapt, like everyone else, and to not burn out in the process. I enjoyed feeling more technologically skillful, despite the tedium of Canvas, but still missed the pre-pandemic sense of control and competence that most academics take for granted. I overcame so many obstacles with the support of trusted colleagues and friends. I especially valued FD through chats with Candace, learning communities, and workshops as well as the PSWG collaboration. I acquired a more refined and humane sense of compassion for myself and for others, which I sincerely wanted to incorporate into my work.

This March, as last year, I worked through spring break, continuing to make course adjustments since we were still in the aftermath of the winter storm. I could barely stay one week ahead in my classes, and I was behind in my online course preparation. Students seemed to need more regular support, and providing it sufficiently through email or Zoom was an ongoing challenge. I had long ago given up on any attempt at structured time management since everything took twice as long electronically. I braced for what's next, accepting that the ever-evolving concept of "normal" was elusive.

This endless pandemic year taught me to pay attention to self-care. I scheduled walks in my daily planner and purchased a stand-up desk for the improvised office in my kitchen. I let go of any notions of how things were supposed to be, which was just the latest reminder of this constant life lesson. I taped a copy of the Serenity Prayer to my laptop and found myself relying on it like never before. At least for now, I finally felt centered in this unpredictable chaos. I applied the ecological model to my own life by constructing a supportive social environment and connecting to it frequently. Maybe almost forty years of being a social worker counts for something after all.

During the past year, I was often surprised by the intensity and duration of my emotional reactions. I finally worked through the grief that I had felt—but did not recognize—over hurts, losses, and disappointments. Like so many profound emotional transitions, once insight is acquired, the negative "charge" that I had been carrying for so long gradually dissipated. I have always regarded myself as a critical thinker and problem solver. I came to accept that some situations are not rational and cannot be changed. I redefined who I thought I was, what I thought I wanted, where I thought I belonged, and where I was going. Through this circuitous process, I arrived at my own personal developmental "new normal."

Despite it all, in many ways, I feel gratitude for this year of COVID-19. I would like to say that I have no regrets, but that would not be true. If I could do some things over, I would, although that is not how it works. I may have finally learned the lesson (or not) of letting go of expectations and perceived control in exchange for gaining a sense of acceptance and peace. I have a renewed awareness of belonging, even though it still feels tenuous at times. I once again look forward to another summer. Even with the continued uncertainty of COVID-19, I count my blessings every day. This time during summer break, I will most definitely turn off the computer. I plan to serenely contemplate the question posed by Mary Oliver (1990) at the end of her poem (my favorite), "The Summer Day": "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (p. 80).

### ***Candace***

Milestones are important. As I write these words, I think back on one year ago. For me, this year has been a tale of longing and belonging, of forming and transforming. I hate this pandemic. That we have lost people we love. That I cannot be with my friends to share music and meals. But I will never be the same. What I saw in the people that I worked with every day was selfless

service, love, generosity, community, a community as I have never experienced it before. Maybe I have always taken community for granted. Because my colleagues and students showed up for me, I know that I will never be the same, and I am happy about that. I saw faculty being brave in the classroom and showing up. Even though they were taking care of their own difficulties, they showed up for students. I saw administrators who showed up, working 14-hour days, every day, just to keep this university moving forward. I saw students show up for each other, and for me. As we all struggled, we just kept showing up and showing up and showing up. Maybe *showing up* is the real key to belonging—sometimes as the care-seeker, sometimes as the caregiver, and sometimes both at once. Maybe we just need to show up and ask, “How can I help?”

### **Conclusion**

Our shared reflection does not conclude; it continues. This may be the stopping point of our narrative, but it is not the end of our COVID-19 story. The pandemic rages on, both nationally and globally. While the country is ramping up vaccinations and adapting to this ever-evolving crisis (along with other ongoing crises), new virus variations emerge, and people question how to proceed among a maze of mixed messages. It is not clear when (or if) the pandemic will end, or whether the “newest normal” will just continue to be a moving target. While next year may be less “scary” than this one, it will still surely be full of uncertainty, confusion, and stress.

As our narrative conveys, the COVID-19 crisis was—and continues to be—a massive disrupter, in both constructive and destructive ways. These opposing forces actually work together to create productive change and growth. While this awareness represents well-established ancient wisdom, we learned it at a deep level through both our individual and shared personal experience. We both had to deconstruct our reality in the face of this crisis in order to reconstruct it in a more fruitful way. This was often a painful process, as growth can be; yet, in an ironic twist, COVID-19 pushed us both to more positive outcomes that we might otherwise have achieved.

The most profound of these unanticipated outcomes was our separate yet shared intention to pursue functional community and genuine belonging. In addition to providing mutual support, we took different paths to this ultimate goal. Candace created FD programs that met both her needs and those of faculty, and Catherine participated in these programs and created other opportunities. In this way, we built upon our previous selves as well as uncovered new desires, and found unexpected sources of support. It was not that COVID-19 changed everything, but it altered our reality enough to move us in unanticipated and innovative directions to meet this most basic human need to belong.

As former and current directors of FD, we propose that “belongingness” is a rich area for future research. While there is rapidly expanding multi-disciplinary scholarly literature on the impacts of COVID-19, there is an apparent dearth of research relevant to our narrative. Two immediate ideas emerge from our experience last year on potential research topics: 1) how FD can expand support beyond traditional programs and perhaps interface with social work’s natural fit in this



area and 2) how FD can facilitate building a sense of belonging among faculty that expands upon existing literature focused on faculty-student relating.

If our mid-March 2021 selves could talk to our mid-March 2020 selves, what would we say? What lessons have we learned? There is so much to convey from the vantage point of one year later. Mainly, no one has done a pandemic before (at least not like this one), and there is no guidebook or set of rules (at least not at present). We know for sure that there is no returning to the “old normal,” either individually, institutionally, or socially. In retrospect, we both learned that we should not wait for a crisis to seek what really matters. This is yet another reminder of connecting to ancient wisdom during crisis.

If we could recommend one thing that we hope our earlier selves might remember, what would it be? Connect with others, seek supportive communities, find compassionate people, cultivate these relationships, and pursue meaningful interactions. Know that you belong; *that place and those people* are out there, although you may need to initiate a community. Show up for others and for yourself. It is relationship that matters, and this critical support is there, even among professional colleagues in a big bureaucracy. People’s ability to give to each other is remarkable in that way. Then, trust that you will figure out this crisis and navigate it the best way that you can. Our shared story tells us that you (and we) will get through it and develop from it—together. As poet David Whyte (1997) so elegantly states, “There is no house like the house of belonging” (p. 4).

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