**Teaching Fellow Faculty in the Age of Corona: From Despair to Xanadu**

Michael Duggan

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I had this terrible miniature mole in the corner of my eye. It was less than half a millimeter in diameter—not much bigger than a pinhead. It was so small most people didn’t notice it. But I did. My life seemed perfect otherwise, but I was bothered by that damned mole. I went to an eye doctor the week before I was leaving town, to check it. My ophthalmologist assured me it was just a minor skin thing and not to worry. But still, I worried. So there I was in Palm Springs in my hotel room, staring at it for hours, fretting. It was February, and I take an annual pilgrimage, as many fortunate middle-aged gay men do, to my Mecca of Palm Springs to write for a week. The combination of sunshine, kitschy cynical décor mocking most every social institution you can think of, eccentric personalities draped in brightly colored, mismatched florescent prints, and laughing senior retiree population provides the perfect inspiration for any artist. I suspect that somehow Dante's Inferno was written there.

There was white noise on the radio about people getting sick in China. “Poor them,” I thought. I even joked with my husband, Wayne, while Facetiming with him over my morning mimosa. “Maybe the sickness will reach our borders, and we will turn into the Walking Dead,” I proclaim. I say it that joking tone one uses when they believe deep down nothing bad can happen. No, in my mind, my priorities were writing my last chapter of my new book, finding a good place for Happy Hour at 2 pm (“Why wait?” say the Palm Springs residents, who take pride in their early happy hours), and perhaps taking a long walk at the end of the day to watch the majestic sunset against the backdrop of the San Jacinto mountains. Meanwhile, somewhere in the back of my mind, I worry about my eye mole.

Fast forward three weeks later. I’m home and having dinner with my husband at our favorite Mexican restaurant. Both of us had been sent home from our jobs with the expectation we would be working remotely for the next two weeks. This change concerned us. “How will we conduct meetings? Teach classes? Talk to people?” We were worried, but the tone of our voices was, again, the one you take when you’re mildly concerned, but not *really* concerned. We’re having shots and laughing, “This may be the last meal we can have out for a while!” as our state was about to go to home quarantine. We figured this situation would last a couple of weeks—a month tops—and then we’d go about our lives. The eye mole is still irritating me, but less so.

Fast forward two months later. Shit has gotten real now. Thousands of people are reported as infected daily; hundreds of people are dying world-wide. We’re both working out of our two-room basement—one in each room. For me, I successfully stagger through the last six weeks of counseling appointments using Zoom and phone calls, while my husband finds ways to conduct his managerial responsibilities through a combination of remote meetings and email. Since I was teaching a class in interpersonal communications for students with autism that semester, the transition is pretty smooth. My students and I already have a good rapport by that point in the semester, so it doesn't seem overly complicated to get everyone talking. My counseling appointments are also pretty easy—people are sad they are home but thinking this weird life has to end any day now, so in the meantime, they take advantage of the free time and stream their favorite series on Netflix.

But then the spring semester ends in May, and now just a week later, I am set to teach a class to faculty and staff on best practices for teaching students with disabilities. I’m suddenly filled with panic and anxiety. The course is one I’ve taught in some variation hundreds of times in my twenty-five years as a counselor for students with disabilities, so I’m confident in the content. But how do I do it remotely? I don’t know how to use these technological tools well. I don’t even know how I'm going to approach things like group discussions and projects. I worry about looking like a fool to my colleagues, people I know, and respect. I keep seeing this image of a toy monkey, with symbols smashing and later exploding in my head.

The weekend before my class is to begin, a group of police officers in Minneapolis viciously murder George Floyd, and the outcry is immediate. People are outraged, myself included, and the country takes a very somber tone. Stories of other African American travesties flood social media, and I’m disgusted with myself for never having taken the time to read about their injustices before. Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky; Ahmaud Arbery in Glynn County, Georgia; Tony McDade in Tallahassee, Florida; Dion Johnson in Phoenix, Arizona. I am filled with sadness. Everyone (at least anyone with a heart and soul) is. The tone of the world is one of despair, and my class starts on Monday. As a Charles Nelson Reilly–esque instructor who tries to put humor in most everything I do, I selfishly think about my class. I’m already nervous about teaching remotely and sink into my chair as I realize my greatest defense mechanism for nerves—cynical humor—is not at my disposal. The image in my mind has now turned to one of a car exploding. I couldn’t care less about my eye mole.

The day of my first class arrives. On my computer screen, I see digital box after digital box pop open—I’m guessing fifteen to twenty windows total. My laptop’s little green light is turned on, and now I know they’re all looking at me. It’s a few minutes before class starts, so I mute my microphone. Their faces tell me exactly what I’m thinking—the world is upside down and will be for a very, very long time. What’s worse, we know many more in the world are suffering to a far higher degree than we are, and this realization sinks us even lower. Our entire collective concept of what reality is has been busted apart like a crash-test dummy flying through a car windshield.

I’m so nervous at that point I can feel my teeth clenching together. My right foot is kicking back and forth like a cat’s tail. My voice cracks. “Hello . . . my name is Dr. Michael Duggan. Many of you I already know me, but I’m looking forward to getting to know all of you better over the next eight weeks . . .” Then I’m silent. What the hell do I say now? I freeze up. Thankfully, a piece of advice I picked up somewhere in my life resonates in the back of my head. “If you don’t know what to say, then talk about how you feel. Be honest.” So I do just that. I tell everyone I’m filled with sadness over the murder of George Floyd. I also share how incredibly depressed I am now that my mind has accepted that this virus is not going away for a long time, and worry about whether things will ever be like they used to be. In this moment of stream-of-consciousness sharing, I also say how badly I could go for some Popeye’s chicken to self-medicate the pain away. Everyone laughs.

This response catches me off guard. I didn’t intend to be funny. I genuinely spoke from my heart and didn’t let my mind filter what was coming out. I continue with my word vomit while going through course objectives and guidelines, but a part of my mind is processing: *People are filled with sadness and pain, but they also need to feel human. We’re all becoming numb to our worlds and losing touch with our humanity. They need to be able to feel sad and outraged, but they need to feel alive, too. They need to laugh and smile a little bit. They need to feel connected.* So after all my course content crapola, I allow myself to feel more human and now start letting my mind work in tandem with my heart's feelings. “This world sucks right now. There is so much sadness and pain and so many things out of our control, but we can control how we are in this class. We can make this a place where we can talk about improving our teaching and interacting with students and making it a place where we can express our sadness and joys together. We can forget about anything else for three hours a week and be present for each other together. We can be here together, and you can watch me pour my heart out and make a fool out of myself week after week.” The words come out of myself, and I crap myself a little bit. Thankfully, my monitor of black Zoom windows fills with half-smiles. *Christ, I can get through this*, I think. I review my class recording afterward (each session is taped for people who miss class). I realize my toilet in the bathroom behind me is coming through clearer on the screen than my own face.

Fast forward to week two. In an effort, to put people into small group chat rooms, I somehow kick everyone out of the digital course shell with an inability to rejoin (to this day, I have no idea how I did this). A colleague and friend message me on Facebook, encouraging me to create an entirely new course shell and email everyone telling them to join. “Please click here to join!” I frantically type out to everyone in an email. Sorry I fucked up!” I confess. I realize in my frantic pace to send the email I make a reply-all to an old email that includes my boss as well as the dean of distance learning. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I shout. My elderly neighbor knocks on my window to make sure everything is okay. I try to explain to her what I did but don’t even know what words to use. *She now thinks I'm nuts too*, I think. My mental image of the car exploding has become one of the entire planet Earth exploding and then melting like a piece of old film in a projector.

Everyone returns to my newly created chat room, thanks to my friend’s advice. We’re all laughing. Hard. I notice a couple of people have tears in their eyes; I have tears in my eyes, too. It isn’t that we’re sad, not exactly. I think for many of us it’s the first time we’ve had a good belly laugh in weeks. It feels like when they move from black-and-white projection to color in *The Wizard of Oz*. For a second, we forgot about the whole pandemic nightmare and could have a genuine laugh. Christ, it felt good.

During these weeks I am still working as a counselor for students, using Zoom and phone appointments. Students are generally depressed about things or anxious they might catch COVID-19 but survive. What an awful deal for them—they’re missing out on prom, graduation parties, award ceremonies—all these things were significant events in my life that I look back on fondly. Still, the work load is not too heavy for me in terms of counseling skills; it’s mostly listening. Then I have my first student who contracts the virus, and I’m filled with worry for them, but provide listening and support. Next, I have a student whose parent not only got the virus but has died from it. I’ve met this parent, and I’m shaken—what do you even say to someone? I’ve lost a parent myself but never in this way—I can’t even imagine the pain they are experiencing. I lean on my previous counseling training and experience doing everything I can to show I’m here and genuinely care about the student. This all makes me so sad inside—how is this even humanly possible? To manage my feeling of being emotionally overwhelmed, I focus on thinking of ways to reach out to other students if others are feeling alone, and I try to concentrate on my class when I need a different mental distraction.

Fast forward to week four. I’m starting to find my groove, and the class is building a nice rapport. People are logging in five or ten minutes before class to greet each other. I still use the first ten minutes of each class for pleasant hellos, but people want even more time to chat. This beginning-class routine gives me hope. In a lecture on psychiatric disabilities, I do something I’ve never done before; I talk about my own experiences having a father who struggled with psychiatric issues. Being so open about my life makes me feel incredibly nervous, but I also feel safe sharing it as I talk to them from my own home. Classmates are moved by my self-disclosure and share their own stories—ones I suspect they are openly talking about in an educational format for the first time, too. It feels cathartic but cleansing at the same time.

Afterward, in an effort to break some of the heaviness of the virtual room, I share my love for the 1980s disco-bomb film *Xanadu* and the eternal perfection that will always be Oliva Newton-John. I share my gospel of *Xanadu*, explaining how this tacky, horribly rated movie inspired me as a child to one day become a Greek muse and the positive impact that seed of creativity had when it was planted in my young, gay brain. “The lesson here,” I preach, “is that this attempt at art may be something that others would label as ridiculous and awful, but it can still have the positive impact it had on me. And if that's true for a ‘bad’ movie, maybe this lesson is true for most anything.” My students laugh, and I close my sermon.

Fast forward to week six. It’s the week of the Fourth of July, which is a holiday in the United States. The class falls on July 3, so we’re not sure what to do here. I think the class is canceled that day since the fourth is over the weekend, but everyone still wants to meet even though we don’t have to. We’re all sad knowing our original plans for this holiday weekend are long gone, and we’re all now stuck at home. We agree to meet virtually. We joke about what nutritionally awful things we would have eaten and drunk and what fun we would have had with our friends and family. We smile, we learn, we share something more significant. I think most everyone was glad we decided to meet that day.

Fast forward to the final week. Somehow the course has been a success. I manage to cover all the pedagogical and relationship-based content I hoped to over the previous eight weeks. In our final class, we do a post-game Kahoot (like an online *Jeopardy!*-type game) using the same questions I used in week one, and we see a marked improvement in everyone’s score. I present a cheesy digital graduation certificate to each student with things like “Greatest looking drinks while Zooming” and “Best-sounding laughter” while playing “Pomp and Circumstance” on my iPhone in the background. It’s a pleasant experience. We say our goodbyes, and the little black Zoom monitors start to disappear one by one. As each student departs, I feel like Wilbur the pig as the baby spiders from Charlotte's egg sac leave him forever to find a new life, and again my eyes well up. I realize this course did as much good for me as it did for the students, maybe more. I felt connected to something bigger than myself for eight weeks, and I realized how badly I needed it.

I shut down my monitor and reflect. I’m reminded that even though the entire world is upside down, the human ability to create connections with one another does not require an exchange of physical space and oxygen. Teaching is one of humankind’s most significant art forms and can transcend almost anything. This isn’t to say my summer class was at that grand a level, but it reminded me of what we are capable of. I also learned how to teach without kicking everyone out of the classroom when establishing small groups, and how not to set the camera on my laptop so it zoomed in on my toilet more than my face. These were small victories. I also stopped caring about my eye mole.