
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

How to Live In a Time of the Coronavirus

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, March 18th, 2020

My daughter's school is closed until further notice, like many other schools across the country. Colleges and universities are also temporarily closing their doors on in-person classrooms and are uploading class materials on remote websites for students to continue their study.

Social and sporting events are also cancelled. The 2020 NBA season is suspended, and the NCAA basketball tournament followed suit. The NHL also suspended its season. Wait, back up a minute, what? Why cancel March Madness? Easy, you want to contain the spread of the coronavirus, lowering and ultimately flattening the curve, i.e. reducing the number of infections from person-to-person contact.

Last week, I did my part in flattening the curve. I cancelled a poetry reading, one that I was excited to participate in because I was planning to read new material from my latest book, *The Doctor Will Fix It*, a collection of poems about raising a biracial daughter in Trump America. I guess the coronavirus trumps Donald Trump.

A few days later, I cancelled dinner with students from a class I was teaching, Discourses on the Viet Nam/American War, where we had been looking at the American War in Viet Nam from various perspectives. The dinner was supposed to be a culmination of the hard work of reading, writing, discussing, listening, and paying attention with heart and mind to the diverse and human stories that emerged from that war.

No one came out of this cancelling of normal life unscathed. My students felt bad. The poetry organizers felt bad. And I felt simply awful.

I tried to explain the reasons behind my decision: I'm not an isolated entity, my wife is pregnant with our second child and the choices I make in my life could have dire consequences for the lives of those I'm responsible for and whom I love dearly, so some sacrifices have to be made in these trying, perilous times.

Still, it didn't take away from the saltiness I kept tasting after I shared the unfortunate news with students and poetry organizers, the feeling that I had disappointed them, that I had let them down.

Now, my wife, daughter, and I are laying low at home. We go to the shop for groceries, the local park for outdoor fun, and the neighborhood for easy strolling and conversations. At night, my wife and I are understandably nervous, sharing our what-if thoughts. What if one of us got infected with the virus? What if my wife and our little baby are exposed to the virus at the hospital? What if our

local hospital is not equipped for the coronavirus and we are sent to Albany, which is forty minutes from where we live? What if my wife's mother and father, who are in the vulnerable age category, cannot visit us and we have to care for both a newborn and a four-year-old, while my wife is still recovering?

I'm not a religious person, but before going to bed in the past few nights I close my eyes and pray to Lord Buddha for protection, to friends and family who are long gone, like my friend April, my *Lok-Yiey* and *Lok-Ta*, my *ma* and *pa*, seeking comfort and assurance from the spiritual world. In a world where most of my friends are either atheist or agnostic, I feel it's sacrilegious to pray. But praying doesn't hurt anyone; it only increases the breadth and depth of the soul for it to live in humility and goodness in this world.

And I'm not letting the coronavirus infect how I care for my wife and love my children. I'm listening to the old heartbeat that I didn't know existed in me 'til I held my infant daughter for the first time in my arms almost five years ago, when I looked into her tiny wrinkled face and knew I would do all within my power to protect and love her.

So, in light of this COVID-19 pandemic, we try to leave our fears and anxieties at the door and lead a normal life for our daughter. The other day, we played school at home. Our daughter played the teacher and we were her students. We were told by our "teacher" to color a Christmas book. I colored Santa Claus in red suit, black belt, and black boots, carrying over his shoulder a green bag full of presents. There was a kind of silence that I didn't know existed before; it was peaceful, full of bright hope for the future, as my wife and I used crayons to color Santa, Mrs. Claus, and the reindeer. My wife, while coloring Rudolph, looked up and smiled, "This is really soothing."

And how soothing it is for me to see how much my daughter has grown. She is smart, funny, generous in heart and mind, so beautiful in soul. And her command of the English language astounds me. One time, while watching Ryan's Toys Review on YouTube, my daughter said, "Mom, Dad, could I have some goldfish? I'm famished." Where did a four-year-old get that word, "famished," from?

To occupy one of our days, my wife and daughter wrote a picture book called "The Sunny Town." In this children's book, which comprises two pages of words and drawings, I read about a town where "All the happiness was gone. Everything was the opposite in Sunny Town. The People were frowning. Even the sun was frowning." I was saddened by the world my daughter created, one that I imagined was influenced by our current anxiety about the state of the world and its future, in spite of attempts to shield our child from it. I said, "It's a good book, honey. Keep writing. The story is not over yet. We have to have a happy ending!"



The Sunny Town books by the author's daughter

Lately, I've been physically affectionate with my family. I rub my wife's neck, massage her back, ask how she is doing in the morning. She asks with suspicion, "What's going on?" I answer, "Nothing. You're a good mom, and I am lucky to have you as the mother of our child."

This Sunday morning, my daughter came into the kitchen, pulled up a step stool next to the island, and said, "Let's bake cookies!" So, with my wife's help, my four-year-old mixed flour, butter, and brown sugar. I cracked an egg. My wife placed dough on the sheet and turned on the oven. Once the cookies cooled down, we ate. Our daughter smiled, said, "This is the best cookie in the whole

wide world.”

Laughing, I went down on my knees, asked my daughter to come up to me. She ran, threw her body against mine, and she gave me a hard tight squeeze, arms wrapped around me, hair in my face, warmth breath on my neck. I told her what I'd been wanting to tell her for some time now, what I had been saying in my actions towards her, in spite of not knowing what the next month or two will hold for us, “Mommy and Daddy love you very much. You know that, Sweetie. You know that.”

(Featured photo is Ken Volante's “On the Edge of the Deep Green Sea.” Used by permission of the artist.)

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