

# Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship

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Volume 5 *Through the Portal: Coronavirus  
Writing During Uncertain Times Letter from the  
Editors*

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Article 3

3-2021

## Coronavirus Notes: Stitching a New Garment

Rick Ayers

University of San Francisco, rick.ayers1704@gmail.com

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### Citation Information

Ayers, Rick (2021) "Coronavirus Notes: Stitching a New Garment," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship*: Vol. 5 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jips/vol5/iss1/3>

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## Coronavirus Notes: Stitching a New Garment

Rick Ayers

Teacher Education Department, University of San Francisco

*“We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”*

*–Sonya Renee Taylor*

What can I add? What has not been tried? Everyone is experiencing some version of this pandemic. It is at once a moment that is absolutely unique and terrifying as well as a time when writing and personal expression has exploded, descriptive writing, political analysis writing, personal writing. I’m not sure if there is anything new to say.

My eye was caught by a piece in the *New York Times* on Netherlands’ diaries during the Nazi occupation. It pointed out that Anne Frank in Amsterdam was not the only one who kept a diary in these years. She was heeding the call from the Dutch education minister broadcasting from London. “Preserve your diaries and letters”, he said “only if we succeed in bringing this simple, daily material together in overwhelming quantity, only then will the scene of this struggle for freedom be painted in full depth and shine.”

That beautiful admonition encourages us to write what we see, to write contingently and incompletely. Who knows? You might come up with something worth saving, you might mine these notes later for the gems, whether they are insights that are prescient or comically off base. But I would encourage you to make your contribution, don’t be passive to the scribblers who are already out there.

Many of us feel unable to write much of anything. We are distracted, or grieving, or anxious – and sometimes bored and overstimulated at the same time. I don’t have a very strong writing urge right now yet I feel a responsibility. How to capture these uncompleted thoughts, this liminal consciousness? So, keep a diary, a journal, reflections. Write on the back of to-do lists.

You don’t have to write *about* the coronavirus, but write *in the time of* coronavirus

One thing to be sure of, you do not need to feel obliged to make final or definitive analyses. We are trained in academia to mouth settled truths, to build essays around thesis statements rather than generative questions. But now especially, we need to consider the importance of writing not what we know but what we don’t know, writing to figure things out. Certainty is not necessary.

Sometimes I just want to capture the strangeness of life in Coronavirus Bay Area. On one level things look normal. People moving around, though many fewer. Face masks. Demonstrations by car caravan.

In wondering how this pandemic reframes our world, I thought first of the insightful piece by Arundhati Roy

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to 'normality,' trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Everyone has noticed it. The birds chirping. Squirrels dancing. Bees bobbing over flowers. Nature has told us, "Shut up, slow down, stop." Somehow this little set of RNA inside a protein shell has forced us to go small, stay local. There is beauty here. And a question: did we always need this economic activity, consuming resources and spewing CO2 at white-hot speed? Could we live differently?

Everyone can begin to write. What about poetry? Of course, reading and listening to poetry but also writing poetry. Maybe you thought you were not a poet. I find people writing poetry more and more. Found poems, group poems, short narrative poems.

Then again, this time forces us to think about, and perhaps address, things we generally push to the back of our minds. Death for instance. Being in our 70's, my partner Ilene and I have to recognize that this thing could hit, and hit hard, with little warning. All of us are doing nervous calculations: if we get sick, when to go to the hospital; if in hospital, should we approve the use of ventilator; what should we discuss ahead of time with our children that we won't be able to say if we are packed off to an ICU?

And finally this: starting in the moment, journaling, poetry, whatever – can lead you to more formal writing, essays, opinion pieces, and journal articles. The following examples show how the work I have been doing with University of San Francisco (USF) colleagues at the Mexican border started as journal, really therapy, and ended up in three op-eds – published on Medium.com and distributed more broadly to the media – and will later be journal pieces.

Here is an example. I went with the Bay Area Border Relief group to Matamoros, Mexico, across the border from south Texas, to a refugee camp with over 1,000 people living in tents. Fleeing violence at home and blocked from even applying for asylum by Trump policies, the families are barely surviving. I organized some modest education experiences for the kids, who have no school, and noticed how highly organized these people were – building hygiene, health care, nutrition projects – showing how community and humanity can shine through in the worst circumstances.

I know aid workers regularly deal with families in crisis and they are, in some way, used to it. But I have to admit: I was traumatized, haunted by pictures of children I had met, played with. Knowing they were still back there, still wandering around the camp with repressive governments threatening behind, cartel gang members threatening on the side, US border agents threatening in front.

One thing I did was write, notes, memories, letters, and journals. I had to start by describing what I saw, experienced, felt. Only later did I try to make some meaning of the whole thing. This is what I mean by “writing into the contradiction.” This was not a matter of having simple, authoritative answers. This writing was contingent, exploratory, and unfinished. Less of a sermon. More of a scream for help.

I collaborated with Belinda Hernandez-Arriaga and Amy Argenal from the solidarity contingent to write this first piece, which begins with my own nightmare memory:

### **An Appeal to Humanity – Close the Camps**

One child

Marisita is eight years old, wears t-shirts that say things like “Make my Day” and “Too Cute.” She is obsessed with birds and often does her best to draw pictures of them. Generally shy, she has recently pushed herself to make friends and has actually become a leader of her posse of girls. They invent games, often ones that involve movement and rhythm, such as leapfrog and a hand slapping song. She has recently had a growth spurt so her pants are all a bit short at her ankles. When in school, she focuses closely on the teacher’s words and works hard on the assignments. She has dreams.

This description could fit any number of girls in the US, those in wealthy suburban districts as well as students in rural or inner-city schools. But Marisita is different from any of these girls because she resides in Matamoros, a hundred feet from the Rio Grande river in southern Texas, confined to a refugee camp that is the result of the US government’s so-called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), better known as “[remain in Mexico](#).” This new rule has slammed the door on asylum seekers, forcing them to scratch out an existence on the edge of disaster with no end in sight.

After that, when parents in desperation started sending some children across unaccompanied, we developed a second Medium piece, which begins like this:

### **The Children of Camp One, Matamoros, Mexico**

. . . The calls began coming in to us at Bay Area Border Relief (BABR) Wednesday night. Four children from Camp One had been forced to walk alone on the long bridge over the Rio Grande to turn themselves in to Border Patrol agents. Step by step, young children leaving their parents to be unaccompanied minors in the United States so they can survive. The cries of the parents are beyond desperate, they are anguished, inconsolable and completely heartbroken to have to say goodbye and

watch their children take the steps that may force them apart for years, maybe even forever.

And finally, we put together a third Medium focused particularly on COVID, starting:

**An Easter COVID-19 wish: human solidarity with refugees at the border**

Death, hunger, illness and separation of families weaken these refugees and put them in danger . . . Camp life is a grueling discourse of survival that is never predictable. Every day there are new twists and turns in the cruelty of MPP. But what no one, including those in camp, could predict was COVID-19.

What I hope to communicate to you here is that your experience now, your unfinished and jumbled thoughts, are exactly where you should start. Capture the now. Then take time to let that writing sit, to think about it. What the young poets call “marinating on it.” Then return to the writing and rewrite, try to make some sense of it. Or don’t make sense – why should we feel that there is any coherent or comprehensive claim we can make just now? We are under occupation by this virus, just as the Dutch were under occupation, and our task is to capture the moment, look up in wonder and confusion and rage. And then pass it on.