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A Reflection on Writing in the Time of COVID-19

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When the pandemic hit and San Francisco's Mayor ordered us to shelter in place on March 16th 2020, I felt fear and dread, bordering on panic. The panic grew from an understanding that the shutdown of daily life—no more in-person school for my kids, no more in-person teaching for me, no more playdates, dinners out, no more *shaking hands*—would be a reality for months if not longer. Then came the masks, the massive layoffs, the mass death.

And so, I wake up every morning knowing that we are the lucky ones. My children are not sick. I am not sick. I still have a job. But knowing these facts doesn't make pandemic life easier in the minute-to-minute lived reality, especially when time seems to stretch like an elastic band, then stand still.

In the beginning, I comforted myself with the idea that the cessation of ordinary life would give me the time and space that I needed to make real progress on my book, which is due to my editor in April 2021. That may sound far away, but ask anyone who has ever faced down a book deadline and they will tell you that less than a year feels like tomorrow.

But what it takes to write a book: sustained concentration and quiet time for thought and reflection—not simply dead time—has proved elusive. I became, in effect, a home-school parent and then a camp counselor to a 9 and 11 year-olds. My clients, whom I represent in the clinical work that I do with my law students at the University of San Francisco's Criminal and Juvenile and Racial Justice Clinics, still had pressing legal problems to address and try to resolve. Bracing for pay cuts I knew were coming, I accepted paid consulting work, which has been fascinating, financially beneficial, but also, of course, time consuming.

Maybe hardest of all, I have no home office and can rarely access my office in the law school. There is no door I can close to be alone with my books, papers, and my thoughts. Instead, I sit at the kitchen table and hope today is the day I can keep my snacking within reasonable limits.

On the days when I am alone—my children are with their father half of the time--I promise myself I will get down to it. And I do, but not in the way that I thought. I am not writing 1,000 words a day. Or even 100. What I am doing though, is interviews.

My book is about ambitious mothers. And so, I have been talking to them. Almost 40 now. Of all ages and professions. Of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations. Single, married, divorced, widowed. In rural and urban areas throughout the United States.

When I set out to write the book in *Before Times*, I assumed that I would travel to meet these women. Now we meet on zoom. I listen as they describe their childhoods, formative experiences, the examples set by their own mothers, their challenges and triumphs, their hopes for their children.

Because these interviews take place in the time of COVID, they have been relatively easy to schedule. No one has anywhere to go anymore. Everyone has more time to reflect. We can talk for hours and over a period of days. Sometimes we do.

These women, strangers most of them, have taken on an outsized presence in my life and in my writing mind. They make me appreciate that there is a larger community out there: mothers with dreams and a determination to seek excellence, to advance in our professions and do the work that makes them feel most passionate and alive. Even and maybe especially in the time of COVID. These working mothers make the book feel important and real even though I have not yet woven in their stories. They recommit me to the project. They recommit me to my own ambition.

That ambition, my ambition, ultimately is to write and to write well. With these women behind me and beside me, on my computer screen and in my head, I believe I will.