**Reflecting on COVID-19—from the computer, from the head of the Center for Bioethics & Health Law, from the heart, March 24 – April 3, 2020**

March 24, 2020 (after 9 days of physical distancing)

I remember the first time our Center gathered following 9/11. I introduced our Bioethics Grand Rounds speaker on September 20 saying how good it was to be together. Perhaps sounding a bit too grand, I said that continuing the work that we do was an important response to the attacks of 9/11. Coming to work, caring for patients, teaching our students, examining ethical concerns arising from our practices, technologies, and our embodied, mortal human condition—doing our work *was* a response to terrorist attacks on our lives and way of life.

Now, since being in the workplace is not essential, we cannot "go in" to work. Though it's the nature and location of the work—not the people—that's relevant to determining what is essential, workers are termed "essential personnel," or not.

Bioethics has worked hard to establish itself as essential to clinical care, health policy, and research. To learn about what-we're-talking-about—and to gain credibility and respect of our colleagues—we've needed to be in the clinic or the lab, to be on site where the questions arise and decisions need to be made.

But it's true that today our location in the workplace doesn't matter. Except for those of us who are also clinicians or scientists, working on the "frontlines," "in the trenches" of the battle to beat back this novel coronavirus and preserve the health and safety of those of us sheltering at home, we can work "virtually."

But so many people are learning that their workplace does matter. The place, or at least being with the other people there, make the work more fun, provide some necessary distraction, prevent the rumination and going in circles that can happen when we work alone. Interaction sparks creativity, fuels problem-solving. Working together, intellectually or physically, there is virtually nothing we can't tackle! How quickly we can idealize our workplaces when we are forced to work virtually. Maybe this reflection on work and workplace is an attempt to focus on something other than the existential threat presented by this virus.

We talked about work and workplaces following 9/11 too. People commented about how an attack on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, places where so many people worked, was a particularly anti-American attack: an attack on people working, pursuing the American dream. (More cynically, since then, we might term it an attack on the particularly American version of the military-industrial complex. Since then, some of us have become more thoughtful about working toward the American dream and more cognizant of how many people that dream has not only left behind, but explicitly excluded and exploited.) But at the time, 9/11 was an especially awful attack on people at work, people from all walks of life, who were going about their business, making a living, trying to support what mattered to them and their families.

I learned about 9/11 at work. The woman who told me about it died yesterday. I learned about her death in an email that specified COVID-19 wasn't the cause.

People die all the time, of all sorts of things. I thought of that on 9/12, too. Perhaps I felt a little smugly liberal. It was easy, living in Pittsburgh far away from particulate debris that was circulating in the cities of the attack sites, to wonder aloud about how people whose neighbors are killed by gun violence all the time must feel witnessing the post-9/11 outpouring of feeling, donations, and compensation for the victims and their families. (Most recently in Pittsburgh, we discussed this disparate reaction following the Tree of Life shooting.) Death is death, whether by a random or intended bullet or by a hijacked plane, whether from cancer, cardiac arrest, or a drug of last resort. Loss always hurts those left behind, though each loss hurts differently. Each loss is tinged differently … by a sense of unfairness, anger, surprise, relief, guilt, and perhaps occasionally by an emotion it really seems no one else has felt before.

Yesterday when I learned about the death of Michelle—the woman with whom I worked, who told me about 9/11, who died amid COVID-19 but not of COVID-19—I was at work, at home, in a "virtual meeting." I was distracted not only by email, but by the Johns Hopkins COVID-19 map. At 10:38 that morning, there were 35,530 confirmed cases in the US. At 1:48 that afternoon, 41,511. The 43,963 cases by 9:43pm had me wondering whether by midnight we would reach more than 45,530, having added 10,000 cases to that initial report I had noted in morning when my attention drifted away from whoever was droning on in my virtual meeting. The 10:49pm report of 46,332 confirmed cases made me feel stupid and a little ashamed for watching the numbers. Unable to take my eyes off the train wreck, rubber-necking at the misfortune of others, strangely transfixed, and admittedly relieved, thinking "there but for …, go I." In short, scared.

Noting the 46,450 confirmed cases at 5:28am, as I write this the next day, I realize that the increase of only 100 cases overnight merely indicates that test reports don't come back overnight, and don't get aggregated in black and red on the COVID-19 map 'til morning. We play with the numbers, alternately comforting and scaring ourselves. People working on this virus model with the numbers, their predictions mapping pathways of hope and action, warranting socio-political interventions, stay-at-home orders. People work with other numbers—stocks, interest rates, unemployment, lost wages—to warrant economic interventions. Others work with the virus, seeking treatments and vaccines. Others work caring for those with the virus. A whole lot of people just wish they could work.

Thus the comparisons to 9/11. Neither terrorism nor the virus recognize boundaries of nation states. Both are partly the product of globalization, of ignoring its burdens and risks, and the anxieties is causes, while embracing its benefits. For the US and global economies to withstand or recover from the virus, as with 9/11, we'll need to spend, and thus to work. But this time, unlike 2001, we can't listen to our president and go back to work, go to the theater, go out and spend money, doing all the things rich-enough people can do to restore the economy and our "sense of normalcy." This time we can't and shouldn't listen to our president at all.

I desperately wanted the current crisis to be Donald Trump's Hurricane Katrina, not his 9/11. Dare I hope that the "one good thing" to come from this pandemic would be that incompetence at the head of state will be revealed and respect for expertise will be restored? It has seemed that this would indeed take an Act of God. But don't call the coronavirus that: too many employment contracts have clauses nullifying them in the face of Acts of God.

Maybe other good things could come from COVID-19. Maybe it will help convince people that we really are "all in this together" as the sign at Trader Joe's says. Maybe we'll come to see that funding healthcare for everyone is compassionate, just, and prudent; that it supports both the Golden Rule and the economic rules of Gold. (At Trader Joe's the sign on the lemons speaks of making lemonade.)

But back to work. The birds are beginning to sing. (Except for COVID-19 it is going to be a beautiful spring.) And, I need to take a shower before Day Two of my first virtual meeting.

Of course, this isn't my first virtual meeting. And I write most early mornings at this computer at this desk at home. But it is different when there is no workplace to go to. Granted, my campus office may be more storage unit than office. Campus is for meetings—usually in other people's offices as I go around campus trying to make myself, our Center, and ethics useful to people doing their work.

When I was first "in the Center," I was a graduate student research assistant. Working in the Center gave me a community of colleagues that a dissertation committee couldn't match. We came together for colloquia and Ethics for Lunch, and to collaborate on projects. But, except for the administrator's office on the fifth floor of the Eureka Building near Magee, the Center existed only virtually, "on email," as I explained to my mom.

My mom died a few years after I had returned to Pittsburgh to join the University and the Center as a faculty member. I came back to work a week and some days later because We (the faculty of the Center) had a meeting with University leadership to "discuss the future of the Center." I got back around midnight, went to that meeting at 9am, and don't remember exactly what we discussed. I do remember that when I walked in, every one of my colleagues stood up and hugged me.

As bioethics became more mainstream, Ethics for Lunch gained the more dignified name of Bioethics Grand Rounds, and the Center became a suite of offices with a conference room. The real work was still done "on email," as manuscript drafts, proposals, and reports circulated and Center faculty collaborated. The Center was a group of people and our work, as well as a place and what University leadership would call "a responsibility center."

On 9/11, when Michelle told me, "Lisa, go home. Somebody just flew a plane into one of the towers of the World Trade Center," I didn't. I went to my office in the Medical Arts Building on Fifth Avenue. I left the lights off, perhaps thinking my being there was illicit or dangerous. I remember hearing the whop-whop of a LifeFlight helicopter flying overhead, the shadows of its wings passing over my desk, and I remember wondering briefly and stupidly whether I should duck under my desk.

That day, they did evacuate tall buildings—including the Cathedral of Learning and U.S. Steel Tower (now UPMC Building, how times and economies change). Our foreign exchange daughter, then back in Switzerland, phoned to be sure we were all right. She had heard there was a plane headed toward Pittsburgh. My father called for the same reason. She is now our-foreign-exchange-daughter-the-doctor, and works on the immune system. My father died 10 years ago. It was my Center colleagues who made it possible for me to be with him for the two months of the only illness he ever had.

It is interesting how many of my colleagues mention someone they've loved, saying "I'm glad so-and-so didn't live to see COVID-19. I'd be so worried."

April 3, 2020
Another early morning at the computer. Yesterday we reached over a million confirmed cases of COVID-19 world-wide. Yesterday, too, Esam Tanzim Hossain, a former Pitt student was shot and killed on Meyran Avenue. He was an artist, who had worked with other Pitt students to design and sell T-shirts to raise money for victims of the Tree of Life shooting. He was an intern at MIC: Music Industry Connected,

where he wrote in his profile that he was a dance instructor and computer science major who did video-game design, that he loved making music with friends, and had “a soft spot for Golden Lab’s and Huskies (who doesn’t though).” He also wrote, from the vantagepoint of someone in his 20s, that if he had “any advice to give it would be to make lemonade with those lemons, stop and sniff the roses after having done so, and then add a grain of salt to take it all in with.” He was from San Jose, a hot spot of the COVID-19 virus. He died amid, not of COVID-19. He died of gun violence. So did five other people in Pittsburgh in the past two months.

We have a lot of work to do. Our workplace is everywhere.

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