

Spanning Pandemic Pandect – Caring, Compassion, and Crises Amidst COVID-19

A Reflective Essay by Dave Carlgren

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I must admit, I didn't see this coming. When my family and I started planning to go on an adventure to travel the world in 2018, we did not anticipate any of what was coming our way. The four of us, two adults and two kids aged 7 and 9, were excited to be going on an epic adventure. We had consulted with many people about our plans. Our recruiter-friends assured us that our choice of schools at which to teach was, apart from being in a very hot place, a well-reasoned one. We were to go to a "small city in China (of 11.5 million people)," as the recruiter joked. It was somewhere that nobody we spoke with had heard of, and we repeatedly had to consult maps to locate it. However, in the time since our departure in August of 2019, the city of Wuhan has become (in)famous for reasons that do not need to be described here.

This is, however, not a tale of pandemic fear, nor of the city of Wuhan and its incredible action in the face of mounting uncertainty and international scrutiny. Rather, this is a story of survival, stress beyond measure, tolerance, friendship, compassion, and the human spirit. It is a set of stories woven together with a common thread. That thread highlights human decency, caring and empathy, capacity, strength, and the will to continue to move forward through adversity. This tapestry is one made from the experiences of a select few teachers who were in Wuhan in 2019 and experienced the pandemic in a myriad of ways. Izzeldin Abuelaish, the author of *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity* wrote, "It is true that the sky was always beautiful, but I don't remember marvelling at sunset or gazing at the dawn of a new day. Survival does not allow time for poetic reflection."

I will start the thread with my own experiences. The timing of our arrival in China, August of 2019, was to be unfortunate. In December, we were cautioned by our Chinese administrative staff to avoid certain areas of the city and one market as "strange pneumonia-like symptoms" seemed to be arising there. Being new to China, we were unfamiliar with the way things were done in many respects. On January 21st, 2020, our family departed China for Thailand for the Spring Festival, a month-long celebration for the Chinese New Year. We intended to relax and learn some new skills while in Thailand, to return to China by the 14th of February and move into a new apartment. This was not the situation that emerged, however.

While enjoying time at a resort in Phuket, we checked the cover stories of the newspapers daily. When news broke about the measures that Wuhan was taking, quarantining sections of the city, restricting travel to and from the city, constructing hospitals in days, and large-scale testing of citizens for an as-yet unknown malady, we were uncertain of our possible courses of action. The school system's upper administration sent frequent updates about events and options for those inside China, as well as recommendations for those of us outside. Returning to China was not an option by this point, and we began to piece together a plan that would allow us to remain outside of China, but still abide by foreign visa requirements. A little over one month later; after night buses, airplanes, online teaching and learning in hostels with two young children and only two cell phones, a broken arm, hospital rejections over fear of COVID, family breakdowns, visa dilemmas, and many long walks and late nights through streets in Singapore, Vietnam, and back to Thailand,

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we found a temporary haven near Krabi. It offered us hospital care for the broken arm (and two more subsequent injuries to other family members), and ways to be semi-stable in the emerging pandemic inflicted world.

To explicate one of these situations a little more, after spending a month exploring and traveling through Vietnam, where the visa was only \$100 US, I had arranged for the return trip to Thailand to allow our kids to attend a private school and be with other kids (and to give Mom and Dad a much-needed mental break). In the Hanoi airport, the kids were playing on a play-structure out of sight when I heard screaming. It turned out that my daughter had been trying to escape a “tag” and had leapt badly to the ground. As a first aider, it was relatively easy to tell that she had broken her arm in a way reminiscent of an accident from the previous year. Our flight was about to leave, so we made an executive decision to seek medical attention for her once we arrived in Krabi. We managed the pain as best we could with our limited supply of stuffed animal support and an inability to access medication as we were traveling across international borders. When we arrived in Krabi, I elected to take my daughter to the hospital emergency room while my wife checked into our Airbnb. The hospital staff at this international hospital was initially highly concerned about her arm, until their questions about our travel history revealed Wuhan. At that point, they immediately put on masks and no longer attended to us. After nearly 3 hours of inattention, I told them we were leaving and would find another hospital in the morning. Just as a counterpoint to this, while waiting for some attention, I received a phone call from one of the school counsellors in China requesting vehemently that I consider an increase to a student’s grade for a university application. Physically and emotionally exhausted, we collapsed at our Airbnb. The following day, we went to the local hospital and had x-rays taken promptly that revealed the fracture of her arm near the elbow. Unfortunately, it required a surgery that this hospital could not perform, but one in Phuket, a three-hour drive away, could. Frantic and tense calls to our medical insurance provider confirmed that the expenses would be covered for our trip and the surgery and recovery. Within a few hours we were all in an ambulance, with all our belongings for the trip, en route to a Phuket hospital. That night, she underwent surgery. There is perhaps nothing so gut-wrenching as to see your own child in pain and fearful about what is to come. With her stuffed panda, Mao Mao (meaning “baby”), clutched to her, I held her hand as the sedation took effect. After a few hours of attempting to doze on a too-short couch, I was also her first, highly confused sight as she awoke. The next decision was regarding our accommodations, which the insurance company would not pay for. We opted to stay in the hospital room together. Our family of four, teaching and learning online daily, making infrequent and restricted outings to find food and glimmers of entertainment – typically early morning runs, before the public was awake. We sustained this close-quartered living for nearly a week before returning to Krabi and a new living situation at a small bungalow resort where we were the only clients for much of the next 6 months.

Our challenges, however, were echoed in unusual ways by colleagues. On a mental health Zoom call I made to a department member, she shared her current experience, which she has since elucidated more. As a Jamaican hire, she was not fluent in Chinese. When the quarantine came, it was a surprise, seemingly without warning. Suddenly her, and her young son’s freedom to move outside of their small apartment was eliminated. Like us, she was required to teach high school students online, while also assisting her son in his new online studies. Food, sanitation, communication, and human connection, however, were not similar. She would receive a plastic bag covered in sanitizing spray, filled with food items, some unrecognizable to the Western eye, and be directed incomprehensibly in Chinese. She was required to wash her hands and don a full

hazmat suit that was provided by the community in which she lived, to merely step outside her door to get the food bag. She then had to reverse the process and re-sanitize the package before opening it and seeing what was there. Knowing what was happening in the outside world was only possible, though difficult, to obtain connections with other foreign teachers who happened to seek and find each other through a Chinese social media app that was heavily monitored by the government. Messages about not spreading rumours, ensuring healthy habits, communicating any concerns about other community members being ill, and maintaining a positive attitude were sent frequently through such platforms. Eventually, a small group of locals discovered this small family and, showing incredible compassion and caring, sought ways to communicate more clearly with them. Translation apps began to be used more frequently and relationships began to flourish. The confinement of one family started to bring about the connection of a community. Food changed, needs were better met, and a new “normal” was being established. Recently she and I talked about her experience tearfully. These people were her captors and saviours, her nightmare and salvation, creators of paranoia and bringers of freedom. What incredible contrasts such experiences can, and did, bring to her and her son. While the healing is still ongoing, much was initiated by those workers in the final days of the quarantines in Wuhan. They are to be lauded greatly for finding humanity amongst threat and fear.

Back to our experience for a moment. We joked with the Norwegian owner of the bungalow resort in which we stayed, when we initially arrived in March, that we might like it enough to stay until June. He said that we could stay until November if we wanted. The reality was an average of the two, with us departing in August, and eventually arriving back in China late in September. The school year had already begun with those who were present in Wuhan. The comparative staff/student numbers were staggering. Consistent with the communist/socialist principles established in China that press for everyone to be working and busy, the Chinese administration was insistent that courses run “as usual” as much as possible. For the 12 teachers who were present in Wuhan, this was a challenge as nearly 1500 students arrived to be taught by a mixture of online and face-to-face means. During another Zoom conversation with one of these teachers, I learned how his day would look. A far cry from the typical teacher who arrives in a classroom and begins a traditional class, he was expected to do that, as well as connect cameras and microphones in classrooms throughout his floor of the school – nearly 20 classrooms, at the start of each class period. To add to that burden, he also had to remove them at the end of each class for fear of theft or damage. Maintaining some level of communication with online teachers fell on his plate as well, and he battled with internet reliability issues, hardware and software troubles, and power outages. Additionally, printing and distribution of papers, and the digital scanning of these back to those outside of Wuhan, when necessary, was also added to his role. As a (somewhat) conscientious educator who understood his work-based burdens, not to mention what he was dealing with post-quarantine, I elected to do much of my assessment and evaluation in online environments, though that did not aid in the technological aspects. When we eventually arrived in Wuhan, a tally on a board in an office was increased by two for my wife and me, and our presence was celebrated as the load could now be further distributed.

This was not the case for everyone. We had experienced unexpected family separation upon arrival in China when we were told that we had to quarantine separately for two weeks. My wife and son were in one hotel room, while my daughter and I took an adjacent one. We had all learned that space and schedules were beneficial to our own senses of sanity and quickly established them within each room and between rooms so we could have virtual family dinners

facilitated by Zoom, conversations, and even share watching VPN-assisted movies online. Fitness and keeping busy, and connected to each other and to friends and family was vital for our two weeks. For yet another staffer, his experience with quarantine was not so positive. He and his family were kept in quarantine for two cycles, a total of four weeks, before being allowed on campus. This took a significant toll on his mental health when he returned to classes. The isolation coupled with his own feelings of inadequacy after teaching and guiding students through university application processes online was too much for him. I can only guess that he craved the interpersonal interactions and the depth of understanding that comes from face-to-face interactions while helping students to select and apply to universities. Without this ability, he felt incapacitated and impotent, I would guess. Additionally, being among the large number of students after isolation broke him mentally. He applied for, and was granted, a mental health leave and remained in his apartment on campus for most of the following months. After nearly 3 months, he was finally able to walk outside during daylight hours and speak to a few neighbours. This was, however, not to be a happy ending. Their family opted to move off campus so he could be better separated from the school and its mental associations. Within three weeks, this unfortunate soul could no longer bear to be a burden on himself and his family. He tragically took his own life. The school community is still grieving his loss and has yet to take adequate time, in my opinion, to really accept this result of the pandemic. A devotion to him took place in the form of a musical tea house with student performances in commemoration of the musical life he loved. This tea house marked an emergence, for us, of light from the shadow of the pandemic. This man will serve, for me at least, as a reminder of what is important in this world – light, love, family, connection, compassion, hope, and finding beauty.

One of the stated purposes of this Special Edition publication is to “show the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty of redefining a just and responsible society in a suddenly chaotic world.” It is through these stories that I find my way to navigate the tumultuous complexity and ambiguity of feelings that are real, uncertainties that do not resolve, cultures that conflict, and justice that feels unjust. Responsibility is not individual, and national boundaries do not serve to redefine individuals as people, but only draw lines in the sand to separate us. We are more alike than different. We are more caring and compassionate than we might know. In times of crisis, we find ways to unite and support one another to the best of our abilities. Trials and tribulations fuel rebirth, and struggle makes us stronger, more adapted, and unified with our deeper connection to self and others. We are all humans. Returning to a quotation from Izzeldin Abuelaish, from a personal presentation, “We need nations to think less about economy and more about humanity.” It is this humanity that connects us and will lead us through chaos in the emerging world.