

Work Responsibilities

I grew up the child of educators—the first in their families to transcend the “working class” distinction. My dad was a high school PE teacher, and my mom ran a preschool out of our basement. As first-generation college graduates, they were strong advocates of work. My dad had started his work life at age 13, selling flowers outside the Bayside Florist. My mom, who grew up in the same Queens neighborhood, was the block’s “mother’s helper,” taking on various cooking, cleaning, and childcare tasks for several families beginning at age 12.

Like my mother, I accepted my first job at 12, helping run birthday parties for kids at the gym where I was also a competitive gymnast. That gig turned into a regular coaching position that I kept through middle school, and I picked up babysitting jobs on weekends. Once I got my “working papers,” I became a lifeguard, strolling the pool deck at the YMCA during the school year and catching rays at a nearby water park in the summer. In college, I coached multiple varsity swimming and diving teams during school, and worked full-time at a campground in the summer.

I like work. I’ve always liked it. It’s where I’ve met a majority of friends and partners, and the site of many hard and important lessons.

One summer, a 14-year-old disabled boy drowned in 18 inches of water in pool I was lifeguarding. I saw Justin, my partner-lifeguard, drag the lifeless child out of the water to the pool deck for CPR. Justin was ghastly white, his neck snapping left to right to left—frantically searching for an adult to take over. Justin and I were sixteen years old. For three or four seconds, I froze behind my sunglasses, pretending it wasn’t happening. It was happening, of course, and the boy died. I learned a deeply personal and tragic lesson that day: to work is to take responsibility for others.

For the better part of twenty years, I have worked at the University of Denver. Encountering thousands of students, I have taken responsibility for every one of them. Work has been there for me, too. I was deeply grateful for work during the Great Recession, for example; and when my life was blown apart by divorce, I was comforted by the consistency of work amidst the emotional chaos. So, when Covid-19 appeared out the clear blue in 2020, I did what I always do: I worked.

While my responsibility to my colleagues and students had not changed, the shape of my work had shifted. A frenetic two weeks in early September—marked by last minute classroom changes, lost students, and high-energy presentations to summer-refreshed faculty colleagues—was instead stretched across a slow-droning summer of town halls, online trainings, and new efforts to reach and retain our first-year class. The relentless and everyday-ness of Covid fear seeped into and infected work.

Normally, I meet incoming students in the first moments after hugging their parents goodbye. Wearing matching t-shirts, they are quiet, nervous. By contrast, I am chatty, easygoing. I am the adult in the room, a strong and certain guide. Yet, in the Covid-moment, I met them on Zoom, from the safety and familiarity of their homes. We conversed about their senior-year experiences and other interests. I answered their few questions and remarked on their wall art. Like me, they seemed weary—trying to summon energy for an important experience, while dragged by the corona co-curriculum.

Faculty attitudes shifted, too. My professional group-chats, once dominated by articles on Covid infection and death rates, moved to articles about plummeting enrollments and students “sitting it out,” whether to care for family members or save money on a compromised education. Our anxiety around bodily threat, shifted to professional threat. But we kept working.

Without our labor, we were told, more people would lose their jobs; perhaps we might lose our own.

The tenor of teaching demanded change with the new academic year. There was an added softness to my teaching in spring 2020, accompanied by a sense that we would “get through this,” as narrated by marketing slogans. My grades were much higher, and it seemed like a good short-term solution. But after the long summer, our location was more ambiguous. Student pandemic experiences varied widely, and the flow of institutional advice urging leniency had dried up. I contemplated my responsibility to my students. Should we return to pre-pandemic rigor? Should we replicate the spring leniency? Or, was there some new middle ground to walk?

It’s a curious thing when emotional expression is limited to the eyes alone. It’s easy to discount the benefit of mouth, lips, and cheek muscles, when reading for demeanor. Scanning 36 new-student eyeballs in our first class meeting, I searched for emotion—finding fear and anxiety staring back. Maybe it had always been there. This time, their eyes mirrored my own. Unable to manage the new technology, glasses misted and gasping under my mask, I struggled through the first meeting, awkward and uneasy. Twenty years into my teaching career, I cried in my car afterward.

But, despite continuing fears and anxieties, the students and I continued our work together. Worry framed our bond. I checked in with them; they checked in with me. While *care* was always core to my pedagogy, it took deeper root in the course, impacting my written feedback, my decisions about readings and prompts, and my assessment.

When I talk to colleagues, they report similar experiences: a renewed focus on student wellbeing, a willingness to go beyond traditional responsibilities, and connections forged in shared fear. We were responsible for and to each other in new

ways. We transgressed the boundaries of weekend of weekday, personal and professional, school and home, teacher and student. It was a mutual rescue.

But, what now?

In the throes of another hot summer, where Covid lurks and hope is rising, a new year promises a return to the security of work. Yet, the old way seems too long ago to reprise. Little seems certain. What I do know is that I will be there, ready to receive the incoming class and ready to go to work.