

Stepping out of my Comfort Zone and Facing COVID-19 Fears

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April 16, 2020

San Francisco, CA



Figure 1. Getting up!



Figure 2. Ready to go out

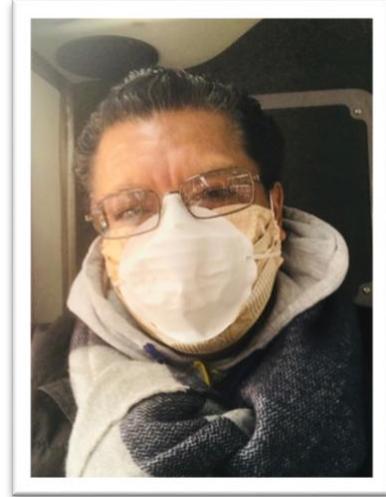


Figure 3. Riding on the bus

What happened? What's the story?

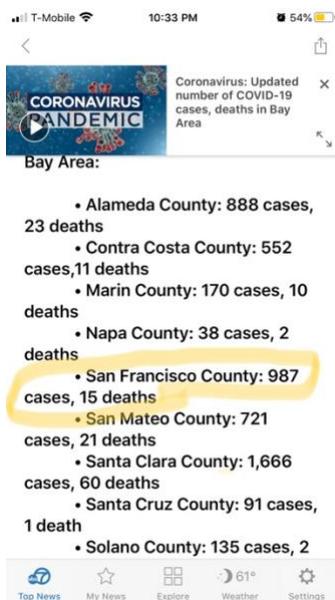
Today, three weeks have passed by since we were instructed to shelter-in-place to avoid people and hopefully, escape the deadly corona virus. Like almost every morning I look at my face in the mirror and what I see is the worry in my eyes, the sadness, the sleepless nights, the dark circles that are slowly making themselves feel at home on my face and that fortunately, I can kind of cover up with my prescription glasses. Going out into the mostly empty streets makes me feel anxious and fearful. Stepping out of the safety of my small controlled-rent apartment in the city is like stepping out of my comfort zone to face an invisible monster. For double protection. Hiding under a disposable face mask, I covered my mouth and nose with a hand-made mask I sewed myself during a sleepless night. Wearing disposable plastic gloves which I believe offer stronger protection when worn with my rosary and a prayer, I ventured out to catch the bus to go to our empty preschool.

Today, is the day the school district decided to hand out materials to all the preschoolers. And teachers Sahara, Edwin, Nadine and myself offered to be on site and personally hand out the learning packets to families. These packets include 51 double-sided pages with activities for parents to do at home with their children, a couple of story books, index cards, a notebook and color pencils or markers. Perhaps next time we could also include, playdough, beads, puzzles, watercolors, big buttons, glue, masking tape, and open-ended stuff to put together and break apart as many times as the children wish. The families started coming in at 10:00 AM and almost every 10 or 15 minutes a new parent approached the school gate, where we had placed a table to

avoid coming into close contact and keeping a distance of two meters or more between us. Between smiles, *saludos y bendiciones* (greetings and blessings) the parents expressed how much they missed us and how much the children wish they could be at school.

Paul's mom told us that he asks everyday why he can't be taken to school and that sometimes he gets angry. Vladimir's mom shared that he asks about teacher Sahara very often and once in a while, he also asks about me and teacher Alicia. Dulce's mom expressed that her daughter really wanted to come with her to pick up the materials, but all parents followed the agreement for only one adult to come by without children, and keep them safe at home. If the children had accompanied their parents to stop by the school, I am sure they would have run to us and given us a hug, even if they had to crawl under the table. It would be hard for them to stay away. I can certainly see Paul running to us and asking us where we have been! I could almost hear his laughter! The children don't understand that we must stay at least six feet apart - keeping roughly two meters, between us. Today, we did not meet the children. We only met one adult from each family, either a mom, a dad, or a grandpa. And it was nice to see them.

What does this story mean?



With covid-19 cases approaching 1000 and with 15 deaths in the city, it is crucial to stay indoors. However, someone had to hand out those activity bags to parents. Teacher Edwin had volunteered to drive throughout the city and drop off the bags at their homes, but something happened at the last minute and he could not do it.

It was quite nice to see teachers Sahara, Edwin and Nadine, and our Principal Ms. Hoshino at the school. We diligently kept our safe distance and wore our face masks and gloves all the time. Parents seemed very appreciative and expressed their gratitude for the work we do on our regular school days. Maryah's dad jokingly said that he now appreciates each one of us even more than before. "How do you do it? Watching these kids all day long, day in and day out is not easy. It's hard work!" He exclaimed with a puzzled look on his face and a grin that made us realize he was serious when he asked that question.

But, what does it all mean? Perhaps it means that we need each other now more than ever, and that we need to do our best to respect the physical distance and stay-in shelter rules so that once again we can all be together at our school yard some day. Today, the school yard, as clean and colorful as ever, did not feel right. Even the plants, although in full bloom, have a certain sad energy this spring. As I usually do, I took a few photographs, which I'm sharing in this story. Our schoolyard, as many others around the world, was missing the hustle and bustle of children coming and going, running and skipping. What was missing in the schoolyard was Paul's laughter, Vladimir's mischievousness, Dulce's shy and sweet smile, Anna's never-ending questions, and Elizabeth's beginners' jokes, the ones that only a witty five-year-old girl is able to say, understand and laugh at, even if nobody else gets the joke.



Figure 4. The Lonely Schoolyard

What opportunities and possibilities do arise?

What I see perhaps, is the need to step again out of my comfort zone and reach out to families via Facetime or any other app to connect with children, but to do so without the constraints of a formal lesson plan. It is admirable that some teachers spend so much time planning a full day of adult led-instruction and activities to fill each day of the week to the minute, while the children are at home with their families. I remind myself that parents are the children's main teachers and from whom they can learn as much as - or even more than, they will ever learn with or from me. But those are the expectations of *distance learning*, *remote learning* or *online learning*. I really admire those teachers who sing, dance, read and hold circle time on live video. I wish I could feel that comfortable and transmit that much charisma and happiness on the screen. It is not that I

do not try. I do. I take a selfie once in a while, like the ones at the start of this story or do a mini video for myself and what I see is simply pathetic.

When I see my face in the mirror or on my iPhone what I see is the anxiety lines, the uncertainty marks and the huge weight of children's education on my shoulders, which is both in and out my hands. With so much apprehension in my heart, singing *De Colores* for children and families in front of a camera is not the first thing in my mind when I wake up in the morning. Lately, I must confess, I do not feel like singing, clapping or putting on a performance. Lately, I do not see days in many colors; it is as if everything was covered in tones of grey. If I could share something with parents, I would tell them that what they are doing at home with their children is perfectly fine. If they feel they would benefit from having a daily schedule or the most recent activity on the Khan Academy app, they should do it and if they feel they do not need them, then they should not do it. Parents know better than anyone else what their children enjoy and what they do not.

Many families, out of need, usually drop off their children at the preschool at 7:30 AM and don't pick them up until 5:30 PM. This is an opportunity to spend family time together and have a good time cooking, sharing meals, doing household chores, while singing or dancing to their favorite songs. They do not need me or an app for that. On the other hand, perhaps the children would like to see us, their teachers. Even more, perhaps if I see the children's smiles, hear their voices, laughter, simple jokes, and never-ending questions, I would start to see my own days in color again. Perhaps, the children will not notice the worry and the fear in my eyes, the dark circle under my eyes or the ounces of gel I now have to apply on my hair to tame it for lack of a proper haircut. Perhaps, they will only see a teacher who cares about them so much, that is willing to step out of his comfort zone to show his face on video if only for a few minutes a day to say or sing *Hola amigos, ya sali6 el sol, vamos a cantar y hablar en espa1ol...* And perhaps, little by little I would recover the sense of hope in my heart, the laughter in my soul, and the sunshine in my day.

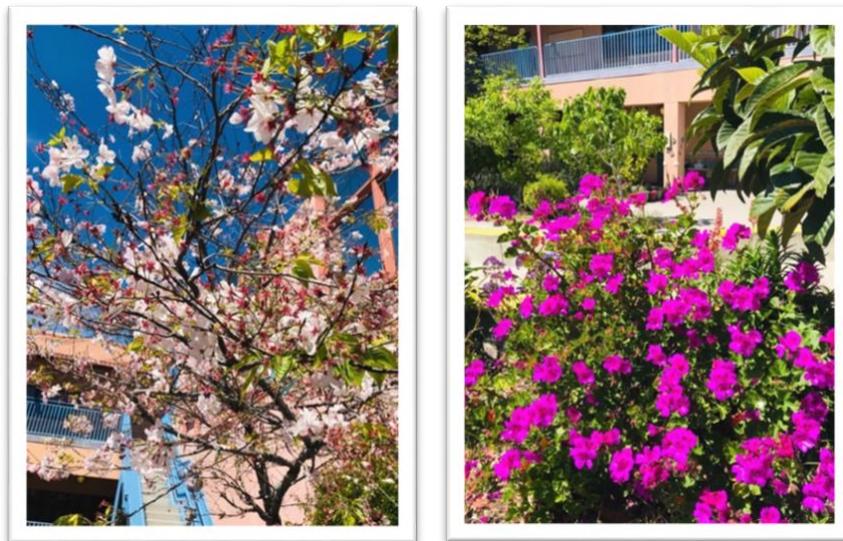


Figure 5. Spring blooms at Las Americas Early Education School