News
Opinion



An empty lecture hall (Unsplash/Nathan Dumlao)



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For the first time in 38 years, I won't have the privilege of sharing time and ideas in a classroom with college students at American University and Georgetown University in courses titled either "Peace and Social Justice" or "Peace Is Possible." As in every past semester, our three texts would have been three of my books, *Solutions to Violence*, *Peace is Possible* and *Strength Through Peace*. It's literature for a lifetime.

The campuses at both schools will be largely empty of students and faculty due to the public health crisis known as COVID-19 in which the death toll since March keeps rising, to almost 165,000 Americans.

The pandemic is anything but academic. It's not yet exactly known how many of the nation's estimated 17 million undergraduates will be taught face-to-face by lecturing professors nor the number of those who will be far, far away from campus dormitories, dining halls, meal plans, sororities, fraternities, clubs, athletic teams, jogging trails, bike lanes, health centers, all-night cramming, parties, libraries, career counseling offices and chapels — all of it "the college experience."

Abruptly, it's gone. Higher education is now online education, students heaved into a sterile home-based laptopping world of Zooms, apps, webinars, Skypes, iPads, portals, Googles and Blackboards — none of which they signed up for when they and their parents agreed to pay anywhere from a few thousand dollars to a state school to as much as $70,000 a year to an Ivy League citadel.

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I have two kinds of worries about my students. First, for their physical health brought on by the uncertainties of the virus. Whether on a campus or dealing with remote learning, will they have the self-discipline to embrace the rites of masks, distancing, hand washing, crowd avoidance and submitting to taking the tests?

The only guarantee is that we have no guarantee that we will not contract the disease and possibly die from it, no matter our fidelity to the safety precautions. All that's possible is lowering the risks, ones that fluctuate from site to site.

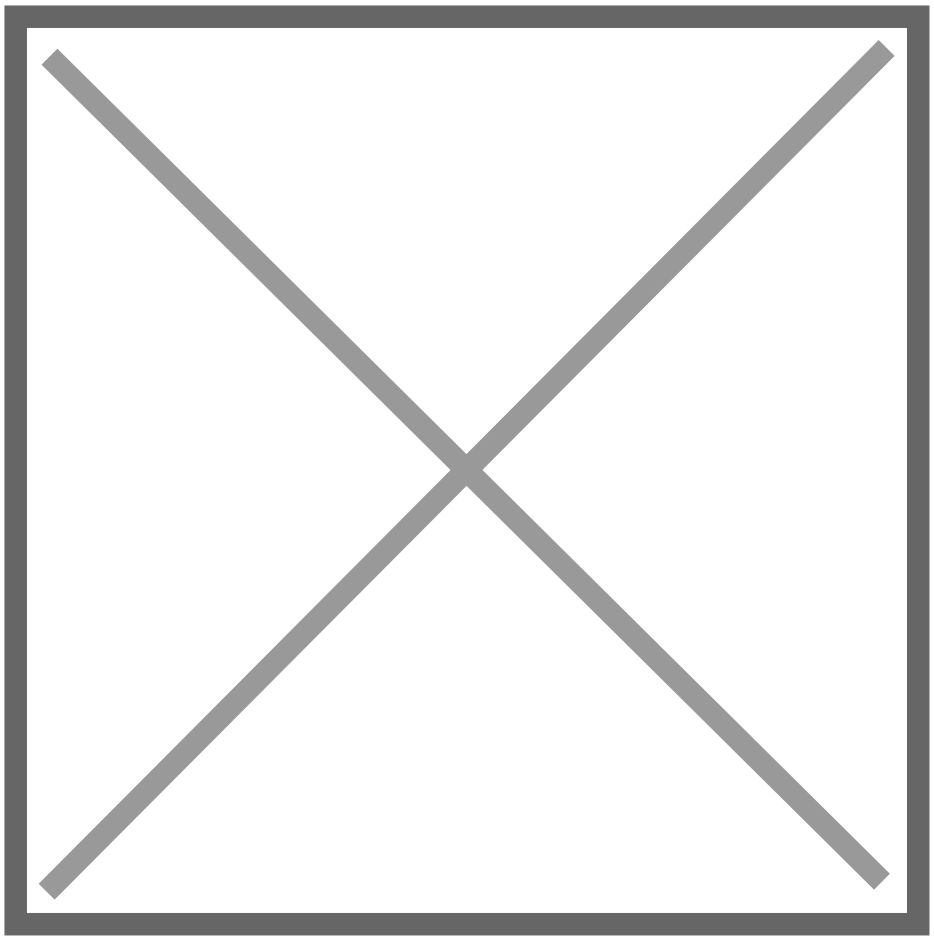
The second worry is about my student's mental health. A 2018 report by the American College Health Association found that 63% of college students felt "overwhelming anxiety" in the previous year. More than 40% were enduring depressions so disabling "that it was difficult to function."

And all of that misery was before the virus pandemic swept across the land and the nation's campuses. All of it was before a crashing economy. All was before the street rallies for racial justice.

It's possible, and perhaps likely, that the stresses, anxieties and depressions brought on by these three crises will lead to higher rates of suicide amount collegians. In the country's general population, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death while among people age 10 to 34 it ranks second. These stats are from 2017, before these crises.

Over the years, I've had five students who took their lives, each leaving me to wonder if I missed the signals that they were deeply in pain and that I should have interceded.

Because my classes are discussion-based and because I believe every person has a life story that could well become a novel, I make it clear early on that in the classroom I want to be a listener more than a talker. In my syllabus, I say it up front about the course's writing requirements, paper and a journal. The former "should not be a conventional research paper. Instead, try the unconventional: research your own life, your experiences with violence or nonviolence, how have you dealt with conflicts with your family and friends, what has shaped your personal and political values. It's fine to use the first-person pronoun. In fact, it's often better that way: to write the kind of paper that only you could have written because it runs deep with experiences only you have had."



Before COVID-19: Students are seen at Georgetown University in Washington March 20, 2019. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

For the journal, this: "Make it handwritten or printed. It should be weekly entries of 300 words or more. More is fine. Don't hold back once you get going. An entry might be your thoughts on the week's reading, or perhaps your reflections on the class discussions or your thoughts on how the essays relate to issues currently in the news or how they relate to the choices you have made in your life so far."

It's not in the course syllabus but I do tell the class, in a somber tone, that many is the time during a semester I've had a near death experience caused by an illness known as MEGO. It the kind of possible fatality that hits me when I read college papers that are cliché-ridden, laced with spelling errors, run-on sentences and pointless conclusions. After pages of reading such literary slop, I get a MEGO attack: My Eyes Glaze Over. Rather than taking a shot of morphine to ease the pain, I leave home to go for a therapeutic bike ride but with glazed eyes that make me half-blind, I risk death by running red lights or crashing into curbs, trees or vehicles.

Have mercy on me, I tell the students. No MEGO papers. Instead, turn in a MEOW paper. Reading its graceful lines, astute insights, sparkling metaphors and memorable conclusions, My Eyes Open Wide. I've received many MEOWs, so ably written that I've helped students get them published, papers that deserved a larger audience than only me.

I may be delusional in thinking that the virus will be subdued and the 2021 spring semester will bring students and professors back to coronavirus-free campuses, myself included. A major problem is that every year colleges graduate students who are idea-rich but experience-poor. The solution? Take a year or two and join the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, the Mercy Corps — all them offering the kind of experiences that can be life-altering, ones that heed the counsel of Albert Schweitzer in *Reverence for Life*:

> No one has the right to take for granted their own advantages over others in health, in talents in ability, in success, in a happy childhood or congenial home conditions. One must pay a price for these boons. What one owes in return is a special responsibility for other lives.

Among my amply blessed former students, I regularly hear back that their experiential sabbaticals were also remote learning: remoteness from feeling the fears and anguish of the world's lost and lonely but realizing we all can help to ease them in ways small and large.

[Colman McCarthy directed The Center for Teaching Peace, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C.]

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