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## COVID SHORTS

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### Reflections on Writer's Block

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When I finished the MA program at Northern Illinois University in 2010, I initially had no intention of returning for a PhD. I felt burned out on academics and was itching to get into my own classroom to teach. Despite the intense pressures of a tightening job market, I was fortunate. I found a permanent, full-time faculty position at a small, rural university in the southwest corner of Minnesota. Deciding to leave that wonderful and supportive community was difficult, but after three years there, I realized that I had more to say (and more to learn) and I wanted to return to get my PhD as a way of amplifying my voice.

Finding such a robust and supportive program at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee felt (and still feels) like kismet; successfully completing that program felt (and still feels) like an extraordinary privilege. In that community, I found a handful of the best people on the planet. I continue to cherish their friendship and mentorship, and I am deeply grateful for my place in that family.

As a rhetorician, I have found myself exploring new avenues of expression in the age of COVID. An introvert at heart, part of me feels as though I was built for a global pandemic. I don't have to be "with" people to feel close to them and I have found comfort in the ways I've been forced to turn inward. I bought books and managed to read most of a few of them. I've tended plants and they are still alive. My dog and I are now co-dependent. I've also invested more time and space in my life for my marriage and, a few bumpy moments notwithstanding, my relationship with my partner is thriving. I am healthy. My family is healthy.

Once again, I find myself feeling extraordinarily, acutely, lucky. Wholly lucky. One-in-a-million lucky. This, for me, has been my truest experience of isolation during this pandemic and it has been the greatest obstacle to my ability to connect with others (and my research) over the past year. My privilege has been rendered palpable – I can almost feel it sitting heavy in my bones – and I feel a sense of Imposter Syndrome whenever I sit down to write about what is going on in the world. From my positionality, what could I possibly say that folks would want or need to hear; what wisdom is there in my lack of struggle? Why would I opt to center my own voice

when so many other people seem to be directly experiencing any social issue or object of rhetorical inquiry that might catch my interest?

I don't have answers to those questions; I continue to grapple with them and after working for so long to find my voice, I now find it burdensome. The internal tension that punctuates those questions is also a big reason I struggled to write even this brief set of paragraphs. However, I also believe that we receive from the world what we invite. If we desire truth, we have to tell it. If we hope to build a better world, we have to amplify what is better about each of us.

My experience during the pandemic has reshaped my approach to rhetorical scholarship and helped me to formulate a commitment to call attention to our collective voids – the ideological gulfs that separate us, the holes that dot our social safety nets and exacerbate inequity, the leadership vacuum that plagues our politics, the material and immaterial cavities that are left when access to community has been disrupted, etc. These are the voids that mark isolation and the absent 'ties that bind.' My main touchstone throughout the past year has been the experience of my own isolation and it has moved me to reconsider what counts as constitutive. I have begun to wonder whether centering the affective experience of isolation may be a productive place to begin rebuilding a sense of togetherness.