

Grocery Shopping in the Time of COVID-19: A Metaphor for the Development of Research

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Every doctoral student romanticizes the idea of reading and writing in solitude. Perhaps the truly ambitious can even see themselves, in their mind's eye, checking into a gloomy roadside motel – strictly for writing purposes (bundles of index cards stuffed promisingly into their duffle bags, with snacks). Oddly, I've observed that whenever I have Chinese takeout, I receive the same message inside the fortune cookie: *"The road to Hell is paved with good intentions."* Which brings me to undertaking doctoral work while in quarantine. A challenge magnified by the fact that daily tasks became much more complex. A simple trip to the grocery store, for example, turned into a whole new experience. My Aunt was so anxious the night before going for groceries that she could barely sleep. Hence, I began to see visiting the grocery store in the time of COVID-19 as a metaphor for the development of a research project.

Several signs pointed toward the legitimacy of my metaphor. First, research has a way of defamiliarizing what always seemed familiar. Educational research, I've learned, is about acknowledging the subjectivity inherent in the ways in which we've learned to read the world, and the real work happens when we step beyond whatever it is that we think we know. Grocery shopping during a pandemic may not be as dramatic as challenging one's own worldview, but it may create a similar sense of unease or disruption. Second, as grocery stores instituted the use of directional arrows on the floor, one was suddenly and often pivoting, redirecting, and changing course – just as one does in the throes of a research project. Lastly, we began to notice and care about the well-being of others in new ways through the experience. At the height of the virus' spread, we came to a new level of appreciation for the people ringing through our groceries and restocking the shelves. Here, I am reminded of the pedagogy of love proposed by researchers Pauline Sameshima and Carl Leggo (2013). They ask, *"What does love have to do with educational research?"* It is an epistemology, a way of seeing the world, a way for organizing research, a way for teaching, a way for learning, a way for living" (Sameshima & Leggo, 2013).

Throughout March and early April of 2020, I was working on the final edits of my PhD portfolio. The Nova Scotia Inter-University Doctoral Program in Educational Studies has each doctoral student create and defend a portfolio of artifacts with the objective of advancing their research and contributing to the development of their dissertation proposal. As I finished the last edits on this work in quarantine, I decided to open my portfolio presentation by acting out a monologue on grocery shopping in the time of COVID-19. As a student taking on autoethnographic methodology to shape my dissertation, it seemed fitting to creatively story this new experience. As researcher Carolyn Ellis notes, an autoethnographer is a person at "the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller" (p. 13, 2009). The following is my monologue, which I performed with yellow latex gloves as a prop.

**Stay the Blazes Home
(unless you need groceries)**

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I pull out a pair of yellow latex gloves. Scanning the parking lot, I attempt to calculate how many people are inside the store. Not many cars. A good sign. I feel like Odysseus. Back home, my daughter Matilda weaves and unweaves the mess of toys on the floor.

Or rather, I am Lancelot. My suit of armour: dishwashing gloves. My Guinevere: a load of groceries.

A month ago, wearing latex gloves to the grocery store would have been exceptionally strange. Now, it's fairly dressed down. Most people wear face masks too.

Matilda and I have been quarantined at my parents' house for three weeks now. Looking through their living room window, I always see this one crow that comes every day because the neighbour feeds her bologna. Does "*one crow sorrow*" apply to the bologna crow? I suspect not.

Okay, anyway, time to focus.

You don't just walk into the grocery store anymore. I am greeted by two employees and a security guard. One of the employees holds up her hand:

"Just so you know how our store works now. You must maintain social distance, keeping six feet away from others. There are directional arrows on the floor. You must follow the arrows, if you miss something, DO NOT go back, you'll have to circle around—pretend it's part of your morning exercise routine."

I thank her, grabbing a cart with my latex hands.

I am Leopold Bloom. This isn't Dublin, but I need a bag of russet potatoes.

Inside, it's quiet. They're not playing the usual outdated grocery store music. Can I really make it through without hearing *Total Eclipse of the Heart*? Are the arrows taped to the floor so confusing that someone decided music would be just too much?

I make my move, grabbing raspberries, but the salad section is too congested. I will have to change track. But I can't walk straight over to the bread because the arrows are pointing toward me. Instead, I'll have to swing past the steak and back around to the bakery.

Plus, I need lemon pie filling.

I have a creeping fear that I'll do something wrong and get thrown in jail.

I am Santiago. But it's not the blue marlin I'm after. It's the lemon pie filling.

Gingerly, I push my cart toward the aisle filled with tins of slippery pears and slimy peach slices.

"Right of way is important these days!" a woman remarks as she stops her cart, allowing me to pass.

There are two carts in the aisle already. I have to pause. I know I'm in the wrong aisle. But I'm trapped, unless I back up, which is strictly forbidden.

A woman nearby suddenly asks aloud, "Is this whole thing making people more grateful for everything we have, even though we never really thought of it that way?"

A man six feet in front of her chimes in, "Followin' some tape on the floor is sure easier than huntin'!"

We all giggle. The Premier recently told us to *stay the blazes home* but it feels good to laugh with people.

I eventually find the lemon pie filling in the baking, foils, and wraps aisle.

As I leave the store, a man a distance away shouts, "Hey!"

This is it. I did something wrong and now I'm going straight to jail, I figure.

I stop and turn toward the man, he's elderly and looking at me expectantly.

"What kind of drugs do fish do?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say.

"Seaweed," he says with a smile.

I laugh. I genuinely laugh. Not because it's a funny joke, but because someone wanted to make a stranger laugh so much that he went out of his way.

Back in the car I think about how Anne Lamott, recalling a line from a *New Yorker* story, wrote, "We are not here to see through one another, but to see one another through" (1993, p. 2).

Back at my parents' house, I see that the bologna crow now has a companion.

Two crows joy.

Conclusion

To me, being a writer, or a storyteller, is about noticing. It's about observing the world in such a way that you extract whatever you come across that happens to be hopeful or heartbreaking, and you turn it into something others can use. As Rebecca Solnit observes, "It's the unpredictable incidents between official events that add up to a life, the incalculable that gives it value" (2001, p. 10). I like the idea of taking an autoethnographic approach because this methodology allows a researcher to consider her whole life as part of the project.

It has now been two months since I successfully defended my doctoral portfolio. While masks are mandatory in all public places within the province of Nova Scotia, the level of uncertainty we all faced when the virus first started to spread has somewhat decreased. Nevertheless, I will do my part to remain aware of the lessons I learned from relating my grocery trips to research; I will try and embrace disruption by redirecting myself into unexplored territory, purposely unsettling my own expectations. Though I cannot spot two crows through my window at this very moment, I believe they are out there, extending their joy to those who take the time to notice.

References

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