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Toward an Academic Made Whole: Navigating the Work-Life Balance in Times of Crisis

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I have attended every Cs convention since starting graduate school. Each year, I pack up the same presentation outfit: a once-fitted starched white dress shirt bought in advance of my first Cs presentation, an itchy navy-blue sports coat from Goodwill, khaki slacks, and an old pair of black and brown dress shoes I received from my grandfather. To top it all off, I wear the same Jerry Garcia tie gifted to me by my dad when I was in high school. I don't love professional attire, but I can appreciate this assemblage of materials old and new. I like this outfit in spite of the fact that it doesn't actually look good. It is, after all, in this suit that I have successfully presented at conferences, and so it is in this suit that I feel most comfortable. The attachment I feel to this suit may, in part, be due to my anxiety, ADHD, and OCD. Routine and ritual play a big role in all aspects of my life.

When I am not in control of situations, I tend to have anxiety attacks. With Cs, there is so much out of my control: public transportation, hotels, airport terminals, airplanes, elevators. What if I have an anxiety attack on the airplane? What if someone plants something illegal on my bag at the airport? To offset these concerns, I check my bags endlessly: phone, wallet, plane ticket, ad infinitum. I still lose things. While these types of experiences are not unique to Cs, they are heightened by the conference, which tends to be located in massive conference centers in big cities. Despite all of this, I still enjoy Cs.

When I signed up for the 2021 CCCC Documentarian role, I had envisioned myself walking through the conference, popping into various presentations and events, and reporting on my experience. When I told my partner that the conference officially announced that it would be all virtual, she was overjoyed, reminding me that her family reunion was occurring that week at St. George Island, Florida. This is just an hour and forty-five-minute drive from our home in Tallahassee.

Not only could I meet her parents, who live in Indiana, but also her three siblings and extended family.

I am a people pleaser, and I avoid conflict at all costs. When I am invited or asked to do something, I do it. This, unfortunately, extends beyond the academy and into the personal sphere. As a result, my work-life balance is always in tension—a focus on one comes at the expense of the other. While I may have had reservations, I certainly wasn't going to let them show. And so I packed my bags, being careful to include each component of my signature Cs suit.

On Wednesday evening, around 6:00 p.m., the conference was beginning, and I found myself in my partner's candy apple red Toyota Yaris. It didn't make for a comfortable drive for a 6'1", 230-pound man with back fractures, a realization that hit me just as we began to trek through the winding roads that cut through the Apalachicola National Forest. As dusk approaches, I attempted to log into the conference to watch the Avengers pedagogy performance on my phone, and my spirits were high. The pandemic had signaled the beginning of a bad rut. I was hoping Cs would reinvigorate me a bit. My partner and I had just finished watching all of the Marvel movies for the first time, so I was selling the presentation pretty hard to her—she teaches composition, too, I remind her. There's going to be someone playing Scarlet Witch, I say.

She nods along, juggling my own incessant chatter with calls from family members asking about our ETA. I tell her that I am not getting cell phone service. Five minutes pass by. "Still not getting any," I say aloud. Another five minutes. "We need to find Wi-Fi," I declare. I can feel my anxiety rising. Why did I agree to this trip? Now I am stuck out here. Who goes on vacation in March? This conference is important, but my partner is the most important thing in my life. Still, I ask if we can find somewhere with Wi-Fi to stop. We find a McDonald's. My anxiety is assuaged. But I am not convinced that we are out of the woods just yet.

As we pull into the McDonald's, my partner notes that this will make us late. "Don't worry," I assure her, "this will only take a minute." This is not true, and we both know it. I run inside and take a seat out of sight of the register and attempt to log in. I receive an error message. The site informs me that I need to contact technical support via email to fix the problem. I write an email. My legs are restless. Unsure of what to do, I pull up the Cs Facebook profile and send a message asking if they can provide a link to the Avengers Zoom room. I then quickly text my partner, "can I get you something? McFlurry?" This is

a dumb idea. We are headed to dinner and no McDonald's ice cream machine ever works.

I then resend my original message to whoever is running Cs Facebook. This is rude. I hate to be rude. At that moment, in reponse to my offer to fetch her a McFlurry, my partner texts, "Yes please :)." "I don't have time for this," I say to myself, hastily walking to the counter. Fortunately, the restaurant is dead. Unfortunately, the ice cream machine is, as always, down. What am I doing here? My partner is understanding, but should she be? The presentations will be recorded after all. The dinner party is, in the grand scheme of things, more important. I glance at the clock. The presentation ends in 17 minutes.

The Cs Facebook messenger writes back. They cannot provide URLs to specific events, they explain. I put my phone away and walk out to the car.

"Did you get the McFlurry?" she asks. We get back in her tiny red car. I try to calm myself, but end up repeatedly analyzing the situation in search of some solution. I made us late for no real reason. "Why is this conference so difficult to access?" I ask rhetorically, in an attempt to replace my guilt with anger. This brings more guilt. I know how hard people have worked to make the conference happen. I am embarrassed when I catch myself in moments like these, where I shirk responsibility and cast blame.

After dinner, my partner's family is talking about their plans for tomorrow. I am reviewing the next day's slate of presentations and recommitting myself to the conference experience. There are so many great panels to choose from. I'm especially excited about online activism, one of my favorite areas of research. I am reminded how lucky I am to be entering this field. "I've just signed us up to go fishing tomorrow afternoon," her father exclaims. "Did you hear that?" my partner asks me with excitement. A fresh opportunity for me to choose life over work suddenly presents itself, just hours after I have made us late for dinner.

The next morning, my partner's family is loading up the car to go to the beach. "Are you sure you can't make it?" her father asks us, referring to the afternoon fishing trip. Later, at lunch, I reflect on how this is probably the best chance at bonding I will get with this important figure, who I have come to see as my future father-in-law, though he does not yet know it. I think, too, about my other commitments. Of all the years to be an active participant at Cs, this year is the most important, because this year I am a Documentarian. I've made a commitment I

don't plan on breaking. I explain my Documentarian tasks to her family, and they are understanding, but it still feels like I am doing something wrong. I think about this on Thursday afternoon, as her family fishes, she shops, and I watch presentations at a local Oyster Shack. It is pleasantly quiet in this restaurant, and I cannot concentrate. The waitress checks on me too often. The elderly man sitting next to me asks too many questions. What would be welcomed scenarios—I love good service and conversation—have transformed into obstacles blocking me from getting my task done in the time I have allotted myself. I make it through two panels of presentations, taking too few notes and remembering very little.

I reflect on this later that night as I read over the Documentarian Evening Survey prompts. "What would be the most valuable outcome from your conference experience?" the prompt asks. Choices include "learning a new theory, concept, and/or heuristic," "learning from others doing similar research and scholarship," and "meet with potential publishers." I am reminded of the opportunities I have missed. I review the notes I've taken in an attempt to reflect and write on things I learned from presentations. Again, I feel like I've done something wrong. Later that night, I tell my partner that I've decided to drive home the next morning.

I get to my house the next day just in time to watch Roxane Gay's keynote. I am a hardcore fanboy. It ends, and I put on my signature Cs suit, including slacks, socks, and shoes, in spite of the fact that only my face will be captured on video. I look in the mirror in search of the comfort that this suit has always brought me. In the past, I would wake up to a clean, cold hotel room with this outfit neatly laid out. I would feel nervous as I put it on but grow into my confidence throughout the day and prior to presenting. I look at this outfit now, laid across my unmade bed, and realize that it is a terrible suit. I put on a simple button-down instead.

This is a common problem for me in graduate school. The scenes shift, but the key stages are always the same: I take on a bunch of commitments, obstacles emerge and things almost fall apart, but I make it out. Each time, I am relieved, but affected. I do not want to keep living under so much stress. But I am torn; on one hand, I want to look out for myself and create a healthy work-life balance. On the other hand, I know I need to work hard to secure a tenure-track professorship and take on the positions that I want to take on.

Do I lack the necessary discipline to stay afloat in the academy, or does the academy demand too much of me? I know of no other persons choosing to go on vacation during a (virtual) conference. Or maybe I do, and they are simply taking these tasks on, struggling in the same ways as I am. I care about my personal relationships deeply. I have determined, at thirty, that the meaning in my life will be defined by the activities and relationships I choose to give attention to. So, sometimes, the academy must take a back seat. I still struggle with believing this. I want to believe that it is okay to not work, but the guilt and shame that comes with not working makes this a difficult task.

These kinds of stories are not uncommon among graduate students, especially toward the end of this journey. Nearing the end of a PhD, one must not only work toward completing a dissertation and securing a job, but also teach, submit to journals, present at conferences, and maintain any administrative and service commitments. On top of this, we have personal lives. I must adequately tend to both of these if I am to ever get a tenure-track position and also build a family. This kind of pressure is worsened in our newly quarantined world, where the boundaries between work and home don't just blur, but fully converge. Often, we must now balance home and work duties simultaneously. In this digitally mediated academy, it is easier to take on more tasks while balancing academic commitments—to say "yes" when my partner invites me to her family reunion. Before the pandemic, I wouldn't have had to make this decision. I would have been in a different city, trying new foods covered by a travel grant (thanks, University!), filling out my *C's the Day* booklet, attending a wide variety of presentations, and fanboying my favorite scholars.

Trying to reenact this experience digitally doesn't *have* to be miserable. It wasn't the technological glitches or Wi-Fi connections that ruined my time at the conference. Those were simply the catalyst for breakdowns. Ultimately, my experience of "going to" Cs was made difficult because I did not look out for myself. I took on too much in an attempt to meet the demands of both my personal and professional lives. The funny thing is, I did not fail. I filled out my Documentarian morning and nightly reflection prompts. I talked into my voice recorder at night in search of genuine insight I could offer. I managed to create and deliver a meaningful presentation on antiracist pedagogies and made good impressions with my partner's family. But I came away from the experience exhausted. That's the most important part of

this story: I got it done. And I can get it done again. And I'll be asked to get it done again. But how can I get it done in ways that lead to less burnout?

Part of the answer is to draw clearer lines for ourselves, to learn when to say no—or, in my case, *how* to say no. Another solution is to recommit ourselves to the habits and rituals that make our work meaningful *to ourselves.* For me, this means finding ways to reconstruct the pleasures of participating in intellectually rigorous communities that exchange ideas and support one another when feelings of self-doubt and burnout arise. I miss sharing readings and pedagogical activities with my academic peers. I miss talking with students after class, as opposed to talking at a digital black wall of muted screens and microphones. I miss driving to meetings and prepping in my head on the way there. Some of these things are out of my control. But important aspects of academic community can be reconstructed. Recently, we had a retirement party for a faculty member, and around fifty colleagues came together in a Zoom room. It was delightful to see so many familiar faces together again. I've had virtual happy hours with colleagues. I also joined a virtual writing group for a while. These happenings cannot fully replicate what occurs in the halls and offices of the academy or the bars and restaurants around town. But they do represent a conscious attempt to make life meaningful again, not by finding new ways to work more, but by reinserting our whole selves into these communities, as opposed to simply doing whatever needs to be done. It is a commitment not to being better scholars, but to returning to the habits and routines that make our work and our personal lives meaningful. In doing so, we might find renewed energy that we can then bring to our classrooms and our research and our relationships, even if those classrooms and home/work spaces look different than they did before the pandemic.