

Dear Analeigh

Analeigh Horton

People tend to think that I have my act together. I meet deadlines, serve on committees, hold teaching and administrative graduate assistantships, maintain a 4.0 GPA, and actively participate in the larger scholarly community. My work as a 2021 CCCC Documentarian is a perfect example of my involvement. I originally signed up to be a Documentarian because, after a year of fully online conferences due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I knew that it was harder for me to engage with these conferences in the ways that I used to when we met in person. I felt a bit embarrassed by my online participation's diminished enthusiasm because, as someone who has her act together, I should be able to pay attention in sessions and go to multiple plenaries, right? Imagine us being in person (or, rather, remember what it used to be like). We paid for flights, hotels, meals, and hefty registrations; we canceled our at-home and in-office responsibilities.

Now, imagine someone going through all that effort only to stay mostly in their room and, in the small handful of sessions they did attend, spend more energy managing their inbox than mindfully listening to the presenters. This would not seem like someone who had her act together—it would more likely seem like someone who was wasteful—but this had become my online conference M.O. I would book my calendar like any other week because I wasn't "really gone" and consequently have a pile of work to do in addition to engaging with a conference.

Taking the time to learn yet another online platform with each new conference was exhausting. Dealing with technical glitches and time zone math was annoying. The online spaces were not the same sites of rejuvenation with scholarly friends that in-person conferences had been. All of this is to say, I had a feeling and a hope that serving as a Documentarian would help hold me more accountable to participating in this online conference more deeply and meaningfully than I had been at others. I went into the 2021 CCCC with this mindset: ready, motivated, excited to learn, and anxious to get back to an engaged conference routine.

Five days before the conference began, the spouse of a faculty member found me alone and propositioned me, telling me that they had discussed “consensual nonmonogamy.” I felt shell-shocked. Time stood still. I tried to make sense of what had happened but could barely begin to even look at all the pieces that felt shattered around me. I felt completely betrayed, entirely unsafe, and not at all sure of what was true. You know the part of action movies where the bomb goes off? I felt as though I had become the main character flung to the ground, vision blurred, injuries oozing. The only sounds I could hear were the ringing in my ears and the blood rushing to my head. My fear and vulnerability were palpable as dust swirled in the air. There was no clear indication of which way to move, and I wasn’t even sure if I could. Like a camera spinning around me, adding to my confusion, I felt dizzy and as if every eye was watching to see what I would do next. I asked myself the same question, wondering how to get to safety, how to survive.

All of my energy, including that which was dedicated to the conference, got diverted to just making it through the day. I felt wholly alone; I was not sure who I could talk to or who I could trust. I had been blindsided. I entered into a psychological paralysis. The hour-long session with my therapist and cross-country call to my mentor were not nearly enough to heal my gaping emotional wound. Still, I showed up to meetings. I attended classes. I went to my graduate assistantships and part-time job. My eyes glazed over in disassociation as I staggered through these motions, but trying to return to some sense of normalcy was my method of self-preservation.

Thus, I tried to attend the conference.

My plan for the Documentarian role to be my accountability was foiled as it instead turned into a nuisance of one more thing I had to do when, really, all I wanted to do was to crawl into bed and never wake up. Frightening depression had replaced my normal exuberance. If I were not feeling lousy enough, this sense of dread regarding my Documentarian role was embarrassing. This was not the feeling that I was supposed to have; it was certainly not the feeling that someone who has her act together would have. When I thought about needing to do my twice-daily survey responses describing my conference participation, I considered lying. If the Documentarian organizers had known that *this* was the spirit with which I would fulfill my responsibility, they would have never picked me. If *this* was the spirit that I knew I would bring to the role, I would never have signed up. Even

now, as I write this for the collection, knowing that the editors have asked for authentic stories, my anxiety wails in fear that *this* is not the authentic story they are looking for.

What I realized, though, was that even though this story is not pretty, and it is not the story I was planning to tell, it is still *my* story. I reflected on this messiness in my summative reflection at the end of the Conference:

I don't even need to look back at my survey responses to know that the week of CCCC was one of the worst weeks of my life. The onslaught of one crisis after the next made it incredibly difficult to focus or function. Multiple times, I considered stepping away from this Documentarian position because I felt like I was not doing a very good job with it.

My responses were almost always late (which is highly, highly uncharacteristic of me), and I felt that, because I wasn't attending as many sessions as I possibly could squeeze into a day, I wasn't providing a good reflection of the typical conference experience. I stuck with the role, though, because I realized that what I was experiencing was an authentic experience. Conferences may get planned years in advance, but a lot of the things we experience in a given day (particularly crisis events) aren't planned out. They are unexpected and, all too often, seem to happen at the most inconvenient times. Still, we embrace the capitalist-driven guilt culture in academia of not working hard enough, even when we're pretty much all trying our best.

Personally, I have always tried to make my best *the* best. I have a particularly competitive nature, I joke that "Type A" is named after me, Analeigh, and I use my strong work ethic to reach the high standard to which I hold myself. I did not need anyone else to tell me that I was not working hard enough at Cs because I was already berating myself. On top of that, I was angry that the trauma had happened in the first place. I felt I had done nothing to deserve what had happened to me and it was now negatively impacting every facet of my life. It was not fair. Despite desperately wanting to overcome and move on, I was incapacitated, and I knew that where I was at was not mine or anyone else's best.

But, unfortunately, it was where I was at. I continued my reflection:

I stuck in the role to show that even someone who seems to have it all together all the time can have a really crappy week that can

become debilitating. Even as I write this, I am nowhere close to resolving the issues that have happened over the past couple weeks and they will continue to affect my personal and professional lives. Just because the conference ended doesn't mean that life will end. I will still be carrying my burdens and some other obligation will step in to take CCCC's place and I'll feel guilty all over again about not working hard enough. Stress, at least for me, is riddled with a bunch of emotions. I am constantly bouncing back and forth between throwing myself into my work, panicking, staring at the ceiling, and fielding the next crisis. All the while, I'm trying to heal, and I'm trying to focus so I don't end up terribly behind.

Writing now, knowing that what I write is the reality of life, I still feel hesitant to publish my truths. Sending this to the editors, putting it out there to complete strangers, knowing that peers, coworkers, and advisors may read it is scary, even terrifying. I fear that some future employer might read this and leave with the impression that Analeigh is someone who freaks out and can't do a good job. I worry that I am opening up lines of questioning that I am not ready or willing to answer. At the same time, I am reminded of what my therapist tells me "fear" stands for: False Evidence Appearing Real. I can work myself up into anxiety that all of these hypothetical situations will materialize, or I could channel that energy into writing that life is not perfect. I write from the positionality of a graduate student, recognizing that my status is particularly precarious, but also hope that my admission resonates with people at all stages of their careers because life's perils do not stop once you achieve tenure.

I am therefore going to transition this piece into a letter of compassion. I am going to write to myself as an exercise in bringing myself to believe that the words I write actually do apply to me. I am going to write to you to appeal to your humanity in recognition that we are actual living, breathing people behind our publications and presentations. Because of strenuous review processes, academia has a way of making it seem like the "perfect" version of something is all that exists. In this way, we believe that the commonplace (to invoke the 2021 CCCC theme) is a place of perfection. However, the journal articles that we read, carefully revised, fail to show us the years and tears that went into them. Those beautifully designed conference slides fail to reflect the stress that went into homeschooling three children

online during a pandemic. The glamorous headshots on faculty bio pages do not picture the struggles of mental illness happening inside someone's brain. The commendations for masterful leadership of committees and task forces do not acknowledge the fractured relationships with colleagues I had once called friends. Those glowing teaching evaluations do not uncover the sleepless nights spent listening to imposter syndrome. Academia's reality—our reality—is that, even though we have made the commonplace seem utopian, our common experiences can actually be quite raw. I encountered this bifurcation when I felt a duty to present my most perfected professional self as a representative of CCCC at the same moment that I seemed to be losing my grip on the side of a cliff or fumbling in the pitch blackness at the bottom of a well. I had thought that I understood my identity of scholar and felt confident navigating my role until I realized that even in this “common” place, my sense of safety had been replaced by disorientation and isolation. I therefore wrote that

I guess, to conclude, my role as Documentarian made me confront my own humanity and imperfections. My journey felt bumpy and not good enough, but I'm putting it out there because I think it is real enough.

As I transition to my letter, I'll share with you that when one of my best friends read an earlier draft, her feedback was that it sounded more like someone I wanted to become than someone who I truly believed I am. My response was that it sounded that way because it was true. The author of the letter you're about to read is wise, but most days, I don't feel wise. In truth, in the couple of months since I drafted this letter, I have come back to it, often at night in bed when there are no other noises to overpower the anxious thoughts in my mind, needing to hear these words of assurance. The journey to healing, both personally and as a field centered upon perfection, is not linear and is not easy. I do not claim to have it all figured out and certainly not all resolved, but each day I come closer to fully believing in myself. My hope for this letter is that it sees its reader struggling with the realities of life, from the most mundane to the least expected, and encourages them to keep going.

Dear Analeigh,

Let me start by telling you that I am really proud. Just this morning,

you sat across the table of a coffee shop with tears in your eyes telling your advisor that you should probably drop out of school because you weren't good enough to be here. You're not working hard enough, publishing enough, presenting enough, and maybe it's just been your "womanly wiles" that have gotten you this far anyway, you said.

You didn't feel good enough to be a Documentarian, either. A couple sessions a day were all you could do and even that felt agonizing. But at the same time as the conference, you managed to complete coursework, fulfill your responsibilities for two administrative assistantships, go to your part-time job, and, looking back at your calendar, I see you even attended *two* professional development events! Was this mostly because you were in the denial stage of grief and did not want to alert anyone that anything was wrong? Yes, but you still did it. Even in a moment when you felt you were your worst, you still did what, in that moment, was your best. And guess what? You survived!

Now that we have had some time to distance from the trauma, let's reflect on how being a Documentarian demonstrated that you are an empowered, kickass woman.

You persevere. Even in the most unexpected of circumstances, you do not give up. You faced a situation that was designed to make you feel powerless in its masterful manipulation. When you could have given in or given up, you instead chose to rise to the occasion. No, you did not always turn your Documentarian survey responses in on time or go to every CCCC session that was available, but it would be more productive to focus not on what you didn't do but instead on what you did accomplish. You collaborated with a co-presenter. You recorded a presentation.

You responded to emailed questions about your topic from respected scholars in the field who were interested in what you know. You watched panels about your research topics, and you are going to be a better scholar, teacher, and administrator for it. You completed each of your Documentarian duties. You made a commitment to that role, and you stuck with it. Sometimes, it is okay to quit. Maybe it just isn't the right fit, or you've bitten off more than you can chew. I am not saying that your perseverance locks you into doing all the things all the time. What I am saying, though, is that you are strong, and you can do whatever you set your mind to. You persevere.

You are brave. I know that you did not particularly enjoy writing all of those Documentarian survey responses. Once you decided that you

were going to be honest about how each of your days went, that meant you had to actually be honest, which meant you had to disclose in a Google Form read by strangers that you perceived to be very important authorities that you were not The World's Best Documentarian™. As someone who likes to be really good at things, it was really hard for you not to be good at this. However, something you need to remember is that they did not ask you to be The World's Best Documentarian™. They asked you to share your conference experience, which you did, and that, unexpectedly, ended up being really courageous. It is also important to note that you did not create this Documentarian archive and then seal it away. Although you needed to set it aside for a few months to let the initial shock of trauma die down, here you are now, rereading and thus living again one of the most challenging weeks of your life. Not only are you confronting this account for yourself, but you are also sharing it with an unknown audience. I appreciate you recognizing that this story that feels deeply personal to you is actually one that might resonate with many others, and you are thus putting it out there to be read, even though it feels really tough. You are brave.

You are compassionate. You are telling your story of trauma and imperfection, making a space for others to do the same. You are being kind to yourself by allowing yourself to live authentically and not hide behind a curated mask. Writing this piece feels like a great example of something hurting worse before it feels better, but I promise that by acknowledging the hurt and speaking to yourself with care and acceptance, the hurt will eventually fade into a scar that is beautiful in its reminder of your strength. As you share your story, you demonstrate gentleness by releasing yourself from presenting a perfected persona. You must be willing to forgive yourself for not living up to your expectations, and you should remember that perfection is never an attainable goal. Yes, you have been enculturated to believe that prioritizing your own well-being is hippie, hokey, and self-absorbed, but you know that you would never criticize a friend in the way you lambaste yourself. In spite of others trying to steal your joy and dim your fire, you still have love in your heart that you are capable of giving to others and to yourself. You are compassionate.

You are wise. You have learned from this experience and will carry it with you. Cs was intended to teach you about college composition and communication. Not only did you learn about this but, because of your narrating as a Documentarian, you have also learned so much

more. You entered academia because you wanted to be able to mentor students. Through this opportunity, you have documented that academia is much more than discussing reading in salons whilst wearing tweed with elbow patches. To be in academia means that you still have a ton of reading and discussing to do, but it also means managing complex relationships and external life circumstances. As a Documentarian for an online conference, you clearly articulated how challenging it is to fully participate when there is so much else whirling around you, like the literal obligations of teaching and working as well as the emotional and psychological stress we endure. You have learned more about what you do, who you are, and how you can encourage others. You are not keeping these lessons of life to yourself; you are sharing them with the world that cares about what you have to say. You have been reassured of your motivation to mentor, and you have been galvanized to be kind, honorable, and sincere. You are wise.

You are a writer. You have looked back on your Documentarian reflections and seen that writing them was a space for you to process your pain. Cs was not created to be a therapeutic event but, in a way, it allowed you a space to escape, even if only for a session at a time. The Documentarian surveys were not designed knowing you would use them as a diary for your trauma, but they gave you a reason and a place to write even when you did not want to confront what you were going through. Now, they are a chronicle for you to reflect upon months later and be grateful for the progress you have made. The pen is mightier than the sword and here you have demonstrated the power of words, your writing better analogized by a paintbrush rendering a story of redemption. Your words document. Your words heal. You are a writer.

Dear sister, I hope you believe this narrative that is a testament of your courage. In her 2021 CCCC Chair's Address, Julie Lindquist writes:

Inspired by the disruptions occasioned by the pandemic and the writings of Documentarians, I consider, in my Address, these questions: If we are living in a time characterized primarily by loss, how might the experience of that, and the lessons we can't help but discover, deliver something like gains for the future? And: what is to be gained by understanding learning in terms of loss? ... Trauma and grief have a way of interfering with learning,

of redefining its terms. ... I urge us to consider the losses—of stability, of identity, of enabling narratives, of community relations. (27)

As a Documentarian, you have considered your loss. At the time, you thought what you had lost was your sense of self. Now, what you can realize that you have really lost (or at least made progress toward losing) is a set of unrealistic expectations and the belief that you are not good enough. I hope you will continue to reflect upon this reality that you *are* enough. This will not be easy, so I hope you return to this letter to remember. Remember that you persevere, that you are brave, compassionate, and wise, and that you are a writer. Remember that these qualities transcend any trauma you might face. You may not be The World's Best Documentarian™, but you are awesome. Don't forget that. And, to quote your mentor, "I'm just going to keep telling you until you believe me."

With love,

Me—Analeigh Elizabeth Horton

WORK CITED

Lindquist, Julie. "Writing and Teaching in a Time of COVID: Uncommon Reflections on Learning and Loss." *2021 CCCC Program*, pp. 26–28. NCTE, 2021, [issuu.com/ncte/docs/2021_cccc_program](https://www.ncte.org/docs/2021_cccc_program).