

Because Suffering is Optional

by Eva Roa White

The spring semester of 2020 was a happy time for me. Though I was still dealing with my own personal health crisis at the time, after two years of teaching exclusively online, I was very excited and grateful to return to the physical classroom and my students in person. Two of my three classes (two online, one in person) that semester were especially engaging. In particular, the in-person class was a joy to teach. I had one of those teaching moments of grace when the individual students and the instructor merge into one identity and the teaching seems effortless as the discussions led by the students flow into profound insights.

When the pandemic hit, I had just emerged from my own personal trauma, an auto-immune disease that first landed me in the hospital and then left me isolated from campus. For two years, I was first confined to my bed, then my home, tethered to an oxygen machine, but still teaching full time online. By the fall of 2019, the magic of medicine and physical therapy freed me to carry an oxygen tank and teach in person. The joy of regaining my face-to-face connection to my students and my supportive colleagues was part of what helped me heal at a faster rate. Though still frail, I was soon able to drive myself to campus and carry my book bag and oxygen tank without the help of my husband, who had been my unofficial nurse for all this time.

Suffering is a great teacher, I have found. Perhaps the greatest teacher of all. I noticed that my view of life had changed profoundly as a result of my illness. I had always thought of myself as a caring teacher, but I now had this new, extraordinary sense that connected me to other suffering humans at a deeper level. It was as if I had grown invisible tendrils that shivered at the presence of any type of suffering.

This first semester back on campus, my in-person class became a little family of sorts. Perhaps it was my gaunt appearance and struggle maneuvering the heavy oxygen tank around the classroom that won them over. Certainly, my vulnerability was a great factor. Illness had reduced me to a weakened state that had me depend on the kindness of others to survive. For a very long time, I was forced to let others take care of my most basic human needs. This new fragility did not match my driven pre-illness persona. I was a changed woman. My

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recently developed survival skills included patience, acceptance, vulnerability, and recognition of suffering. It also drove home the words of Japanese author and marathon runner Haruki Murakami who, in his “Foreword” to his running autobiography, *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, shares:

One runner told of a mantra his older brother, also a runner, had taught him which he’s pondered ever since he began running. Here it is: Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional. Say you’re running and you start to think, *Man this hurts, I can’t take it anymore*. The *hurt* part is an unavoidable reality, but whether or not you can stand any more is up to the runner himself. This pretty much sums up the most important aspect of marathon running. (Murakami vii)

I took this one step further and added “and life.” These words guided and sustained me during my recovery. When my body screamed it hurt too much to get up, I thought of Murakami and how he pushes his body and mind. And I chose. I chose to do physical therapy, go for a walk around my neighborhood, and find renewal and satisfaction in every small achievement of my incapacitated body. This was my own marathon.

That following of Spring 2020, some of the students from the fall in person class took another one of my courses. In this small seminar that featured women and literature, I found a tribe of women who also knew suffering. Not that we discussed this overtly, but it bled through our discussions of some of the novels we were reading. The experience was very rewarding in that we connected as human beings and women as well as teacher and students. Some looked to me for support through their own traumas, if only by showing up to their presentations in other classes or listening to their progress with their struggles. By the time March came around, I was winning my race back to health. I was using oxygen less and less, the constant pain was diminishing, and my stamina increasing almost daily. My walks around the neighborhood became longer and longer. Life was good again. I was recovering not only my physical health but also my ability to once more enjoy the small pleasures in life.

And then, the pandemic took it away.

Next thing I knew, I was back at home teaching online again. This time, my isolation was not as traumatic. I was no longer on oxygen, had gained weight, and the brain fog that comes with deep shock had cleared.

Also, I now knew that suffering was optional.

Eva Roa White

WORK CITED

Murakami, Haruki. *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*.
Translated by Philip Gabriel. Vintage International, 2008.