

October 2020

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Recommended Citation

Murchie, Sharon (2020) "I Wrote My Way Out," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 53: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol53/iss1/9>

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I Wrote My Way Out

by Sharon Murchie



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When schools shuttered in March, I issued a challenge to one of my independent study seniors.

We would “NaCoWriMo” for the next 30 days, modeled after the 30-day challenge of NaNoWriMo.

NaNoWriMo stands for “national novel writing month” and takes place in November every year. Participants pledge to write a 50,000 word novel in that time, or approximately 1,667 words per day. Our NaCoWriMo rules were simple: it would take place during the Coronavirus lockdown; we would both write a blog post every day and post it, no matter how bad it was; we would text each other the link to the new post every night; and we would use this strange situation to build some writing stamina and just see what would happen.

We both naively thought that 30 days would be enough to see this pandemic through. I called my entries “The Coronacation Diaries.”

From entry #1: *“Let’s be honest: for a teacher and for her kids, an unexpected 3-week vacation is like manna from heaven at the end of a dull, grey winter: a gift of precious days of sleep and recovery direct from the gods of teenage hormones and eye-rolling wars.”*

Months later, we were still writing, still posting, still trying to figure it all out.

From entry #81: *“When I started this journey, I naively thought that it would be just a few weeks. A nanowrimo of sorts, blogging throughout the pandemic, trying to entertain the masses with the annoyances of it all. Instead, it became something bigger, a force that has driven me throughout these past 12 weeks, forcing me to reflect and to put into words what it all has meant to me and to those I love.”*

I ended up with 100 posts in all, 100 days of reflecting and ranting about the big things and the little things and the things that made me roll my eyes and the things that made me smile. And, I realized a few things, too.

From entry #68: *“It’s okay to acknowledge the beauty around us and simultaneously see the devastation. It’s okay to stand in the center of destruction and be awed by the gorgeous power of it all. And it’s okay to wish we were anywhere but here, even though here is actually not that bad of a place to be.”*

I can’t begin to explain everything that happened during our NaCoWriMo(s). But these are some of the things that I realized—about me, about my student(s), about my family, about my profession, about our state, about our country—as I wrote.

From entry #46: *“I want to bury my head in the sand and pretend that—if we all just stay home and*

wash our hands—soon, things will start to go back to normal and we can start to get our lives back.”

I realized that I am not Ma Ingalls

One of the recurring threads in my series of blog posts was the ups and downs of being home with family, of trying to navigate their and my anxieties, of trying to navigate school, of trying to come up with something for dinner that everyone would eat. I love my kids, I love my partner, I love our pets, and I adore our home.

But I am not cut out to only see these faces and no others for months straight. I am a teacher at heart, but I would never willingly jump on the homeschool bandwagon. I love to cook, but I have realized that cooking for these same faces and these same palates day after day after day... this does not bring me joy. And as much as I love having my kids around, sometimes I just really want them to stop talking.

From entry #61: “Today should have been a great day. And mostly, it was. And yet, our fuses are so short; we are snapping and overreacting and taking it out on each other, on the only people we know who will take it, on the people who don't deserve it, on the ones within striking distance.”

I do, however, kind of like the fact that the world slowed down. We had not had a family meal together, Monday through Thursday, in years, because of sports, scouts, and music. I had not managed to get a garden planted before July in the last several years. We were still living in boxes from a house remodel we did back in 2018.

Suddenly, every night was a family dinner, the garden was planted mid-May, and the boxes, although still present, are much fewer in number. The world slowed down and the important things bubbled to the surface. I got much closer with my kids. I realized that my relationship with my partner, although not perfect, could withstand being together 24/7 for months on end. I realized that, when this is all over, there are aspects of this slower life that I hope to hold on to. I realized that, in the day-to-day scramble, I had forgotten to breathe. I don't want to forget to breathe anymore.

From entry #52: “I wonder—when this is all over—if our lives will be changed, a slight tangent from the trajectory we had been on. I wonder if we will be any different. I wonder if any of this will stick.”

I realized that our kids and our teachers need to be in school

From entry #38: “Virtual learning in my household is slowly destroying my will to live.”

There are no easy answers, no ways to solve this crisis in education until we can solve this international health crisis. But unless we somehow completely restructure our society so that parents don't need to work and completely restructure childrens' brains so that they desperately want to do school work instead of playing Fortnite, we really won't be able to effectively reach and teach our students through a computer screen.

Online education is so much more than just putting our lessons online, and our schools provide so much more for our communities than simply teaching reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. Not only do teachers need extensive training and time to learn how to effectively teach online, but students need substantial support systems and intrinsic motivation in order to be successful online. Instead, we were and still are triage teaching, trying to stop the hemorrhaging without solving the underlying issues.

From entry #58: “This is not what our students have signed up for. This is not what their parents have signed up for. This is definitely not what we signed up for. And although there are ways to provide thoughtful and thought-provoking education in online settings, it only works if everyone is on board, not if everyone is just treading water in the near vicinity.”

I realized that I am quite often disappointed by my fellow citizens. The brazen insistence that the economy was more important than human lives really struck a chord with me, and with my readers. Because I did develop a small following of loyal readers, and several of my posts about the anti-lockdown protests and the

anti-maskers were shared widely on social media. As I stared at news articles about armed men storming the capitol and screaming in the face of law enforcement, brandishing guns in legislative halls, I wrote. I wrote about my anger at their selfishness, I wrote about their blatant inhumanity, I wrote about their misplaced rage. And as I wrote, I realized that these people in our country who will put the economy above humanity: they do not represent me. These people who refuse to mask up in order to protect others: they are not my family. These people who don't believe in science because the virus hasn't affected them? They are not my community.

From entry #31: *Most of us, when faced with the choice between taking on a little discomfort to ourselves versus potentially exposing others to great harm would choose the former with very little hesitation. Most of us believe in freedom, and we freely choose to conduct our lives with empathy and understanding towards those who may be in harm's way. Most of us will do our best to continue to act in ways that will not cause harm to others. Most of us care about more than ourselves. We are most of us.*

I realized that writing brings us together

My independent study student wrote along with me, sometimes keeping pace day after day, and sometimes taking a few days off. But she wrote about the losses of being a graduating member of the class of 2020, left with no graduation, no prom, no closure. She wrote about the protests. She wrote about struggles with family, about being let down by friends, about crippling anxiety. She wrote about the people in her apartment complex, a cast of characters rich with oddities and poverty and drug abuse and beauty.

She published two of her posts on BuzzFeed, and they were shared hundreds of times. She found her voice, and voiced the thoughts of a pandemic graduate, isolated, together with hundreds of thousands of high school seniors nationwide.

From one of her BuzzFeed posts: *"Look, I know it's not about me. I know that the anxiety that my fellow teens and I are feeling is super irrelevant compared to the big picture. But if you have a student in your life, please, offer them support. Because right now, the only thing scarier than what's happening out there is not knowing what's going to happen next"* (Dunlap, 2020).

I realized that being an ally is not enough

As the Black Lives Matter protests flooded the country speaking out against police violence, the usual backlash and talking points echoed. But this time, something was different. There was an energy present that wasn't here before. There was a white movement towards acknowledging that our country has a problem. There was a youth movement that had power and momentum that wasn't here before. But more importantly, as I wrote, I realized that being an ally was not enough. I had not realized that before.

From entry #83: *It's not enough to recognize the storm, be awed by it, and sit a safe distance away from it, whilst claiming to be an ally. It's not enough to tweet, or post a meme, or repost an article, and then go on with our day. It's up to us to use our privilege—the audiences we have, the safety we have—to get in there and fight with the tools that we have: with our words, with our dollars, in our communities, with our bodies. Otherwise, we're just taking and reposting videos of the power of the storm, but doing nothing to actually aid those who are constantly out in it. It's up to us. We have to be the change. We can't just watch from a distance.*

I realized that I am a writer

I have taught writing for 20 years, but I have never really identified with being a writer until now. But challenging myself to write every day for 100 days, figuring out how to put each day into words, how to find something meaningful in each day helped me process

the moments in this completely unique situation. And I wasn't just writing for myself. By the end, I had a small but loyal following, who thanked me for putting into words what they had been feeling, for helping them process it all, for writing us all through the pandemic. Because writing does that: it builds bridges and it helps us grow as human beings, and grow as a community. We read because we want to learn the stories of others, because we want to put ourselves in those stories, because we see ourselves in the mirrors that great writing provides.

And I have gifted the series to the National Women's History Museum, to be included in *Women Writing History: A Coronavirus Journaling Project*, "a living archive of women's lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for online and physical exhibits, articles and stories" (Women Writing History...n.d., para. 7).

From entry #94: Finding a way to put each day into words, and finding something unique in each day gives meaning to the mundane. And the realization that others are using these words to also process this strange time has been empowering, frightening, awe-inspiring. The fact that you are reading this, by choice, helps me to realize that I am not alone. We are all in this together. Together, yet apart. Apart, yet together. This has been the common thread.

And these are lessons that I will bring to my classroom in the fall, no matter what that classroom looks like. My NaCoWriMo experiment reminded me that writing is so much more than an author's craft. Writing is the author's soul. And through writing, we can help our students face and frame the present and the future, whatever it may hold.

From entry #100: Like a great British tv show, it's important to end a thing before you run out of things to say, before you jump the shark. You shouldn't write 7 seasons if you can figure out how to end somewhere in the middle, maybe at the end of season 2.

Maybe at Coronation Diaries post 100.

I've thought a lot about endings, about famous final lines, about how to end a thing that has become, literally, a part of my daily life, a part of who I am as a person. As Holden said, "It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." By putting a part of my heart and soul out there on the Internet, by building a small but loyal following of readers, I have accidentally tapped into something much bigger than me, much bigger than my thoughts or words.

Because, it turns out that the cliché was right: we are all in this together. Well, maybe not all of us. I'm not going to even pretend that I can connect with the "historical statues matter" folks, or the "never maskers" or the "barbershop or die" crowd, or even the "all lives matter" folks. I'm not even sure that I want to. But I can see the community out there of people like me: people who are trying to do the right thing. People who fail, but then get back up, apologize, and promise to do better. People who care passionately about our country and recognize that "I don't do politics" is a road we will never walk. People who sometimes struggle to get out of bed or accomplish anything of meaning...and who recognize that tomorrow is a chance to get up and try again. People who struggle to connect with the ones they love, who struggle being together, who struggle being alone.

*Tonight, I am alone for *I think* the very first time in 100 days. Michael is out running. The kids are at their dad's. Daughter from another mother is out for the evening. It's just me and the dog, hanging out in my home office/front yard, watching the battery tick down on my Chromebook. It is peaceful, but strange, to be alone after so many days of forced togetherness.*

There is so much yet to be done. There is so much to do. And if I have learned one thing—one singular thing throughout this whole pandemic—it is that our words have impact, not only in how we frame our message for others to hear, but in how we characterize our days and our moments. The words that we use frame our lives, frame our relationships with others, frame every moment. These words, no matter

how poetic or succinct, have the power to change our world.

But these so many days of forced togetherness and so many days of having to put my thoughts into words has helped me to make meaning of it all and to find meaning in each day. And my final thoughts are not final, of course. I will still write, I will still blog, and I will still search and find something in each day that is worth writing about. Even though the pandemic is not over, this particular series has ended—but only to make room for other things that need to be unpacked, that need to be said.

Because I refuse to walk back to the hotel in the rain. I refuse to lay down my brush in extreme fatigue, having had my vision. I will always beat on, boats against the current. But I refuse to be borne back ceaselessly into the past. There is no room for defeat, for getting stuck into the what ifs, for attempting to live and relive the past over and over again, for throwing my hands up in the air and declaring my work here to be done.

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I realized, on this 100 day journey, that we can literally write our way out. We just have to start.

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