



UiO ●●
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Reflection note

“Comprehension apprehended: Language barriers in the times of Corona”

On the role of language barriers in aggravating the difficulties and the isolation I've experienced as an international student during the Covid-19 outbreak. On coping mechanisms and how I manage to keep sane in the midst of the chaos.

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“it’s not the large things that send a man to the madhouse. death he’s ready for, or murder, incest, robbery, fire, flood . . . no, it’s the continuing series of small tragedies that send a man to the madhouse...”. Bukowski’s imagery lends itself quite nicely to the world’s recent condition. The corona virus pandemic is a large thing that holds multiple little tragedies in its folds; a chain of whirlwinds of varying magnitudes that have swept plans, certitude and security from underneath our feet. “The great equalizer”, Madonna had called it from a luxurious petal-filled bathtub; tone-deaf words that fail to see how its impact is all but. As countries pulled the hand break on economic and social activity, the interruption bore a different significance for each and every one. To international students; the risk of infection, academic hitches and financial insecurity come with an added burden, that of isolation.

As a child I’ve spent more time in my own company than most. A habit I’ve taken with me to my teenagehood and became nature when I turned an adult. Aloneness barely phases me. So, when my Norwegian floormates packed their bags as the lockdown stuck and went back to their hometowns, I still found some joy in being alone. After all, the kitchen would remain as clean as I kept it, and that is an absolute win. What got to me, though, was having gotten used to a lifestyle of activity, social closeness and hugs, lots of hugs. Serotonin was now scant.

The second pattern that proved crucial was having led a Norsk-less life for most of my stay. The language, bar my trips to Kiwi, was almost never direly needed: I’m enrolled in an English master’s program that carries the word “International” in its title, my workplace could very well fit in the heart of Dublin, and my friends and coworkers speak twenty and one tongues, English being the common denominator and Norwegian taking up but a few measly percentiles. I’d learnt enough to get me through food labels and serving drinks to the occasional non-English speaking customer, but not enough to understand the news. The watch reads pandemic o’clock, information is wanting, and isolation is nestling.

It starts with one final friendly gathering in Grønland. As we sat enjoying drinks and sharing plans, our phones started to chime with messages from friends and flat mates. The videos are surreal: lines upon lines at grocery stores and baskets and carts full to the brim. Clearly, some people knew more than we did. Indeed, the date is March 11 and the number of cases had just escalated to the nine hundreds. The air in Grønland suddenly seemed charged with tension as people left stores with bags of toilet paper and exchanged commentary asking: “did you hear the

news?”. We had too, but through Facebook posts rather than official channels. We finished the night in a friend’s kitchen around pizza and burgers. We knew it to be the last hangout for months to come, and I knew that obsessively checking social media was a new habit set afoot.

To this day, I still know more about the outbreak, public health measures and preparedness in the United States and South Korea than I know about Norway. Neither is my home country, and I don’t speak Korean. Despite the much welcome letters from the Dean, the occasional posters in metros and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health sharing English updates on their website, I was still information hungry. Metro announcements were still monolingual as were the detailed daily reports. And as English news websites hid behind paywalls and denied newsletters, kind friends had to voluntarily translate press briefings to keep me and others in the loop of the outbreak’s social and political impacts. The same kind friends had to walk me through my options after being *permittert* and served as a channel to all student-related news: whether we qualified for salary compensation or whether the renewal of residence permits was jeopardized.

Picking up Norwegian lessons was one of the habits I’d instilled into the new Corona-times routine. But the learning was tinged with a taste of bitterness as I felt I lived in a country that didn’t acknowledge my needs or my existence even in the most urgent of situations. I’d looked at UDI’s all-Norwegian letters in the past with a bit of consternation but had shrugged it off as one of those things one must get used to. After all, I respect a country’s ambition to protect its language and identity and understand that, as guests, it is our duty to try to bridge the gap and learn. However, something was clearly amiss as Covid-19 took unequal toll on immigrants, 25% of positive cases being registered amongst the foreign born by April 19 according to [Reuter](#). Apropos, a dear doctor friend has had texted me on the 3rd: “I started on the isolation ward today and one of the first things I noticed was how many foreign names there were... Muslim names”. The trend was in view early on.

Whilst my medical background had sheltered me from taking unnecessary risk, it was certainly not the case for a lot of immigrants, and I wondered how well the available information had translated to fellow international students. The poor language preparedness of the public health system was discernible in the little things: In multilingual information letters and videos only produced and released weeks after the outbreak, or a tracing application whose privacy agreement I couldn’t understand. “... *not the death of his love. But a shoelace that snaps with no time left...*” Bukowski continues, and that all-Norwegian agreement was my own personal shoelace.

For months I've had a single mission: To keep sane. Physical, psychological and linguistic isolation was hounding like a three-headed Cerberus, and establishing a routine proved as vital as playing the harp. It turns out that quarantine is a great time to adopt new habits. My vow and duty to self-care focused on the basics: sleep well, eat well, move well. The first two proved relatively easy with the absence of the late-night shifts and the greasy temptations. The third, however; required a bit of mental conditioning, having never been an adept of exercising in confined spaces. It is fair to say that the nearly daily dashes of endorphin were the best antidote to all the worrying that was thrust upon my conditions: The student worrying about her mind being agile enough to write decent papers, the academic about jeopardized field-work abroad, the international guest about meeting financial conditions and renewing her permit, and the kin wondering when she'll see her one-sixth furry family next.

My fair success aside, it almost feels inappropriate to write about coping mechanisms when I've spent over thirty hours of the last three days sleeping. It may not sound like much, but my sleep diary will be quick to signal the aberration as my mind and body thrive on quiet, dreamless hours of sleep that come in sevens or eights. Such an event is a singularity in and of itself, much coveted and rarely obtained; Hypnos regularly tipping the scales in favor of shorter nights while Oneiroi indulges in the stuff of nightmares. It occurs to me, however; that setbacks are a norm in the world of adults, and that writing only when the sun shines high and bright is not only dishonest, but disrespectful to the struggles of today, the lessons of the past and all that makes me myself.

Carl Rogers writes on the process of becoming a person: "He [the client] feels loving and tender and considerate and cooperative, as well as hostile or lustful or angry. He feels interest and zest and curiosity, as well as laziness or apathy. His feelings, when he lives closely and acceptingly with their complexity, operate in a constructive harmony". I am only just embracing the complexity of my emotions, my states of mind and my energy levels, and dare say I'm thankful the pandemic occurred at this stage of my life, for I fear my younger self would have succumbed to the difficulty of enduring. I recall a bit of conversation I've had with my former therapist a few months into the process. I'd said: "I feel well today, perfectly all right. But what about tomorrow? What if I relapse and can't get out of bed or don't want to talk to anyone again?". To that, she simply replied: "So what? You'll have good days, and you'll have bad days, you'll just try again". Embracing this reality and gifting myself with kindness was monumental in coping with the outbreak. Growing up, the strong and successful were presented to my child's mind as these

superhuman creatures of iron will. They're never phased by anything life throws at them, sadness can't taint their thousand-watt smiles and procrastination does not belong in their lexicon. Like gold medalist hurdlers, they just keep going. As the years went by, and as I steered away from the illusion and the weight of what I was and thought I wanted to become and into what I truly am, I began to understand my strengths and accept my weaknesses, not as a burden to carry but as an inherent, valuable part of myself. I've become a good hurdler, but on the days where I stumble and hit the ground, I pause to smell the flowers.