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## On Sabbatical: A Backward Glance

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## A Backward Glance

*Phyllis Gimbel*

**I**n late January of 2020, I thought about how lucky I was to be on sabbatical at a time when I could do some serious thinking, writing, and travel for scholarly work. Then, in early March came the Covid pandemic and a message in which Provost Ismaili highlighted the details of Governor Baker's press

conference, outlining steps to address the spread of Covid-19. Provost Ismaili said he would be in touch with more information later that evening. He added that we would be receiving text alerts and emails from President Clark concerning this issue.

This was the beginning of my spring 2020 sabbatical. I thought to myself, "What a whirlwind time we were in." It was changing so fast. Each day was presenting new protocols. One day we could all congregate closely. Then we had to learn to be careful of sneezing and coughing, maintaining social distance, and being certain to wash our hands for 20 seconds. Then another day, no more than 25 people could be together in one place at one time. Later, it was suggested that no more than 10 people could congregate. Then social distancing was really the best behavior to follow. In other words, it would be best to stay home and avoid being in places with other people.

Then my hometown postponed elections due to the spread of the coronavirus. And then my favorite restaurant closed, except for takeout. The local indoor tennis courts, where I play tennis, closed. Yoga classes became virtual. Several hair salons closed. Churches and synagogues decided to cancel face to face services in favor of virtual services and masses. Travel was restricted and every day a new country closed its borders. Some students who were studying

abroad were stuck in other countries. In fact, several high school students from my town remained in Peru, while politicians figured out how to bring them back to their families.

Then came short-term telecommuting ordered by Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker. The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates due to losses on Wall Street and fear of a recession.

Many grocery stores opened early for people aged 60 and older and for those with disabilities. These same stores closed earlier than their normal hours to restock and sanitize. They had to restock as shoppers were hoarding toilet paper, tissues, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes.

All of this was being conveyed via television and radio speeches from governors, mayors, and the President of the United States. We were being bombarded daily with emails about closings and about a different way to continue operating. The bombardment of emails also seemed to be used for marketing and for donations. A local florist sent an email explaining that their delivery team would be adhering to social distancing guidelines and would leave gifts at the front door, following up with an immediate phone call to notify the recipient. The florist expressed a goal of sharing happiness and hope through flowers, adding that it was more necessary than ever and that these sentiments would continue to be

delivered as safely as possible. The floral company thanked us for continued support, wishing us health and safety.

Then Governor Baker requested that institutions pursue strategies to reduce the need for faculty and staff to be on campus by maximizing remote work opportunities while maintaining essential on-campus services, especially for residential students who could not safely return home.

The day after Governor Baker's public health order, President Clark informed us that extensive conversations with state and university leaders had occurred during the day and that based upon those conversations, he was expanding the university's email announcements from the prior evening by alerting the BSU campus that we would move to fully online/remote learning when classes resumed on Monday, March 23, 2020, and continuing through the remainder of that spring semester.

All these daily changes were unsettling. I decided to get out of the house and go to the local grocery store to buy some disinfectant wipes. I found an employee restocking the shelves with eggs and milk. I noticed his nametag and asked him if he spoke French. He said yes, as he was from Haiti. We spoke in French and talked about what was going on in our country and in his native Haiti. Our conversation in French helped build a relationship. He asked if he could help me find anything as many of the grocery shelves were empty. I mentioned the disinfectant wipes. He said they did not have any. A few moments later, he located me in another grocery aisle and gave me a container of disinfectant wipes he had obtained from the supply room. I was deeply moved by his gesture. We both knew that we were in the situation of the pandemic together and we had bonded by sharing language and culture. This incident gave me hope. I had connected with someone new at a time when I was craving human connection.

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Then I heard on the news that three states, New York, Illinois, and California, were ordered by their respective governors to shelter in place. At that time, Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker said he was not going to mandate shelter in place. My mind wandered. If the Massachusetts death toll from the coronavirus increases, will Governor Baker order shelter in place? I wondered how I, an extrovert who loves to play sports, exercise, do yoga and walk will be able to stay home 100 percent of the time.

And then I thought, what about the needy? I heard on the news that K-12 children eligible for free or reduced lunch would need access to food since their schools were closed for an undetermined amount of time. Some school districts decided to do grab-and-go lunches and breakfasts while others asked school bus drivers to deliver meals. And what about the children in hospitals who could only have two primary caregivers as visitors? My heart was heavy for these sick and needy children.

On March 23, 2020, Governor Baker ordered the physical closure of all non-essential businesses and organizations effective at noon on Tuesday, March 24 through Tuesday, April 7, 2020. Even physicians closed their offices to offer telemedicine.

These abrupt changes made me think deeply about life. Isn't that what a sabbatical is for? In addition to writing a book about mentoring new school leaders, shouldn't I also think about what all of us are experiencing? It was time for me to open myself up to new perspectives; to force myself to look through extremely different lenses. Is this a way to bring all of us together against a common threat? Is this a way to slow us down from our frenetic pace? Is this a way to help us build community in our families, our businesses, our schools, our universities, and with one another?

Since it was March, which is a month of daily changes in New England weather, I took advantage of sunny days to walk, to be in the natural world. I returned to the same place to observe the same trees, some with pussy willows and some with buds of red, orange, yellow and green. Each time I walked the same paths, I watched how the daffodils sprouted, budded, and then blossomed. I wanted to see, hear, and smell the arrival of spring. I wanted to see if certain birds remained in specific trees. I had the time. I was on sabbatical. And as I observed, I thought about the book I was writing, drafting thoughts in my head to later put on paper.

The lone walks allowed me to think about the current generation of students. I remembered the terrorist attack of 9/11. What will this worldwide coronavirus experience mean to current elementary, middle, and high school students, as well as to our own university students? How will they look back at the spring semester of 2020? Will they reflect on the pandemic as a time when their own schools as well as our BSU community pulled together?

The peace and quiet of my walks helped me see a road to brightness. The hustle and bustle and frenetic pace of our twenty-first-century lives had all but stopped. Now, with the stay-at-home paradigm, we could reach out to friends, acquaintances, and relatives to reinforce connections. I reconnected with my former student who was also my Graduate Research Assistant and who now lives in Valencia, Spain. She and I share our love of languages, so we emailed in Spanish. She told me that she, too, was basically remaining at home and that it was challenging to be in an apartment with her two very young children without a backyard, a balcony, or a terrace. She thanked me for reconnecting with her. Our correspondence made me think about how important it is to let people know how much I care about them.

I communicated with my ninety-year-old friend and let her know how much I valued our long-time friendship. In return, she told me the same thing.

Was this type of connection with those I care about a way to make a new start? I was not sure that those of us in good health valued our health. I was signing my emails "Stay Healthy," and my friends were doing likewise. Ralph Waldo Emerson's words rang true, "The first great wealth is health."

Wasn't it time to take to heart former first lady Martha Washington's words about happiness? "I am still determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances."

As I look back on the spring of 2020 and the ensuing academic year, I realize that so many things mean more to me now:

Maintaining friendships

Enjoying nature

Sharing time with family

Reaching out to BSU colleagues

Connecting with my BSU students via Zoom, text, phone, email

Finally, reflecting on my spring 2020 sabbatical, one of the best things I learned is to keep moving forward, and at BSU, we have done just that.



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