

# When the River Ran Dry

## Personal Reflections on a Professional Moment

*Caroline Martin*

**T**he second weekend of March 2020 saw a fabulous occasion unfold at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City. It was when our Upper School students put on a dazzling show with their outstanding rendition of *In The Heights*, transporting us all not only to Broadway, but back into our own childhoods, and into our parents' childhoods, as the musical tale of immigration to Manhattan was retold. Sunday night's closing performance was emotional, particularly for our seniors, whose own paths out into the world were so appropriately illuminated by those of the story's young characters. We teachers left the auditorium with a wonderful combined sense of nostalgia and hopefulness that beautifully blended the pride in our pasts with the potential in our students' futures. It was a moment in time that not one of our community will ever forget.

We came to school on Monday, the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, much as usual, but there was mingled with the levity over the weekend's jubilations a creeping foreboding for just what the imminent, but as yet impalpable, East Coast sweep of the pandemic would demand of us. It started with the alert that one of the audience members at the weekend performance had tested positive for COVID-19. With no map for just what to do upon exposure, we found this news to be more of an augur for just what geometrical permutations social distancing would impose on our perspectives, as the precise location within our auditorium of the infected individual was shared in an email marked "urgent." By Thursday, the 12<sup>th</sup>, the plug was pulled, and although we didn't know it at the time, the doors to our school would remain shut by state mandate for the remainder of the school year. What would have been a purely joyous week as we approached our much anticipated Spring Break, was instead another moment in time—this, one of a very different quality—that not one of our community will ever forget. Instead of pride over what was and optimism over what was to come, the spectrum of feelings that pervaded our atmosphere ranged from uncertainty to fear.

Despite the impending cataclysm, the weekend of March 16<sup>th</sup> proceeded as planned. My family and I drove 50 miles upstate for the Maple Sugaring Festival at Long Meadow Waldorf School, and celebrated St. Patrick's Day with friends in typical expat fashion.

There were one or two notable absences from these traditional gatherings, and a few cynical remarks about the virus, but otherwise we made merry. So much so indeed that we stayed an additional night, deciding to brave Monday morning rush hour for the sake of a few bonus hours with our pals (little did we know just how big a bonus it would turn out to be). The rental car had to be back by 10am, so we budgeted an extra hour and sped off by 8am.

It was at some point along HWY 4 that the paucity of traffic became eerie, but even this did not prepare us for the ghostly city we entered as we rolled off the George Washington Bridge and made our way unimpeded down the Henry Hudson Parkway. It was a sunny morning, with glistening crests dancing seaward along the river, but the water's advance, made spectral by the strange stillness, was more a harbinger of drought than a symbol of plenty. As we reached our apartment and turned the inner latch behind us, our walls closed in, and in that very moment, we physically, mentally, and emotionally went into lockdown.

Two weeks of Spring Break and one of rapid assessment and formative action would pass before my official duty would resume, but in what format, across which medium, to teach what and to whom, none of us fully understood; we did not, perhaps, realize the extent to which we were in a state of shock. Some of our families were clearly in distress, their lives, or at least their outlooks, turned upside down, and supporting our students' wellbeing took on the deepest meaning. As Waldorf teachers we knew that this was our time, that this crisis was exactly what we were trained and compelled to brave. Thus we did what we do best; in the same breath by which we re-shaped lessons and schedules, we shared our impressions and understanding of our students' inner worlds, keeping their welfare at the forefront of our endeavor.

We decided on Zoom as the virtual medium that would keep us connected and our classrooms intact while we adhered to and grew used to physical distancing. Very early on, mostly through faculty meetings with one another, we learned that collaboration was taking on new important meanings. There would be fatigue associated with the screen, but also practical difficulties in

running the platform while teaching. Having an additional teacher would make monitoring waiting rooms and break-out rooms and student requests more fluid and thus less disruptive to the lesson. Plus, collaborative support would also serve us more fundamentally, in alleviating our own feelings of isolation.

What broad constraints were most important we laid out:

- Screen time would be minimized
- Movement would be essential
- Outdoor activity would be gently encouraged
- The immediate home and local environment of the child would, as much as possible, be part of the lesson
- Now more than ever it would be vital to collaborate with parents and siblings

We also anticipated that the drastic and sudden change to both the learning and the teaching environments would be better served by collaborative instruction. The classroom or the laboratory was no longer a teacher's domain for the duration of the lesson. Instead, it was a living room or a bedroom or a kitchen or a bunkbed, a space shared with others not officially belonging to the class. Likewise, the outdoor spaces available to our students ranged from city blocks to farmsteads. Pooling together different teachers with different voices and skills provided individual students with a fuller sense of unity with their new learning environments.

In an effort to bring teachers and students together more meaningfully and in ways more appropriate to the new and varied learning environments, we reduced the number of remaining Main Lessons while extending both the duration over which each would be taught and the breadth of subject matter that each would encompass. For example, we formulated a new tenth grade Ecology Main Lesson with instruction to be given by three teachers from the science and math department. During this course, we had students make observations of their immediate environments by keeping a notebook, but we united geology, soil science, botany, geography, biology, and chemistry, from the uniquely different vantage points (backgrounds and foregrounds) of the three teachers. During the Ecology Main Lesson, there were moments of harmony across such varied landscapes as those that we each occupied that will forever influence our teaching for the better.

Another highlight was the Kitchen Chemistry course that we offered, both as an elective for the eighth grade and as a seventh grade Main Lesson. The kitchens of participating students became home laboratories as students collaborated with their parents on shopping lists to supply their inventories. Using sugar, vinegar, salt, ice, eggs, oil, natural dyes, gelatin, and more, this course brought to light the wonders of everyday chemistry. More fundamentally, it gave the students a sense of place and purpose in their own homes at a time when feelings of isolation were overwhelming. Through the course, we were welcomed into each other's homes at a time when this is exactly what we all needed most.

It was inspiring to see the scope and creativity of the new elective courses that we offered, all intended to meet the students in their isolation. Some courses, like those described above, were founded on embracing the simplicity of what is before you, on stripping back abstract theory, and on allowing spiritual connection through the practical. Other courses, such as a new reading seminar with the tenth grade, in which we took up Stephen J. Gould's *Wonderful Life*, with its focus on the ineffable questions of life's origins, gave conceptual escape to the students in their physical confinement.

With the juniors and seniors, it became apparent that there was comfort in academic rigor, with some students exceeding their past performances as the spirit of teamwork took over. And perhaps the icing on the cake was being more fluidly able to offer placement in advanced classes to students in lower grades, and indeed in different time zones.

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There were lows, too, but these were mostly caused by fatigue. What stood out more was the palpable gratification that pervaded the atmosphere at the beginning and end of all faculty Zoom meetings. The moment when the familiar faces of those with a shared purpose popped up on the screen was a comforting realization that we were all in this together. And when we signed off there was a tacit acknowledgment that yes, the river may have run dry but our task was now not to idly watch as the waters returned, but to venture forth and map the bed.

**Caroline Martin, PhD.** *An Irish national, Caroline Martin began teaching chemistry at the Rudolf Steiner School in 2019. As a parent of two young daughters, she was drawn to Waldorf education to support their*

*healthy growth and development. Before teaching at Steiner, Caroline studied geology at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and in 2013 earned her PhD in geochemistry from the University of Cambridge. Caroline also studied at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University and at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, where she was a Fulbright scholar. Outside of the classroom, Caroline can be found wading in rivers, swimming in cold coastal waters, or immersed in Victorian fiction.*

