Teaching and Learning Moments

Pandemic Pause: Lessons in Unscrambling My Daily Life

I play this silly game on my phone called Wordscapes. It started as a way to pass time, in moments like those when you’re waiting for your plane to take off—post-airplane mode, pre-in-flight Wi-Fi. Then, it became a way to unwind and take my mind off things without mindlessly scrolling through social media. Lately, it has become a way to keep my mind engaged and awake during late nights and early mornings while nursing my newborn child.

The game is something of a mix of Bananagrams, Scrabble, and a puzzle. You’re presented with a few letters and tasked with crafting those letters, and only those letters, into words that fit in a predefined web. Often this is breezy and rhythmic, relaxing—cat, cap, cape, tape, pat. Click click click. The words all fit! Other times, I stare at the letters and the blanks on the screen, desperately trying to squeeze the letters into some coherent word that fits the puzzle, only to sigh in frustration. O-L-I-C-L-G-A. What?? But, hours later I reopen the app and it couldn’t be more obvious—logic, logical, local, lilac! And then it hit me.

Maybe that pause—a few hours of separation—is needed in more than just a game. Maybe it’s needed in our careers, our families, our relationships, our lives. Maybe we need hours or days to step away and come back with fresh eyes, a clear mind, and a renewed spirit to tackle our daily grind again. When our demanding days, pressured pace, and heavy emotions leave us tired and weary, could “pressing pause” lessen the burnout we feel?

There are many challenges, tragedies, and anxieties wrought by the current coronavirus pandemic, but perhaps a promising silver lining is this poignant pause that’s been forced upon us. At once, extracurricular activities, get-togethers, and a host of other engagements were all suddenly brought to a screeching halt. Calendars were forcibly cleared, and priorities reexamined.

Make no mistake, I’ll be the first to admit it: I miss the “extra” things in life, and certainly, even more so, the essential things I’ve forgone for the moment (What I would give for a hug from my mom!). But even when this pandemic is over, perhaps I’ll try to maintain for the moment (What I would give for a hug from my mom!). But even when this pandemic is over, perhaps I’ll try to maintain time for some more pauses in my “regular” life too. A few more minutes just holding my baby, a conversation with neighbors at the mailbox, an intentional phone call to an old friend, some time spent in reflective silence alone.

Our schedules have rapidly refilled with countless Zoom meetings, webinars, home-schooling, and conference calls. We’re struggling to juggle unexpected personal responsibilities, grappling with the emotional effects of months of sudden social distancing, and wrestling with the uncertainty of what the next year will hold, all while the pressure to be hyperproductive mounts and the feelings of burnout begin to bubble.

To move forward, we’ll have to intentionally create space in our calendars and in our lives for taking pause, both now and after the pandemic subsides. It’ll be challenging. We’ll have to learn new kinds of discipline that, I’ll be honest, I certainly don’t have right now. But, just like taking a break from a simple word game helped my mind unscramble those letters, maybe more often pausing in my daily life will yield critical clarity too. Perhaps this practice can become a habit, and in becoming such, it can be more than just a Band-Aid for my burnout. As they say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Acknowledgments: The author wishes to thank Scott Wilkinson, PhD, Ruth Gotian, EdD, MS, and Mary Featherstone.

Funding/Support: The author’s work is supported by a National Cancer Institute grant (1-F30-CA-243250).

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