

Transcending Zoom

It's 6 AM on a Saturday morning in Viroqua, Wisconsin, when my alarm first starts going off. The wind has been banging on the windows of our 110 year old farm house all night long and the smoke from the wood stove that has been working on overload is thinly permeating the air in our bedroom. Since the snowplow made its first noisy pass on the road at 4 am, it's been a relatively sleepless night and I'm finding it nearly impossible to leave the warmth of my bed and pad quietly down the dark hallway to where my laptop is set up to Zoom. By 6:30, I am up, tiptoeing so I don't wake the dogs, into the dark room. I look out the upstairs window at the rooftops in our rural town. About two blocks away, the sun is just beginning to cast a pinky orange light onto the snow blanketing the hill behind Cecil and Sonya's tall red house.

I open the Zoom classroom but leave my camera off. I am already a Sophia's Hearth graduate, coordinating online education, so I don't need to be seen (I reason with myself). Really, it's because I am not yet awake enough to see the hairbrush that I placed next to the laptop before going to bed. I let Jane Swain, arriving in person at Sophia's Hearth's in New Hampshire, into the Zoom classroom and can see the sunlight filling her room on Eastern Time. I enable the waiting room so she can get set up and prepared before letting the students into the classroom while I quickly get dressed. I decide to get dressed in the bathroom as it's the only room in the house that stays warm on the coldest nights when the rest of the house drops to 50 degrees. When I come back in, it's time to let the students in and the sun is now just level with the windows of the neighboring houses.

Jane Swain, a pediatric physical therapist and movement specialist, greets the students logging in from around the country and overseas. One student is stretching in front of a fire and then pauses to feed more logs into it. I watch as the flames fill the little picture screen on her fireplace and on our Zoom community. I've seen before that fire has an ability to reach out beyond our laptop cameras. Anna Rainville, in the BACWTT Summer Conference for Early Childhood Educators, referred to this as a creating a hearth space, when we light a candle next to where we will be learning online. This past summer, I needed to stretch and take a walk during a long weekend conference but still had one workshop to go before our break. I thought about ducking out of the workshop, but then the first student logged on with my group. Joining from a small town in Quebec, she had set up her laptop outside and just behind her was a small black chiminea crackling and sending up little white puffs of smoke as she talked. She and her fire recharged me enough to stay on for that workshop and I was thankful I did.

It's not just fire that has the ability to transcend Zoom. Movement has this ability also. My room is now filled with morning's first light coming in the window and Jane has just begun leading the students in Spatial Dynamics exercises. I watch from my chair, at first thinking I'm glad my camera is off as I can remain sitting and observe. But that thought has barely completed itself before I am drawn into their movement and am up and out of my chair crossing the room with Jane and the rest of the students. I feel elevated and graceful like someone that does this every morning. After twenty minutes of coordinated movements around the room, the sun is risen above the chimneys of my neighbors' houses and my arms and legs feel as light as the earliest rays now dancing across the snowy rooftops.

While Jane takes questions from the students on the assigned reading, I quickly dart down the stairs to make my tea, feeling nourished from the exercises to meet my dog's high morning energy as my husband, now up, looks for her leash. I hurry back upstairs with my tea and get back just in time for Jane's opening comments on the lecture while I see my husband and our dog heading down the snow plowed lane.

It's been a particularly cold and snowy start to the winter and my parents, who farm not far from here, have been sending me daily reminders to keep my gas tank full and pantry stocked. They know me well enough to know that my motivation to pump gas when the temperatures are -10 is about as strong as my motivation to get out of bed at 6 am. But they want me to be prepared to meet a blizzard or cold snap or whatever the winter holds in store.

My parent's passion for a sensibly stocked pantry is equivalent to my passion for participating (both as student and online coordinator), in as many classes as I can reasonably fit into my monthly schedule. The winter is long and cold, and I long for the time when we can all be together in person, making unforgettable memories, dancing, singing and holding hands together. But for now, I take comfort in keeping my teaching pantry stocked with healthful and nourishing resources that will allow me to meet even the hardest day with wisdom, joy and lightness in my step, whatever the day or weather may bring.

I am excited because this weekend the Sophia's Hearth faculty will be offering their first online Post Graduate course. The Post Graduate course is designed for students and teachers who have already completed their studies and are looking to dive deeper into special topics. This first post graduate course is on the topic of Incarnational Support for Pandemic Times. Students will dive into aspects of pandemic life that we are all experiencing, learning practical activities including stories and songs to build resiliency, studying reflective practices for parents and adults, and gaining a foundational understanding of the phenomena before us. The course will take place over 18 hours divided over 3 months.

This brings me to the most important thing I have observed transcending the limitations of Zoom (and I find it to be especially true in the courses that meet more than once): community. Two years ago, I would never have thought it possible to feel comfortable in a Zoom classroom let alone make friends or feel a sense of community. But these past two years have taught me that like fire and movement, in challenging times, the spirit of community will defy physics and ride out on waves of energy from student to student across the country when we are all gathered together in common purpose. I have made close friendships with folks that I never would have had the chance to meet otherwise. It's like when you hear a song you love on the radio, and a tingly feeling fills the air around you. It's because you know you are in a moment in time dancing with others, together elevated by community, regardless of where you are.

May we all be together again soon. Until then, I hope you will join us online at Sophia's Hearth.

Darla Barrows is a parent and child educator, a graduate of Sophia's Hearth Birth to Three Program and coordinates online education programs for Sophia's Hearth, in all kinds of weather.