In 1969, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was publishing a monumental work, *On Death and Dying*, with a research conducted on terminally ill patients. At the time, her 5-stage model (denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance, respectively) was considered revolutionary and it helped many go through the grim experience of being terminally ill. I used her work when I was researching for my first book, *Transacting Sites of the Liminal Bodily Spaces* (2011).

When my mother was dying in 1992, I did not have the support of any group. I had to rely on being stoic, which my father had instilled in me long before my mother’s diagnosis. I grew up in communist Romania and my father, my role model, was extremely calm, sarcastic, and stoic. He knew that raising two girls in a household full with women would imply teaching by example. In part, my father was right. Suffering exposes people to embracing their stoic side.

But how does one fill the void in the wake of such a loss? I did not know the answer then. I retreated in the solitude of reading, mostly philosophy and drama. I was in the last year of high school. I had a textbook of anatomy that I kept with me all the time. I did not understand much of its jargon, but I carried it with me in the house as comfort. I knew my mother was gone, yet that anatomy textbook was a constant presence—keeping me company.

I wanted to know why bodies break. Ever since that loss, I am still adding to what I know about pain, suffering, but also resilience. This is why, the 5-step model, while heavily contested, still relates to how we process a moment that is too difficult to relate to logic, too surreal to put in words, and too damaging to have a fast remedy. This is what COVID-19 is for me: a mix of denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and acceptance—and never in that order.

But I am not dying. Only that, 10 weeks into quarantine, my back hurts, my eyes have difficulty focusing, and I am not sure what day is unless I check that on my phone. I have a 15 year-old son and I am responsible for his well-being. I do not always want to wake up, but I set my alarm for 7 a.m., splash my face with cold water, and start to make breakfast.

Since I teach and my semester is over, right now I feel more scattered-brained than I am typically. I know I need routine so I do not succumb to depression. But I also know that pretending to feel fine is not going to help me in any way. I have no filter added to how I should react and interact. I cannot be asked to suppress my emotions. They are untamable because what we experience is tantamount to a draconic training.
I am scared. I hated communism so much because we were taught to be submissive, we were lied, and we were intimated. I am scared that the more we stay indoors, the more we risk our sanity. I am scared to hear the 7 p.m. clapping of hands and shouting, even though I respect the first responders, nurses, and doctors. But the 7 p.m. ritual is triggering. I think of people who have lost their job. I think of prisoners. I think of refugees. I think of senior citizens. I think of lonely people. Is there anyone clapping for them?!

Furthermore, I contrast that clapping with how life used to be. How I used to hug strangers. How I’d hop on a bus and go to a museum in New York City. How I’d enter a classroom to meet and greet my lovely students. How I’d go back home in the summer. How I’d not have to go to sleep hoping everything was a terrible nightmare.

One day, I just couldn't take it anymore. I listened again to the New Year’s Concert in Vienna, my mother’s favorite, assuming that I could restart the year. That did not happen. And so I went back to repeat the 5 stages of grief only that I am still not dying (physically). We stay in pajamas walking from bedroom to bathroom to kitchen back to bedroom. We joke that we need an entire new PJ wardrobe.

I look at the world through what my friends post on social media. Some are here, others are all over the world. I hear news from Romania, Australia, Macau, Canada, South Africa, Brazil, etc. We want to make sure people know we are "here." We cling from this to the next second. And we are mourning. I hear that collective sound of grief. I close my eyes.

And I wonder: but what if this is the end only that instead of dying we repeat the day we started quarantine ad infinitum? That’s when I panic because that would be cruel. From an early age, we train our minds to cope with disaster. However, this is too raw and nothing makes sense. We started a new year, we had plans and dreams and mid-March we froze. I want to think this is one of Augusto Boal’s statue exercises. But when is the unfreeze moment?!

We try to compare this moment with other crises and interestingly we rely on artworks. We are not in a painting by Edward Hopper, though. In the early days of the lockdown his artworks resurfaced as a reminder of his lonely people. The difference is that we are asked to stay 6 feet apart, we are asked to practice social distancing. Hopper’s painted people were loners by choice. Maybe they felt the malaise of their time – after all many of his paintings reflected the Great Depression of 1930. Then, we “moved” from Hopper to Georges Seurat’s 19th century painting, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, only that instead of many people the “new” version had none. Seeing that photoshopped version, I had chills all over my spine, even though the intention was noble, that is, to teach us, people who used to go outside and engage with our environment as freely as possible, to stay inside to flatten the curve. While inside, a personal favorite comforted me: René Magritte’s famous paintings, Les Amants (1928). The lovers’ faces are covered. They feel each other’s presence and that is all they need.

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1 Theater of the Oppressed (1974).
And so, I had a moment of clarity: I need to navigate my emotions and try to accept them. That’s how unscripted I am these days. I cannot say that today I plan and will actually do this, that, and the other. I breathe. I cry. I try to exist. Because in 2008 I suffered the greatest depression of my life, I know how easily one may fall into their own abyss. I try not to despair. But if you hear me crying, “hold” my hand. I can’t do what Shakespeare did during his time of plague, as some words of encouragement circulate online. I can’t and I will not because no two experiences are alike. I’d rather learn to listen to my bodymind: if it wants to fear, I let it fear; cry, I let it cry; laugh, I let it laugh. After all, we are surviving a pandemic one day at a time.

Instead of a conclusion, because I have none, I’d rather like to share with you one of my latest 5-minute plays written for a Play Slam Zoom series organized by Domnica Radulescu that has helped me deal with the stress of everything new and old and delve into my imagination. Writing helps me cry in a more refined way. Writing is my therapy. Enjoy.

THE SPACE BETWEEN US

CHARACTERS²:
VOX, 45 (female)
MARE, 54 (male)

TIME & SETTING: VOX is in her apartment. MARE is in space. Now.

VOX
(Sings playfully George Michael’s Faith while she applies shaving cream on her legs)
“Well, I guess it would be nice if I could touch your body. I know not everybody has got a body like you…” (Stops and checks herself in a mirror) Damn, I’m still hot! (Resumes singing,)
“’Cause I gotta have faith. I gotta’ have faith.”

A ringtone is heard. She drops the manual razor; picks up the phone.

VOX
Hello? Hello? (Hangs up.)

The ringtone is heard again.

VOX
You said noon.

MARE

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² These are Latin nouns. Vox means “voice” and mare means “sea.” Towards the end of the play, they will make sense.
What?

You said you’d call me at noon.

I wanted to hear your voice now. Is there a problem?

No… I mean… I was doing something.

What were you doing?

Nothing… It’s personal.

Do you want me to call you later?

 Damn!

What’s that noise? Are you cooking?

Ha, ha, very funny. You know we only eat what the government ships us.

I forgot. What’s on the menu for today?

Applesauce and tuna in a can. I am not that hungry anyway…

Can we FaceTime?

No!

Why not?

I was in the middle of something …

Something very mysterious, apparently …

VOX turns the camera on.

There. Happy?

(Jokingly,)
Ah, some *house* cleaning.

Something like that.

I miss touching you.

Find me that cure and come back.

VOX

MARE

When did … wait a minute… What day is today?

VOX

MARE

You know that’s forbidden.

VOX

MARE

Huh?

VOX

MARE

It’s been like this since last fall. Calendars are forbidden.

MARE

I have one. (*Tries to reach it, but he’s too imponderable.*)

VOX

Checking the time has been deactivated… (*adding,* per an executive order…

MARE

VOX

MARE

(Confused.)

Why?

VOX

MARE

So we do not have any attachment to it.

VOX

MARE

(Concerned.)

To time?

VOX

MARE

How about your summer gig?

VOX

MARE

There is no summer.

VOX

MARE

Did they cancel your gig?

VOX

MARE

No. Listen, you are breaking up.

VOX

MARE

Sorry. Let me try this position. Better?
VOX
Yes. There is no summer!

MARE
I forgot how silly you are … no time … no summer … I miss you.

VOX
There is no summer and there is nothing left to see here.

MARE
You worry me. Did … (sotto voce) the oncologist say … something … else?

VOX
Other than I’d die if you didn’t find me a cure from the outer space?

MARE sighs.

VOX
Hey… Do you remember that time when we made love in the bioluminescent ocean?

MARE
Yes. I got a cold.

VOX
Is space the same?

MARE
Cold?

VOX
No, breathtaking…

MARE
It’s infinite.

VOX
I’d love to make love in the infinite.

MARE
Baby, are you OK?

VOX
Yes… no… I don’t know.

MARE
Did something happen?

VOX
Nothing happened. Nothing happens here anymore. We get our meals delivered daily. The lights are turned off when they want us to go to sleep. A siren is heard to wake us up. On TV the image is static. It’s like life did not ever exist here. So, maybe my cancer was a dream, too… a bad one. You know… this morning, I dropped the cup of coffee and it spilled all over… I liked that accidental pattern. But I had to clean the mess. I found an old photo of me under bed. I said, “I’m
going to make myself beautiful today. Put some lipstick, wear a tight skirt, pun on some sexy heels and go out.”

Do you still have those red strap sandals? 

Yes. 

Could you put them on? 

Now??

Yes. 

Can’t you wait? 

Not really. 

Why?

I’m coming back.

When?

Today. 

Does that mean you found me a cure?

I’m coming back today. 

So, no…?

They said they were running out of funds for my mission. 

So, no cure for me. 

We will be together.
One at last … vox maris\(^3\) …

You are my voice.

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\(^3\) Latin, “the voice of the sea.”