

Filling the Unusual Silence with Purposeful Rustling

Category: COVID-19

written by Ashten Duncan | April 5, 2020

“Did they finally pull you out of the hospitals and clinics?” My father’s voice resonated through the receiver.

“Yeah,” I replied with my eyes fixed on my whirling ceiling fan. “I figured it was inevitable after the AAMC issued its recommendation for students to be pulled from direct patient care, given the uncertainties surrounding the supply of PPE and the potential harms of having more people than necessary in clinical environments.” My father knew those abbreviations referred to the Association of American Medical Colleges, which governs the education of medical students, and to personal protective equipment, like surgical masks and gloves.

“What do they plan on doing for you now?” my father continued.

“A virtual curriculum—the best they can manage with what we have.”

After exchanging a few more words with my father, I hung up the phone and walked over to my desk to get a dry-erase marker. Like so many others in my community, I was caught off guard by the rapidity and magnitude of the changes that SARS-CoV-2 have produced. The social distancing measures, while climacteric, have unfortunately created an unusual silence in my home and largely inaccessible surroundings. It has brought forth many opportunities to think and be productive in the stillness, which prove to often be uncomfortable.

As a medical student, I have been questioning what my role is or should be in this pandemic. With my education now being exclusively online for the conceivable future, I have wondered how I can capitalize on this situation. In the past, I have enlisted the help of my trusty whiteboard to sort out my thoughts and make actionable plans. In this case, I decided to sit down with my whiteboard to figure out how I might be able to fill the silence with something more than my television.

At first, I focused on no specific aspirations; I drew a network of disjointed ovals and filled them with things I had noticed in news reports and where I felt gaps in knowledge existed. I connected these ovals with lines and identified areas in which I could provide audiences with potentially empowering information. After several minutes, I felt satisfied with the list of articles I could write to share what I know about public health and infectious diseases.

While this pandemic has in many ways limited the ability of medical students to contribute, we can still use our voices to influence for the better the

public's perspective on what is transpiring. For me, this will involve hours at my desk where gentle yet purposeful rustling fills the silence.

Ashten Duncan
Tulsa, Oklahoma