



Dusting off the old survival kit

By Natalia Kovalyova

On March 23, the U.S. visa departments in embassies across the world effectively closed. In the diplomatic parlance, they reduced the operations and started providing emergency services only. The entry to the U.S. became a veritable hurdle and my regular summer trip home turned into a sheer impossibility since this time I would need a new visa to enter the country. When travel restrictions had been tightening earlier in the semester, my chances of being “trapped” by one side or “locked out” by the other had been increasing rapidly, presented me with a proverbial choice of “damn if you do, damn if you don’t.” Air-traffic from abroad terminated in April by my home country effectively eliminated one horn of the dilemma. I was to stay put and to handle the situation “remotely.”

Distance from home thus reinforced by multiple authorities and major work routines disrupted by subsequent “measures” prompted me to reach out into my survival kit built during prior crises. Of course, I sought advice close at hand about how to cope with the situation. However, while my work habits and preferences, developed and matured on campus at the American university, suffered most, my surviving skills

bolstered in Russian perseverance formed a protective belt. Here are a few of them, dusted off for COVID-19.

First, a well-stocked pantry is a necessity since “rainy” days abound. A pre-set arrangement of the “essential foods” may limit your dinner choices but these limitations train imagination and sparkle creativity once you set your cooking goals higher than just “something to fill me up.” College-dorm reveries may also inspire a handful of “crisis” recipes that take only five ingredients and 20 minutes to make. In full disclosure, my grocery list for the seven weeks of “quarantine” has been made out of two items only: the greens and the bread. The rest has come out of my pantry, composed of Russian frugality with a dash of Mark Bittman for flavor.

Second, many services do not require extensive training, and knowing the basics in those areas goes a long way, including trimming your hair or laundering your fine shirts, washing your windows, painting the walls, or proofreading and editing your papers. Everyone can learn to trim/style (their own) hair to a passable, tolerable degree, and get quite good at it. You might face the need to lower your standards for the first couple of trials, though. But if you are looking for a learning opportunity (the American take on the situation), here is a vast, uncharted territory to explore. In the absence of available businesses (or service people) who would cater to your needs, DIY is just as acceptable. Plus, you save the money (the Russian take on the situation) which is already coming tight.

Third, a home office does not need to be a separate room. A (spot at the) desk that you can claim regularly and (ideally) leave your stuff on it without clearing after every use, a chair and good light serve the purpose. Connectivity -- and with it, your constant availability -- is negotiable, especially for those households where several people (including students of all ages) work from home and have to share a computer. What completing work regardless of the surrounding conditions teaches you is a quick “dive” into your work, screening off disruptions, and maintaining focus and concentration for an extended period of time since your next work session almost always takes place elsewhere. For the past two years, I have worked from multiple places on campus, in the hotel lobbies, airport lounges, and public parks. Writing any place and grading any place has turned to be a great skill and under the circumstances, I can only capitalize on it.

I must acknowledge though that not all of my projects need a lab or special equipment. Those parts of them that do require access to the physical materials and resources currently out of my reach have been put on hold. Yet, having come through the Soviet system of higher education at the time when textbooks were not readily available and when poor funding greatly impacted the studies to pursue since the cost of data collection or access to recent scholarship on the subject had to be covered by aspiring researchers, I am wary about the adjustments that researchers would feel compelled to make, limiting what and how they study to the studies of continence.

This revival of the survival wisdom and my easy fall back onto it was not the only surprise gift from COVID-19. Quarantine measures highlighted the already existing trends in the social contexts, also making the task of tracing and comparing them easier to accomplish. A case in point is the absence of true diversity in viewpoints in the news media and the bubble that the social media create around their users under the cover of personalized services. After two months of watching a handful of YouTube channels from Ukraine and Russia (my home country), repetitive journalistic techniques, a predictable slant in the interpretations, and guests who make their rounds on various shows year in, year out became quite obvious. Breaking out of the bubble succeeded only for the U.S. side of the internet, possibly because the U.S. media wear partisanship on their sleeves and what the “other” side listens to or watches is easy to identify and access. Curiously, the “alternative” views are also rather limited as the loudest Russian voice criticizing pandemic measures and affiliated with the Cato Institute has not even registered on the American mediascape while both Ukrainian and Russian media posted several interviews with him (each over an hour-long). Moreover, his use of publicly available English-language documents as his evidentiary base tailors his argument to the American public more than to other audiences but has not earned a single mention in the U.S. media. This glaring absence only magnifies considerable gate-keeping that the online media exercise as much as the traditional print and broadcast did before.

