

Academic Motherhood and COVID-19

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Surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic with a Wolf Pack and the Marco Polo App

This narrative nonfiction essay explores the ways in which a group of academic mothers used Marco Polo, a video instant messaging app, to remain tethered to each other and to their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The mothers, who are a combination of millennial and Gen Xers with children aged two to twenty-three, hail from a range of academic disciplines (e.g., theatre, education, environmental science, community health, counseling, psychology, and hospitality administration). We were all well into our careers and accustomed to grappling with the myriad ways in which the things we were raised to believe—that we could do anything we put our minds to and could definitely be mothers and career women—sometimes still felt like a pipe dream. And then COVID-19 came barreling into our lives, laying waste to all the usual coping and time management strategies upon which we typically rely. Since mid-March, we have exchanged an average of between fifty and seventy-five Marco Polo messages per day and have covered a wide range of topics—from spice storage methods, to preferred Cheeto shapes, to teaching our children to do long division while attending Zoom meetings, and to watching our male colleagues soar in terms of research productivity while we struggle to find five minutes of uninterrupted time to respond to an email. The essay offers some speculative ideas as to the role Marco Polo played in a larger story about connections between adult women during challenging times.

I grew up in a traditional faith community that prizes motherhood as a woman's primary purpose in life. Mormon women are taught that motherhood "is the essence of who we are as women. It defines our very identity, our divine stature and nature" (Dew). It is, quite simply, what women do and who we are. My own mother broke the mould and worked outside of the home, but she was the exception rather than the rule. I likewise dreamed about and eventually trained for a career, but I always knew that I would become a mother. It was,

in that oh-too-small world, the only legitimate way for a woman to create a meaningful life.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I became a mother and discovered that it was really, really hard. And that I didn't love it. It had honestly never occurred to me that I wouldn't love it. It was supposed to be my *raison d'être*. Instead, I felt like I was playing a role for which I was ill-suited and had been inadequately prepared. I often felt like I was losing sight of, and sometimes couldn't even remember, the person I was outside of the role of mother. I got married when I was nineteen and had my first daughter when I was twenty-three, so I didn't have much of an independent adult life before marriage and motherhood. I often found myself wondering, "Did I ever not have these kids?" and feeling as if my kids deserved a better mom than I was.

But then Kennedy, my oldest daughter, became a senior in high school, and I discovered a whole new mothering phase—mothering teenagers and emergent adults. Her senior year was my best motherhood year yet. Whereas the mothers of so many of her friends and my own friends bemoaned how difficult their kids were that year and how ready they were for them to graduate and move out, I was on cloud nine, feeling like, this motherhood I can do. She was seventeen; my next daughter was fourteen, and my son was eleven. They were growing up. They were snarky and fun and funny. So funny. We had engaging, stimulating conversations. They bathed and brushed their teeth without reminders.

And then, in 2015, just like that, it seemed, she graduated and left. I was bereft. Our family felt broken. Misshapen. Missing a fundamental piece. And then, just three years later, Marin (our middle daughter) left as well. I knew it was going to be hard, since I'd already done it once, but her departure similarly sucked the wind clean out of me.

Just when things were getting fun, they were gone.

What was I to do with just one kid at home? And he was 15 and quite independent, so he mostly only needed me for rides and money. After twenty-one years of intense parenting, I felt a bit adrift.

Luckily, I had tenure, so I had some breathing room at work. I looked at my women friends and colleagues on campus and made a conscious decision sometime in 2017 to find ways to support them. A few women had really helped me with both my career and with motherhood, so I decided it was time to pay it forward. I latched onto the idea that women had to help ourselves and help each other. I developed a program to help connect new faculty to one another and to existing faculty at my university. I invited junior faculty to work on some writing projects with me that we collaboratively saw through to publication. I started a writing group with women in my department, which felt like a good way to make use of the additional time and energy I had now that my girls were no longer living at home and needing my attention the way they once had.

On a more personal scale, I invited ten of my favourite women—all of whom were also colleagues at our regional comprehensive university in Deep East Texas—to join a secret and closed Facebook group in early 2018, which we jokingly called the “coven.” Over five to ten years, we had developed professional connections and personal friendships with each other, forged largely out of a (sometimes) desperate need to find likeminded souls as we went through life in a deep red part of the country. It’s not easy out here to be a professor, a mother, and an ardent feminist. We needed a digital space to support one another.

There are eleven of us, including me: ten professors and one who works in student affairs. Ten of us are married. Nine are mothers. Between us, we have twenty kids, ranging in age from two to twenty-three. We are now in our thirties, forties, and early fifties. We all have terminal degrees—except for one, who is currently pursuing her doctorate. We hail from a range of academic disciplines, including counseling, education, theatre, biology, public health, environmental science, psychology, and hospitality. We are all white, and we are all cisgender, and eight of us are tenured or have tenure-track positions. Pre-COVID, all of us had the luxury of stable employment. We are an admittedly privileged bunch.

In May 2018, just a few months after our group formed, Abby Wambach gave her now famous speech at Barnard College, in which she recounts the story of what happened in 1995 when wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park. Rather than threatening the system, the reintroduction of the wolves helped stabilize the whole ecosystem. As Wambach recounted, “The wolves, who were feared as a threat to the system, turned out to be its salvation. Barnard women, are you picking up what I’m laying down here? Women are feared as a threat to our system—and we will also be our society’s salvation.” Later in the speech, she told the Barnard women in attendance: “Women. At this moment in history leadership is calling us to say: Give me the effing ball. Give me the effing job. Give me the same pay that the guy next to me gets. Give me the promotion. Give me the microphone. Give me the oval office. Give me the respect I’ve earned and give it to my wolf pack, too.”

A group member posted a link to Wambach’s speech in our Facebook group, which said, “Can we change ‘coven’ to ‘Wolf Pack?’” and everyone agreed. So, the Wolf Pack assembled. We rallied around each other when someone had been slighted at work, making wine and chocolate home deliveries to cheer someone up or delivering coffee to the theatre prof who was on campus late nights and weekends. We celebrated each other’s birthdays. We helped each other handle difficult supervisors, students, and colleagues. We asked for support to get through especially difficult days or life challenges. We started making plans to create a women’s organization to advocate for women on

campus. The first time someone called me the “matriarch” of the group, I scoffed. Nothing about me was mother-y. However, I had to admit that what we were doing for one another looked and even felt a lot like mothering. As I turned my attention to my women friends and colleagues, I occasionally caught glimpses of what my life may look like, moving forwards, once all three kids moved away from home.

Fast forward to March 2020, almost two years after I started our group. Kennedy was in law school in Baton Rouge, Marin was in her sophomore year of undergrad in Houston, and Stuart (the youngest) was a high school junior. During spring break, my husband, Stuart, and I travelled to Houston and Baton Rouge because we knew we may not otherwise see them until mid-May when their spring semesters ended. We were beginning to get nervous about COVID-19 but naively thought we were somehow insulated from it.

And then, just a week after our visits to see them, both girls were home. Everything had shut down. Both their universities, my university, my husband’s university, and the local public schools (where our youngest son was a junior) moved to fully online classes. Everyone I knew was hunkered down. Everything felt so precarious. I didn’t leave my house for two weeks except to drive around aimlessly with my husband sometimes at night. We stockpiled food. We rationed toilet paper. We worried about long-term job security.

The whole world seemed to be unravelling. COVID-19 cases were steadily increasing. People were dying. Millions of Americans were losing their jobs. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was conducting raids at food processing plants. Protests raged all summer long against police brutality—even in our rural community. Wildfires and hurricanes ravaged communities. I was distraught by what was happening across the country. I feared for the safety of our elections. I worried about one of us getting COVID-19. I could not see my aging parents because of the risk of COVID-19 transmission. The state high school debate tournament, for which my son had worked so hard to qualify, was cancelled. I grieved for all the important school and life events my kids were missing.

But (and this feels like a confession) despite all the uncertainty and fear, I was secretly thrilled to have the girls home. The kids were all happy to see one another again and grateful for what they thought was a temporary respite from school. They went for long walks together every evening. We had rousing arguments about political candidates. We watched movies together at night. They cajoled my husband and me into learning a TikTok dance (which I assume was later posted on TikTok and rightly mocked). We rearranged space in the house to accommodate everyone working and schooling from home and settled into a new routine. It was so deeply satisfying to see them enjoying one another’s company. I sometimes went to bed, feeling like maybe my mothering hadn’t all been terrible; they were growing into genuinely lovely young adults,

who liked one another—and us!

Even though I was glad to have them home, I also really missed my Wolf Pack friends. Prior to COVID-19, I saw them every day in meetings or walking across campus. Since the girls had moved away, I had grown accustomed to meeting my friends for lunch and occasional meetups at a local bar. We infrequently managed a meetup at my house during which we laughed and commiserated and ate a lot of Little Debbie Nutty Buddies and chips. Suddenly, none of that could happen anymore. I sometimes experienced feelings of isolation reminiscent of what I had experienced when the kids were younger and we were more homebound. Facebook suddenly felt stale and empty. I think it had worked as a filler—a place to finish conversations we had started face-to-face—but it was a poor substitute for the kind of face-to-face interaction we were craving.

So, I started a Marco Polo group and invited the Wolf Pack to join.

Apparently, we weren't alone. News articles have reported a huge increase in Marco Polo app usage since mid-March 2020, which is when the shelter-in-place orders started in parts of the United States (Perez; O'Brien; Melton). *TechCrunch* reported that twenty million video messages were shared via Marco Polo in one twenty-four-hour period alone in April (Perez).

So, what is Marco Polo and how does it work?

Michal and Vlada Bortnik created the Marco Polo app in 2016 to facilitate communication with Polish relatives. A 2018 *Houston Press* article dubs Marco Polo “Snapchat for old people” (Balke). *Forbes* attributes the popularity of Marco Polo to its simplicity (Melton). It uses up significantly less bandwidth than other video platforms, such as Zoom, FaceTime, and Facebook video chat. It's straightforward—users set up an account and send video messages to individual friends or to groups of friends, who can watch and respond to the messages whenever it's convenient for them. There are no “likes” or “dislikes.” You cannot be tagged by others in photos or posts. There is no possibility for strangers to see or comment on your posts. The purpose of the app is for small(er) groups of friends and families to connect, remotely. And it's all asynchronous. Maybe that makes it the perfect app for working moms who are juggling fulltime careers, caring for children, and helping to school children from home while quarantined.

In our early quarantine Marco Polo days, we sent maybe ten to twenty total messages per day. As the spring semester continued, virtually, along with our consequent isolation, the number of messages grew exponentially. Now, a typical day includes at least one hundred messages. On weekends, we sometimes approach two hundred messages a day. Remember, there are eleven of us, and some of these messages are maybe only ten to fifteen seconds long. And, sometimes, days go by, and you don't have even a minute to look at it, and there may be three hundred messages when you come back. At that point,

you have no choice but to just skip over them and jump into the present Marco Polo moment.

We check in with each other, to report on how we're feeling about another day, or to express worry and ask for support regarding a difficult family or work thing happening that day. There is typically a flurry of messages that comes in the morning, and then the messages slow down, a bit, as we settle into our workdays and (try to) concentrate on work tasks. Though really, what does "concentrate" even mean anymore? We are moms, at home with demanding toddlers, needy elementary school kids, sullen middle schoolers, grumpy high schoolers, and depressed college students marooned at home due to the shutdown. What does it mean, for us, during this pandemic, to just sit down and "concentrate"? Our "polos" (i.e., shorthand for messages we send via the app) are interrupted and punctuated by such things as: a middle schooler coming home from a first day of school and stripping all their clothes off in the doorway and coming into the house in their underwear to talk about their day; an elementary schooler asking who in his mom's Marco Polo group wants to see him make bubbles out of his own spit; a toddler running around, grabbing something in the air, and saying she "caught the virus"; a teen practicing a rousing and dissonant Bela Bartok piece in the room next to his mom's "office"; an elementary schooler snagging her mom's phone, opening the app, and posting photo bomb-style videos of herself for us to watch later; chickens clucking in the background; lots of dogs barking and biting and even sometimes stealing a kid's lunch right off of their plate; and a high schooler and two emergent adult children doing dance parties in the kitchen to rap music that is definitely not safe for work.

You get the picture. The polos are recorded at our desks or whatever we are using at home for a desk, such as outside in a carport, sometimes while driving, and, not infrequently, while hiding out in a bathroom or closet—trying, desperately, to just have a few tiny uninterrupted moments.

So, what is happening here? What do we do? (Or, as some of our partners and children sometimes ask, "What are y'all doing?")

We talk. We vent. We laugh. We share childhood stories. We talk about depression, anxiety, and therapy. We talk a lot about COVID-19. We talk about our kids. We talk about work, a lot. Some of us cry. We ask for support. We kvetch about our supervisors, a lot. We talk about politics. We wring our hands. We validate each other. We hype each other. We do silly "unboxing" videos of subscription boxes we've signed up for during quarantine—a feminist book club, Hello Fresh, Imperfect Produce, Winc, etc. We make plans for the women's organization on campus.

I suppose this could just be the pandemic version of meeting up for lunch with friends on a workday or grabbing a drink after work.

But maybe, we are, quite simply, just bored. After seven months, we have

grown tired of only seeing the people in our immediate families with whom we are quarantined. It's fun to know that—almost always—if we get on Marco Polo, someone will be there to listen. We have talked about so many topics—big, important things but also completely inane things. We are starved for social interaction. We have made polos showing each other how we organize our spices or showing off all the candy sprinkles in our pantries. We have discussed our preferred Cheeto shapes. We have all taken a BuzzFeed quiz that answered the burning question, “If you were a potato, what kind would you be?” And we joked about the answers for days. I even once made a polo of myself, while climbing up my attic stairs, to show our group how our attic was organized. Some of these things are things we might have shared prepandemic. But the organization (or not) of our spices? I think not.

Maybe we are pushing back against our isolation at home, in close quarters with our children and/or partners, around the clock. We did not choose to spend 24/7 with our babies, children, teenagers, or even our emergent adult children. We chose to spend most of our days in the company of other adults. Then COVID-19 came barreling into our lives, laying waste to whatever boundaries we had between work and home. We found ourselves immersed in home and family life, isolated from our work, our students, our colleagues, and each other. Some of us worry that COVID-19 is both poleaxing our careers and thwarting our mothering efforts. Many news articles attest to the fact that COVID-19 has hit women, and especially working mothers, particularly hard. An ongoing University of Southern California study suggests that one-third of working mothers in two-parent households are doing all the childcare, compared to only one-tenth of working fathers. As Gema Zamarro has explained: “Considering women already shouldered a greater burden for child-care prior to the pandemic, it’s unsurprising the demands are now even greater ... the pandemic has had a disproportionately detrimental impact on the mental health of women, particularly those with kids” (qtd. Miller). This study also shows that women with kids are most likely to experience psychological distress, depression, and anxiety. Working, college-educated mothers reported having had to reduce their working hours more than women without children and more than men. One study shows that fathers increased their childcare work during the pandemic, but mothers still did most of the care work. The quarantine has exposed that less progress has been made than we might have wished in terms of household and childcare divisions of labour.

Perhaps, Marco Polo is filling a void we were already living with but didn't recognize or that we had come to accept as normal. What we've been doing every day during quarantine couldn't be more different from our normal lives in academia. Our regular lives are sterile; our days quiet. Sure, we go to class and attend committee meetings, but we also spend a lot of time, in our offices,

alone. Our work is very compartmentalized. The three pots (i.e., service, research, teaching) really don't mix. We usually do just one of those things at a time. We get ready for each day, meaning we put on work clothes, maybe some makeup and shoes. A necklace or some earrings. Maybe even a bracelet. When we get home, all of that comes off. We put on stretchy pants, we take off the earrings, and we wipe off the makeup. We settle in for our home life, which is casual and informal—a contrast to our daily work lives.

And then came COVID-19. All previous norms about privacy, objectivity, and compartmentalization flew out the window. Most of us in the Wolf Pack were teaching on Zoom in stretchy pants while our kids played at our feet. No makeup, no work clothes, no shoes. Shoot, I have worn a bra exactly four times in seven months. There is no more professionalism. There is only life, while working and caring for kids, during a pandemic. There are no more boundaries between work and home.

So maybe Marco Polo is how we are accepting the chaos? Maybe even embracing it? There is little sense of privacy. In Marco Polo, we are in each other's homes, for probably sixteen to eighteen hours, off and on, of course, every day. One member in our group regularly makes postshower polos while wrapped in a bath towel. More than one of us shows up in polos in a bra. We send polos while in our PJs, in bed, sometimes right before falling asleep or right after waking up. There is almost always someone on Marco Polo. We are rarely without a listening (Marco Polo) ear. We sometimes hear a snippet of an argument between one of us and a partner. Or we hear one of us lose our cool with one of our kids. It happens. It's a pandemic, after all.

Finally, Marco Polo isn't just a diversion; we also polo a lot about work projects. I don't even know how many smaller groups have spun off from our original group. Each of the smaller groups has a unique focus. One is for women in the same department at our university; another is for women who are trying to get student loan forgiveness, and two others are for women who wrote grants together over the summer. At least two more focus on coauthored writing projects. In addition, I have one-on-one Marco Polo groups with each woman in the group, for when we just need to talk to the one person. I'm guessing there are lots more groups and combinations of people that I'm not a part of.

This is part of how we are working now. We can't do what we used to do. COVID-19 took away all the separations between work and home. We can't go to the office while kids are at school or in daycare and have uninterrupted time to teach, meet with students, or work on writing projects. So, we improvised. We found an app that enables us to work in and around the increased fragmentation of our lives due to COVID-19. We sometimes feel sheepish about it. Our kids and spouses tease us about the time we spend on Marco Polo. But in addition to the silly conversations, we have also used it to coordinate the teaching of dozens of courses and the beginnings and endings

of numerous research projects. Our campus women's organization—which was just a Wolf Pack idea a year or two ago—officially launched in September; we had sixty people in attendance via Zoom at our October meeting. Several of us submitted grants over the summer—completed largely due to hundreds of short polos sent in and around and through the crevices of mothering at home and helping our children with schoolwork during a pandemic. I think in some ways that this has always been the reality for working mothers—accomplishing tasks in tiny snippets of time, multitasking during carpool, or firing off one more message before settling in for bedtime with a young child—but COVID-19 has made it so that all of our work is now being done in this way.

Now it's October. The fall semester is well underway. My girls flew the coop, again, returning to their college student lives, crossing their fingers that neither they nor their roommates got COVID-19. We're back to just one kid at home, so the house is quiet again. And he got his driver's license, so he doesn't even need me for rides anymore. Everyone in our Marco Polo group is teaching via Zoom and working remotely. Many of us are struggling to facilitate pandemic online schooling for our kids. Some of our kids who excelled in school are now failing or just barely making it. Some of us are struggling with marital problems and partners with unstable employment. Several of us have had to quarantine when a spouse tested positive for COVID-19. Some of our older kids have anxiety and depression, brought on by COVID-19.

Our Wolf Pack Polo group persists. I can't speak for anyone else. I can only try to explain why I continue to need and appreciate it. I need people in my life, more than ever during this global pandemic. I need to be able to talk to, listen to, and see my friends and colleagues. And I need to be able to do it in tiny pockets of time that fit into my quarantine life. And, my friends and colleagues, most of whom are mothers with young children at home, need that even more.

I don't know whether our Marco Polo usage will continue once the pandemic ends, assuming it does, indeed, end. (It has to end ... right?) At the end of this school year, I will officially be an empty nester. I am scared. I feel like I'm standing at the edge of a precipice. Mothering young children was hard, but empty nesting may just be harder. I don't know how that transition will go, but one thing is sure: I'm going to need my Wolf Pack after my last child flies the coop.

Right now, Marco Polo is enabling us to do what women have always done: create and nurture a community of peers with whom to share our wins, grieve our losses, and support each other as we continue to wake up, each new quarantine day, and put one tired foot in front of the other.

And we'll keep doing that, Marco Polo or not.

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