

## Try Them All Five

by Catalina Florina Florescu

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 intimidated. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> *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

### CHARACTERS<sup>2</sup>:

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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<sup>2</sup> These are Latin nouns. *Vox* means "voice" and *mare* means "sea." Towards the end of the play, they will make sense.

What?

VOX

You said you'd call me at noon.

MARE

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

VOX

No... I mean... I was doing something.

MARE

What were you doing?

VOX

Nothing... It's personal.

MARE

Do you want me to call you later?

VOX

*(Drops the shaving cream. It's messy.)*

Damn!

MARE

What's that noise? Are you cooking?

VOX

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

MARE

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

VOX

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

MARE

Can we FaceTime?

VOX

No!

MARE

Why not?

VOX

I was in the middle of something ...

MARE

Something very mysterious, apparently ...

*VOX turns the camera on.*

VOX

There. Happy?

MARE

*(Jokingly,)*

Ah, some *house* cleaning.

VOX

Something like that.

MARE

I miss touching you.

VOX

Find me that cure and come back.

MARE

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

VOX

You know that's forbidden.

MARE

Huh?

VOX

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

Why?

VOX

So we do not have any attachment to it.

MARE  
(*Confused.*)

To time?

VOX

I guess so... I really don't care.

MARE

How about your summer gig?

VOX

There is no summer.

MARE  
(*Concerned.*)

Did they cancel your gig?

VOX

No. Listen, you are breaking up.

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.”

MARE

Do you still have those red strap sandals?

VOX

Yes.

MARE

Could you put them on?

VOX

Now???

MARE

Yes.

VOX

Can't you wait?

MARE

Not really.

VOX

Why?

MARE

I'm coming back.

VOX

When?

MARE  
(Flat.)

Today.

VOX  
(Excited.)

Does that mean you found *me* a cure?

MARE  
(Heartbroken.)

I'm coming back today.

VOX  
(Vague.)

So, no...?

MARE

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

VOX  
(Emotionless.)

So, no cure for me.

MARE

We will be together.

VOX

One at last ... *vox maris*<sup>3</sup>...

You are my voice.

MARE

*A sound of waves clashing is heard ad  
infinitum. Because that exists, right?*

**THE END**

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<sup>3</sup> Latin, "the voice of the sea."