

REFLECTIONS

over a cup of coffee



Fanny Velázquez

Introduction

As I write these lines a meager rain is falling on the ground; the sky in this part of Germany is turning gray, announcing winter. Today it is the twentieth of October of the year 2020. It has been a year of worldwide crises that have touched each of us in different ways. It is in times like these that writers could perhaps, through their voices, bring us back to things of importance; to remember love, to remember gratitude, to remember touch, and - why not? - to also remember pain and rising above it.

I have looked through my files to find some of my reflections and little stories for you from the last few years, hoping to find words of encouragement and light. I found 17 simple stories about the basic things of life that we sometimes forget to value. They were written in three different times of my life - some were written in the USA, some in Mexico, and some in Germany. My intention is that while you read, you also think about or relate to things of importance in your own life. I also hope that you can come to value each little moment and find treasures of joy in small and simple places throughout your day.

Finally, I would like to thank you for subscribing.

A treasure

– Germany –

As a society, we have never lived through a year like 2020. Perhaps it is the beginning of a decade that will change the way we think. The pandemic has undoubtedly generated fears in many of us. Perhaps it's even the first time in a long time that we've faced the possibility of death, either of ourselves or of those who we love. Sometimes this confrontation with our mortality gives us the opportunity to ask the questions that really matter. One of them is: Am I valuable? Do I matter? Why?

Let's start with the day you were conceived. Did you know, according to biology, 100 000 000 sperm are released to fertilize the egg? That means that the champion sperm had to beat out 999 999,999 other possibilities of another person being born instead of you. Like Anthony DeStefano said it; "At the very dawn of your life, you had to overcome overwhelmingly low odds, smaller than you will ever have to face in any other situation. Regardless of the opinion you have of yourself now, regardless of the evils that may befall you in life, regardless of the suffering that you may be forced to endure, regardless of family or financial problems, it is imperative that you understand this, you came to this world as a champion "(Ten prayers God always says Yes"). From a statistic point of view, your existence on this planet is a miracle.

If this isn't enough, let's think about your body. According to the medical futurist institute, "If you could harvest every organ and chemical in your body you could be worth \$45 million". If you wanted to legally sell your organs in the United States - for example your heart, your liver, your two kidneys, your stomach, and your two eyeballs - your worth will be approximately \$2 million dollars. (By the way, you're worth much less on the black market).

In present times - when government officials are asking if it's more important to save lives than save the economy - it is important to realize how much a human life is worth. Sarah Gonzalez from NPR podcast wrote an interesting article with the following question: "Is it worth it to shut down the economy to save lives? Or should we let people die to serve the economy?" According to her findings and with the help of Kipp Viscusie, economist at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, at the present time the cost of a single human life in 2020 is, statically speaking and determined by government agencies, worth \$10 million dollars. She concludes with this quote: "Epidemiologist said shutting down the economy could save 1 to 2 million lives. So 1 million lives saved at 10 million each, that is 10 trillion. That is about half of the U.S. GDP in a year. Trillions and trillions of dollars' worth of people."

From the philosophical point of view, let's quote Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher born in Königsberg (today in Russian territory) who said, "everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent, on the other hand whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity." In other words, for Kant the human existence had dignity; we were irreplaceable and we had no price. (Big Think newsletter).

But even if you've read of all these ideas and they do not convince you, let me ask you a psychological question: how do you feel as a mother, spouse, daughter, son, or friend? How would the people who love you feel if you were gone? For me, the life of my children has no price and the life of my parents has no price. The life of my husband, or anyone in this world - be they friend, not a friend, but certainly my fellow human being - have no price! I am sure your parents, partner, children, or friends think the same of you. It is impossible to pay for you or them, even with all the gold of the world. Every person under the sun has a very specific mission in this world; a special contribution, a craft, a job, a quality, an idea, a dream, or a solution for all of us that cannot compare with any other because you are unique.

That is why I really believe that you and I are worth it. You are important; you have value, your presence on this planet is simply a gift to our world, and you are a living miracle. Therefore everything we do, day in and day out (even if it's cleaning a diaper, wiping a floor, teaching a class, helping a company, translating a paper, making dinner, serving a warm meal, healing a person or animal, driving a person somewhere) no matter what it is and no matter whether or not you think it's important, let me tell you that IT IS. You are a blessing where you are, in the job you are performing. After all, nobody will do it the way you do; nobody will have the background you have, the training, the experience, the love, the courage, the intelligence, the faith, the caring spirit, and the beliefs you have. In this world there will be no other you; that in itself makes you extraordinary.

So, let me tell you what I believe. Because of you this world is richer, because of you the lives of others have more flavor, because of you we have more color and light in this world. Your life is important, and you matter. Because of you, this world is beautiful. So you're it! You are the treasure.

What the heart seeks

– Italy –

Yesterday I walked the streets of a small, magical town in Italy. It's called Tivoli and it's in the vicinity of Rome, located in the neighboring mountains of this great capital metropolis of the ancient world.

The streets of Tivoli are extremely narrow, only giving space for the transit of one car. They're made of stone and not asphalt like the American ones. There are old stairs between the buildings, perfect to hide two young lovers discovering their love with passionate kisses full of fire and emotion. However, these stairs are also perfect for an old couple to hold each other's arms and walk slowly, full of an autumnal, powerful, and permanent love that has been able to cross the layers of time without eroding. Together they have probably faced the storms and deserts of marriage, as well as the springs of joy in their long life. Seeing them so close inspired me.

The brown walls make the buildings smell like stories. Very old, ancient stories that I wish I could write, but that my heart tells me are perhaps being mysteriously re-lived now by the inhabitants of this century which reside under those red tile roofs.

Yesterday I was in Tivoli. I stood in front of a building with balconies and plants and a line full of hanging clothes. Someone had just finished washing and the clothes were drying under a damp sky smelling of recent rain. It made me remember, for a brief moment, the clothes that I'd hung in the attic of my apartment in Berlin and that had stayed wet before I left for Italy. Seeing the hanging clothes made me think a simple truth: sometimes we think that living in another country, in another region, or in another time would be more interesting, or we would be happier, or we would wish for and have different things that would make our life richer. The truth is that we are the same in all parts of the world. Like in Tivoli, all the people of the world want the same thing: clean clothes.

Tivoli reminded me of this truth while we were escaping a packed Rome full of tourists. Here in Italy, with all of its delicious food, there's someone like me who wants what I want; someone who wants their family to smell like clean clothes.

As a child I saw indigenous women washing in the river in Mexico. My mother made us wash our socks (covered in soil) in the stone sink before throwing them into the wash machine. "You children should learn to walk in your shoes and not your socks," I still hear her say - I never learned that lesson and coming to Germany didn't help much. Here you have to take off your shoes and walk around in socks as soon as you enter the house (so try not to walk around in the ones with holes).

However, I did learn to love the smell of clean clothes. Now that I walk through Italy, I realize that life is the same everywhere. Yes, maybe here you get to eat more pasta than tortillas. Maybe another language is spoken, maybe you have a different job and a different salary, but finally, after all, it doesn't matter where in the world you call home. We all want our own place to wash, to sleep, to cook, and where there's sweetness and affection to nourish the heart.

Traveling to Tivoli made me think that families like yours and mine - as well as the families of immigrants, refugees, those displaced by war, families in countries full of cartels and wars for drugs or politics, or families living in countries without freedom like North Korea, it doesn't matter where - we all want the same thing every day. We want a safe place where peace reigns and hope exists, but above all where love is shown through a line full of clean clothes.

We are all one humanity: children of the same world and brothers on earth. We have the same desires and longings. As brothers we treasure friendship, affection, kindness, patience, faith, hope, solidarity, and - of course - love. Love is the foundation of any good relationship. Love can unite people from different countries. Love could prevent war. As Paulo Coelho said in his book *The Alchemist*, "Love is the force that transforms and improves the soul of the world. When we love we always want to be better than we are."

No matter where you are today, dear reader, I hope that - through this force - you will be transformed. I hope that the best of you will raise, like the sun that I see in the clear blue sky on the wings of the steel bird that takes me back home.

The power of courage and love

– USA –

It happened this year. At the moment I least expected and in the most unusual place, I found the face of courage. It was the act of an unknown woman who let me see love in action. I was at the terminal of one of the busiest international Airports in the USA; the George Bush International Airport in Houston, Tx.

My husband and I were sitting with our children by the gate of our next flight to finally take us home. We were coming back from visiting my husband's family in Europe and we were tired. I realized then that, when you travel with children, you become more aware of the parents around you whom are going through a similar experience with the same kinds of little people. You are aware of the challenge this poses and become a little more emphatic towards them, even though you don't know them by name.

Therefore, while we waited at our gate for the plane to arrive, I started paying attention to all of the parents walking by. As I did this, I heard a child crying really loudly as he walked from the plane into the terminal. I looked around and saw a mother of two little ones coming out from one door and firmly pulling the hand of a little boy who seemed to be around 5 while she was carrying a baby girl in her arms. The beautiful baby girl looked at peace, even happy, while her older brother seemed to be crying his lungs out. Their mom seated both of them by some chairs, but the boy sunk down to the floor with a lot of tears streaming down his face.

His mother tried to reason with the boy for a while. She was carrying what seemed to be a very heavy and bulky backpack. I imagine, also being a traveler mom, that it had all of her children's stuff for such a trip. The woman then started caressing the boy's forehead and hair with the soothing effect that every mother's hand has. This made the boy calm down from wailing to a soft cry. She then decided to continue their journey to their destination and, carrying the baby girl in her arms, she stood up. But the boy wasn't ready; he was still on the floor shedding tears. Between sobs he extended his arms up, asking mom to carry him too. Every mom of a 4-5 years old boy knows that they're almost too heavy to be carried. I saw her trying to convince him to walk, but the boy was determined.

My eyes did not leave them. I was secretly hoping for her husband to appear in the middle of the crowd and help her, but he never came and I realized then that she was making this trip all by herself. I felt so proud of her; she was courageous, strong, and she proved to me that women are strong enough to do anything. She kneeled down and, with an amazing act of strength and love, picked up her crying boy from the floor while still carrying her baby girl and the heavy backpack. Then she slowly walked away, surrounded by a busy terminal that seemed oblivious to the act of strength and courage that had just taken place.

It was an amazing act of love that I will not forget. She found strength when she had none; she made her body do the impossible out of love. Seeing the courage of this fellow mother and traveler left me with a big smile. It made me believe that women can do even the impossible for

their children, no matter their age. There's nothing better than motherhood to teach us about the power of love.

The sound of C

– USA –

Sometimes the sound of music wakes me up. This morning was one of those days. Before I opened my eyes, I grasped the last memory of my dream and played it over and over again in my mind. It was a note. The sound of a guitar playing C. The sound was clear, smooth, and full of sweetness. Sometimes we need sweet.

C is the first note I learned in the music world that I slowly entered as a child. C was a simple scale, a simple challenge, something I could accomplish, something I could do, and something that gave me security. It made me feel capable.

I was fortunate enough to have Millie Flores as my piano teacher. She had the ability to read hearts and nourish them with her love for music and life. I still remember the day when, in one of our lessons, she gave me a new song to play. Then she observed me and saw how desperately I wanted to make it happen right away. She stopped me. It was a simple piano piece, but hard for a young and insecure girl like me. She read the frustration in my face and said:

“Don’t be impatient with yourself, music takes practice - and a lot of patience.”

Today I woke up thinking in C. One of my friends who is able to appreciate music appeared in my dream and asked me to play it, bringing C alive. The sound woke me up. Music woke me up. My hearth was soothed and I felt loved and comforted by the sound of music.

C is in the middle of the piano, at the center. It is balanced, level, solid, and melodious. It’s beauty to be discovered and a note that can start a million songs. It’s surrounded by black sharps, but C is white.

Sometimes our lives need C. We need balance and clarity, we need whiteness and purity and joy for the simple things God gives us. Sometimes our lives can become like the sound of a beautiful melody that starts in the morning and finishes at night. It has rhythm. Sometimes it’s fast or slow, sometimes it’s dissonant, but other times it can be beautiful to hear.

Music takes time - time and hours of patient practice. Some days C can be a good place to start because C is the center. In our lives it could represent our hearts, the things that really matter there.

I remember practicing my violin as a child - the sound was terrible at the beginning but, as the years passed, I became a little better. Perhaps life is like practicing an instrument; we need patience and perseverance at every step. Every time we make mistakes we need to be able to forgive ourselves. Every time we play the wrong note, we must try again - and we don’t stop trying until we’re able to play the right sound, with the right vibrato and a pure clarity that fills the house and is able to tell us we’re walking towards the path of beauty.

Perhaps on this path to beauty we can practice having a better marriage, a better family, a better friend, a better place of work, or a better community. We need to be patient with each other and be patient with ourselves. Sometimes we are prone to playing the wrong notes; the sharps hit the wrong pages in our lives. We tend to want transformation in a single moment but growth takes

time. We tend to be hasty in our decisions and forget what love really means – as well as how much we are truly loved by a great God, the master of transformation and the creator of music.

Maybe today is a good day to start all over again for you and I. To forgive ourselves and others for their past mistakes. Today is the day to slow down and give ourselves love and patience first, then another chance to others. Today is our day. It could sound like music. I would like mine to start in C. What about you?

Rain

– México –

It's been a hot week and I have no air conditioning at home. For the first time I'm missing my Texan home where the A.C. made me forget about the heat and the scorching summer sun. I realized that, here in Mexico, I place a higher value on the rainy days. They refresh the house, they clean the air, and they resurrect my body from the hot stupor.

However, generally the days of rain or storm in literature or the metaphor of humanity are compared with problems, challenges, and sometimes even with pain or sorrow. We often compare the grayness of the sky to the times in our life when things were not easy. Maybe it was a marriage or trusted friendship that ended in broken pieces, a broken relationship in your family, or even a new diagnosis in your own body. Simply put, we tend to see the rain as a representation of our trials in life.

Today, after the rain had fallen and a fresh breeze made the day new, I sat by the window enjoying the sound and smell of the last drops of rain falling to the ground, nurturing the earth. After it stopped, I grabbed the camera and went outside to take pictures of the last drops. The plants seemed happy, covered with small drops of water on their leaves. The flowers appeared to have pearls. Small puddles had formed here and there and my boy decided to follow me and splash in some of those puddles, just for fun.

I'm happy to realize today that rainy days are also a blessing of life itself. Trials and tribulations sometimes irrigate much-needed inner growth. Rainy days nourish our soil, grow our roots, and bring fresh green color back into our lives. It makes me think of the words of a teacher who once told me: "those who adopt a positive attitude in the face of adversity tend to suffer less and live more satisfied."

Perhaps today you're facing a very tough test - or perhaps a very long rainy season. Victor Frank, survivor of the concentration camps and one of the writers that I admire the most, wrote: "Those of us who were in the concentration camp, we remember the men who went from barrack to barrack comforting others, giving them the last piece of bread that they had left. They may have been few in number, but they offered sufficient evidence that man can take everything except one thing: the last of human freedoms, the choice of personal attitude to a set of circumstances to decide his own path."

I don't know what kind of personal trial you may be facing today or what rainy season you're going through. I just hope that, in the midst of your hard days, you may be able to see ahead and use the last of human freedoms. One day, with hope, look forward towards a better future. Sometimes it is only the winter that can make our spring seem brighter. Sometimes it is only the rain that can bring about healing.

Like author Roberto Badenas wrote in his book "Frente al dolor", In reality we can all choose to complain about the things we don't like, or to thank heaven for the wonders we enjoy. We can be afraid of what does not work, or be grateful for what is still going well."

Blessed rain!

Beauty all around us

– México –

I heard him when I was on my way to the music class my children take. We were walking to the school's room and he was sitting by himself on a black bench outside. Around him were children running, teachers walking to their next class, parents chasing children, and all this noise, but he didn't seem to notice. Instead, with perfect skill, he was playing his guitar. It was with such concentration that it was admirable. I don't know enough about classical guitar to recognize the song, but I do know it was beautiful. My children and I passed by and they stopped to listen to him, admiring. Then he stopped his practice and we continued walking.

I admire how children have a great capacity to recognize the small moments in life that are sometimes short, but fill us with beauty. They are discovering their world and everything is fresh. In contrast, it is too easy for us adults to pass them by without noticing them. Today my children's awareness of beauty made me realize how important is to stop and listen - or to stop and look, to stop and savour them.

The day ended and the sunlight disappeared behind the mountains. The night found me tired, but before I put my children to bed, I read them a story. We sat together in a blue recliner. I hugged them as I read to them and smelled their shampoo on their still-wet hair. They were listening in silence and then we prayed. Thinking back about my day, I realized that both the guitarist's mini concert and that last hug were little moments full of magic. In that moment, gratitude had taken hold of me. There was peace at home.

According to Amy Morin, who wrote an article for Forbes magazine, gratitude has seven great benefits that have been scientifically proven. Some of them are: it opens the door to better relationships, improves your physical health, reduces your perception of toxic emotions, promotes empathy, reduces aggressiveness, and improves your sleep, among many others.

For me, gratitude tends to open the door of hope. However, it is a value that I tend to forget and must learn to cultivate.

Today before I turn off my light, I remembered the conversation I had with my son this morning. I had spoken with him about perseverance (he did not want to do his homework). I explained that only a musician who can practice for many hours is capable of playing as well as his cello teacher; only the artist who paints, hour after hour, is capable of making some of the beautiful paintings that we had in the living room. Only the writer who writes and writes can one day publish a book. Practice makes perfect, I concluded.

As I listened to the song of the pigeons saying goodbye to the light, I had no doubt that I need to give that mini speech to myself regarding gratitude. I need to practice this each dawn and each dusk. At the same time, today my little children had taught me how to catch a moment. Enjoy the now. They didn't worry about the future - and why would they if they had their parents? They lived, confident and happy knowing how to distinguish the magic of the world around them and stop to admire it.

Sometimes it only takes the eye of a child to rediscover what makes life beautiful. We need children to learn from them; to stop and rediscover our wonderful world. They are the purest example of the beauty that still exists around us.

Nature's Sanctuaries

– Germany –

Sometimes you and I need secret places. Places that restore the soul and give you clear thoughts - where anger and sadness fly away and you're able to find the best of yourself there. In these places you always find happiness, without a doubt. I call those places sanctuaries. They have literally become that in this quarantine.

Here in Germany I have discovered one of those places. To get there, you have to take a road through a forest. The forest is a mixture of pines of different species, one sporadic oak tree, and bushes of wild blueberries, blackberries, and even strawberries. Sometimes we pick mushrooms for breakfast in this forest. The country flowers that appear in spring or summer paint the path of colors. When my daughter asks for it, we stop to pick them up and take them to our home's table.

Part of the road to reach the sanctuary is covered with the modern asphalt that we all know, because the roads of our modern world use the same thing. Another part, however, is covered with old stones glued together by cement, giving the ground a more or less flat surface, but still making the tires of my car tremble from top to bottom. This piece of road makes me think of the kinds of roads that horse-drawn carts would use in ancient times. Suddenly, the feeling of history fills the air.

Upon reaching my secret place, we park under the shadows of the trees. When I see them, I know that I am just steps away from reaching it. As we walk into the middle of the forest, my children pick up sticks that look like swords or little flowers that they give to their mother. They run, they chase each other singing or talking, they play their stories full of knights and princesses. Her innocence moves something inside of me that only another mother can understand. Then we come to the most beautiful part of the forest; the beech trees. They are tall, leafy, and incredibly beautiful. There is a part of this forest where they surround me. When I see their thick trunks I want to believe that they are the kings of this place, with their antiquity and greatness. Seeing them makes me say a prayer of thanks for allowing me to contemplate such beauty. Seeing them makes me quiet down in reverence. Seeing them makes me feel small. Seeing them reminds me that their creator sustains me and as long as I am in His hands, there is nothing and no one in the world that can bring me down. His strength sustains me. Whenever I get to them, I also can't stop thinking about Antoni Gaudí, the Spanish architect who brought the forest to man's houses or churches. I would like to imagine that his inspiration was born next to the beech trees - that both he and I, in the past and present, admire the forest to the core.

When we finished passing the beech trees we reached the lake. There are four benches on its sandy shore, making you think you are close to the sea. Sometimes I find the lake calm and can see the reflection of the trees that surround it. However, my favorite way to find the lake is when it's being bathed by the sun. The air that moves the surface of the water makes the reflections of the light remind you of the brightness of the stars. The reeds around the lake sway, dancing. There

are a couple of swans that have made this lake their home and in spring you'll find them swimming on its surface with their little babies. They still live there.

Then I get rid of my clothes, get into the water, and swim. I breathe the pure air of the forest and enjoy the summer sun. The cold water revives me and I suddenly find happiness.

Where is your sanctuary? When was the last time you were there?

The story of a La-Z-Boy

– USA –

There is a secret short story in the corner of my heart that I have kept for a while. I realized today that I ought to write about it because we need to keep remembering our blessings. I have never shared this with anyone, but today I will share it with you. It happened almost seven years ago, when I struggled through some nights of insomnia.

When I was pregnant with my son, Jonathan, I suffered of a condition called polyhydramnios. Basically I had too much amniotic fluid. Because of that, I had to go for regular procedures where the doctor inserted a needle through my womb and took out liters of this fluid into glass bottles. At the end of the procedure, a couple of these bottles would be lying on the floor besides my bed with a yellowish liquid inside that had been the swimming pool of my unborn baby. The procedures were done without anesthesia and, although uncomfortable and sometimes even painful, I asked the doctor to do it because the pressure on my body was so hard to bear. Towards the end of my pregnancy I was so big that strangers who saw me would ask if I was having twins.

Because of this condition, when I was seven months pregnant it made it impossible for me to lay down. If I did, I felt extremely uncomfortable and had difficulty breathing. In the beginning I tried to lie in bed with lots of pillows below my head, but this didn't work. I dreaded the night, because with night would come my insomnia. Some nights, sunrise would find me with my eyes still open.

Every pregnant woman most probably knows that, towards the end of your pregnancy, bathroom breaks are usually a prerequisite of the night. Getting up from bed was too hard and I didn't want to wake my husband to ask for help, because he was usually sound asleep after a long day of work. For the last month I would usually walk around the living room, listening to the sounds of the night and sometimes whispering songs, praying for the baby to be delivered soon. I wanted so desperately for this stage to be over so I could sleep better (what a naive naïve first-time mother!). However, when I was about to fall into despair for lack of sleep, an amazing thing happened.

To explain, let me tell you that months before a couple from the church my husband was pastoring had approached us with a gift - a recliner and rocking chair all in one. Because I had never mothered a baby before, I was not fully aware of its high value in a mother's journey. This recliner was sitting right there in front of my eyes and I didn't realize it was my perfect solution! One night, in desperation, it finally dawned on me to try it. I pulled a brown handle on the side that opened a surface for my legs and a way into my first night of rest after a long week. At that moment, secret tears fell from my eyes and I thanked heaven for that gift. Then a night of sleep followed.

The blue recliner sits today in the children's bedroom, a silent reminder of love. Sometimes we are given things or meet people, unknowing that they will be of high value in our future. Some call it providence, others call it luck or the wisdom of the universe - I like to call it God's love.

Pain and maturity

– México –

We cannot be real to others if we aren't willing to share our humanity, our sorrow, and our brokenness, nor share about the difficult stages we go through in life. It happens to all of us and it changes us. It happens that I want to be real, so today I will open a page that is difficult to write, but true.

I recently read a historical novel about Pearl S. Buck written by Anchee Min. She writes, "only when one understood suffering is one capable of happiness." I never found that to be more true than today, because it was seven years ago that I experienced the kind of pain a mother never expects to face. It was seven years ago that my first son was born. His name is Jonathan, which means God's gift. Let me tell you about him.

When Jonathan was born, I - like any other new mother - was full of expectations, full of dreams, and full of hope. All these were shattered in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit where they took my son and where my husband and I heard for the first time the words "muscular dystrophy". Then I saw what it was capable of doing to a human body. The first time I saw my baby, I found him connected to all kinds of weird machines that were keeping him alive. They made lots of noise. This strange disease was going to be part of our daily routine from that day on and we didn't feel ready for it. Seven years ago, everything seemed dark. It was painful, it was awful.

Yet in the midst of this storm, I was able to experience love. It first appeared through the phone calls and the flowers, then the visits and the restaurant outings, taking us away from an intensive care unit that seemed so noisy, so full of tragedy, so full of hurting parents, and so full of tears. We went out with our Christian friends and family and tried to eat, tried to talk, tried to be friendly. It was hard, but it was through these visits that we remember we were loved. I felt back then that they were God's hands holding us.

Then time passed. With each season that my son started growing, he also started bringing so much joy into our life. As a baby he was so sweet and so loving. He would let you hug him as long as your heart desired. When he was able to walk - something we never expected him to do - he would come running to my bed in the mornings, trying to find the love of a sleepy mommy who always had a small space for his warm body. He soon became the essence of love.

Today, as I look back on my life, I believe that pain can give us a deeper sense of happiness. Seven years ago I almost lost him through a respiratory arrest. If it wasn't for modern medicine, I probably wouldn't have a son today. However, my son got a second chance for life through the care of an excellent team at Driscoll Children's Hospital. It was there that I almost lost my hope for the future, it was there that I cried the worst tears of my life. Last week I celebrated my son's seventh birthday - and that day I realized as I never had before how happy we are to have him. His diagnosis changed our hearts.

Seven years later we sing, we make pizza and cakes, we hang balloons and smile, and we invite his friends for a b-day party and to ride their bikes around our home with him. I hear the

children giggle; I smell the wet grass from the rain last night and I smile. We are happy today because we are celebrating life. I stop and I treasure this moment, because it is today I am able to remember that life indeed is beautiful. Although some days we will face pain, we must not lose hope for better tomorrows.

To finish, I would like to tell you about Alexander Solzhenitsyn, an author who won a Pulitzer Prize and spent eight years of his life in prison for making a few disparaging remarks about Joseph Stalin. He went into prison an atheist and came out a Christian. After he was released, the first words out of his mouth were: *“I bless you prison—I bless you for being in my life—for there lying on rotting prison straw, I learned the object of life is not prosperity as I had grown up believing, but the maturing of the soul.”* (Simons III Richard, *“The true Measure of a Man”*, Union Hill Publishing, 2011)

Friends and love

– Germany –

Love is certainly a palette full of colors; in life, we find it in every form. Nevertheless, it is often the case that when we ask people about love, they tend to think of romantic love. However, love does not start there. In fact, it starts in our life way before that. We learn it from our parents, siblings, grandparents, etc. until we arrive at friendship. It is this kind of love that I would like to talk about today, because not long ago a friend described it with the perfect name; it is a treasure.

I arrived in Germany one year ago and I knew no one, except of course my family. I knew as soon as we arrived that I wanted friends; they had always been such an important treasure in my life. But before I tell you about my friends, you need to know that saying “I love you” was the most constant and normal expression in my childhood home. It was very important for us to say it out loud. It was repeated to me with almost every rising sun.

It wasn't until I left home that I realized that the world wasn't like that. However, this realization hit me the strongest when I arrived in Germany. Here's a different way, you see, and it's not like I hadn't had a previous warning. In fact, the first time I met a German in person was in Indiana. She was a friend and colleague from work and my first question about the German language after we became acquaintances was “How do you say ‘I love you’ in German?” And she said “Ich liebe dich”.

Later that year on a day when we were having a wonderful talk and connecting, it came so naturally for me to finish our talk with “Ich liebe dich”. She went red and gave me a whole interesting cultural lesson about the German “I love you”. It cannot be said so casually. This kind of ‘I love you’ could only be said when you were in love. Luckily, we were in the States and she understood where I was coming from. She knew I meant the American ‘I love you’ between friends.

To be honest, I had forgotten all about that lesson until I came to live in Germany. Oh boy, was I ready for a ride! One of my Teuton friends even thought I was in love with her because of my weekly desire to say “I love you” and show her I really did. One cold day, she finally and patiently explained a little bit of why Germans think about that phrase so differently. She believed “I love you” can lose its meaning and wear off with too much use, and the “I love you” for friends was actually “Ich hab dich lieb”. Or, better yet, “Ich mag dich” (which means I like you - I have to say that in this regard, I also like ice cream! But to me, friendship is stronger than ice cream!) Needless to say, I was confused. For me, “I love you” represents the certainty that there is a connection of the heart and soul - a special affection for the receiving party. For me, saying it out loud will never wear away with the passing of time. For me, it's important to express it when I feel it. I know I love her like that.

Truth be told, when you're a foreigner like me, the love from your friends and family is one of the things that your heart misses the most and longs to hear. When you move, all your emotional support system is cut off instantly. Suddenly you feel isolated, incapable, immature, fragile, lost, and lonely. It's even harder when you can't even express yourself in the language of the country, much less make friends. It doesn't matter that you can read it in all the messages from those you love sent via the Internet world. Nothing can compare with somebody saying it to you while looking straight into your eyes. So, I went ahead and started looking for friends.

My first friends here were the English speakers. That's how I found Claudia, my Brazilian and English-speaking friend who had studied in England. One day she came to give me a bag full of clothes; it wasn't the first time she did that and, although I considered her gift valuable, the truth was that I truly just enjoyed talking to her and looking at the love her face radiated. Claudia is a wonderful pianist, a good photographer, and an artist who is able to reflect a million feelings in her art, music, and beauty. In my opinion artists often have the ability to express their feelings more easily than other human beings. Often they do it through their art; it has been my experience that sometimes they can also do it with words. Claudia has that gift. So that day, we finished our conversation and she said goodbye to me, kissing me like Latin-American woman do. With a great expression of joy, she stopped to say something important. It seemed as if she had discovered something beautiful in her heart, something that was exciting and could not be contained inside any longer. "I love you," she said, with a beautiful smile. From that day on, she called me her little sister.

Her words took by surprise, but they sounded very sincere and I believed them. I embraced them and smiled. We hugged and kiss once again and then she ran off. I looked at her and waved. Suddenly I realized that that'd been my first "I love you" from my new friend in Germany. The sky of that day was cloudy and dark, but the sun had come out for me.

Throughout the next months, something beautiful started to happen all around me. As if in a domino effect, the other "I love you"s came to me through the people who had become my friends. Fadia, a Muslim from German class, said it with a smile. Monica, a dear Polish friend, said it in a letter. Daniella, my Bulgarian friend, hugged me and said it in my ear. Of course, the last ones came from the Germans – and these were perhaps the sincerest of all, since it was so hard for them to say it out loud

I do not know where in the world you are reading this now. Maybe the people you love are all around you, maybe your circle of friends is very small, maybe they are far away, or maybe you feel very lonely in your corner of the world. Nevertheless, I believe that love can be found. Germany taught me that lesson once again; your heart only needs to be open to look for it. Remember the words of this unknown author: "Love comes to those who still hope although they have been disappointed. To those who still believed *although they have been betrayed and to those who still love although they have been hurt before*".

Lessons from my dog

– USA –

Recently I read a story in the Washington Post by Denise Daniel. It says that one of the greatest lessons of her life was learned by her dog when she saw her house being burned to the ground. Her dog was going back and forth, making sure all the children were outside the burning building. Being a child development expert, she says a pet can help our children develop empathy and responsibility, boost self-esteem, and reduce stress levels.

In contrast, I read another article in The Independent written by Rachel Hosie saying that the medical research charity Harrison's Fund found that people have more empathy towards animals than humans. The researchers printed two adverts, both of which posed the question: "would you give £5 to save Harrison from a slow, painful death?" The only difference between the advert was the picture. One was a dog, the other a little boy. People donated more money to the dog fund. This finding really surprised me!

I have also learned a beautiful lesson from one of my dogs which I would like to share with you today. The story started on a sunny day in Texas. Our dear friend Tom Evans arrived at our home after eight hours of travel. He was there to bring us a present. When the children saw him, it was love at first sight. It was a golden retriever. He already had a name, Gunner, and he was the first pet my children were going to own. He was a very sweet and gentle dog.

A few months later we moved into a house in the country and Gunner befriended a street dog. It was a female dog that looked extremely skinny and was scared of humans. She acted very shy in front of us, but then she started eating Gunner's dog food. We found ourselves with a dilemma. We tried to shoo her away, but it didn't help at all; she was always there next morning. I didn't want more responsibilities, but our dog seemed to like her and we had enough land for them to play together. Gunner had been a lonely dog for over a year. Now that he had a friend, he was beside himself for joy. Day after day, this dog somehow convinced us that we should accept his female friend. In the end he won. We loved him and wanted him to be happy.

Gunner died that year. We had a little funeral for him with the children in our backyard. Some tears were shed. His death was hard for all of us, even for his female friend that stayed around. Losing Gunner had been so painful that I decided to finish off the last dog food and then expect her to go. But, month after month, dog food found its way into the cart at the store. Until finally, one day, my sister in law came for a visit and gave the dog a name. She named her Honey. I knew once a name was given, that dog would be ours.

Honey has become a blessing. She is kind with the children, she's my alarm system, she goes running with me, she walks with us to the nearby oranges groves, and she's warned me of serpents and coyotes in the night. Today my husband took Honey to the veterinarian; she had a horrible abscess, as if a snake had bitten her. The cost was expensive, but we were at peace. She had not died, she had been a faithful dog, and she had earned our respect and love. In a way,

without us noticing and with the passing of time, we had adopted her and she became part of our family.

These incidents taught me one of the most important lessons about faith, acceptance, and what it means to be adopted by God. Adoption is to belong, to be part of, to choose or to take as ones' own. I did not want to have another dog, but because this dog became my dog's friend, we took her in. Love was multiplied in our hearts. It was similar to how God adopted me. He did not do it with hesitation, like I adopted Honey, but instead He did it wholeheartedly from the moment I was born. Not because I had earned His respect or trust, but out of His passionate heart which was full of love for me. Through Jesus, according to the Bible, we are adopted. "*He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will*" (Ephesians 1:5). For this I am grateful.

Hope

– USA –

It was early in the morning in Las Vegas when we found ourselves running through the airport like maniacs. I and my two little ones ran as fast as we could through the hallways, trying to locate our gate to departure. My husband was checking the bags to save time. I felt my heart pumping loud and strong, telling me how out of shape I was. At the long line for security my husband finally caught up with us and, once we were cleared, we continued the race to terminal 11. We had hoped to fly home that morning.

My husband, who runs every morning, went ahead of us with Sophia over his shoulder to try and catch the plane. Our race was useless; once we reached the gate, the plane had already left. Several things had delayed us - taking the wrong turn in an unknown city, Jonathan pouring water all over his pants and having to change him, carrying 5 bags and 2 car seats with only four hands, and a mom who did not think of all the possible “incidents” with little children that can happen before flying.

I sat, exhausted, on a terminal chair and Sophia came running to my arms - something she seldom does. My Sophia is the most independent little girl I have known. It’s not like I have a bunch of girls in my house to compare her with, but from my experience working in a Day Care when I was younger and at the office with little girls as a therapist, I realized this a long time ago. She seldom looks for hugs, but she has a way to know when mom needs one. This was one of those days. My heart was pounding hard and sweat was on my brow, but what mother can deny her toddler a hug? We found out that the trip which was supposed to only 6 hours long would now take 14 hours. Andrzej and I felt terrible. Sophia kept insisting that I carry her, so I finally picked her up from the floor and both of us rejoiced in the closeness of our bodies. Her arms gave me the peace I needed in that moment. We lingered in the embrace and I thought, as I felt her little hands play with my hair, “Who cares if I missed our flight! As long as I have this beautiful baby in my arms, all is good.”

Suddenly, all the stress and disappointment disappeared. The realization that we were alive and together invaded me with happiness. We were going home, yes, but, “home is where the heart is”. Home was right there in the middle of the terminal, which was unusually quiet at 6:27 a.m.

Once we landed in Houston, I felt I was at home already. You could hear Spanish here and there. The terminal was full and my legs needed a stretch. I asked my husband (who’s the best traveling partner I know) to take care of our children and I took off to scan my surroundings. All I could find was food, people eating, restaurants, and more food. However, as I walked a little further into the middle of the food court, I found an exposition of art - children’s paintings.

Because I was a counselor for almost eight years of my life and had worked with children, I have been always interested in children’s drawings. They usually have a lot of meaning. I stood there, studying them - the colors, the forms, the drawing as a whole. Then I read the ages, the

stories, and what they said when they drew it. These were strong and wiser children than their age. These children were cancer survivors. Some were 3, 4, 6, or 7, while the older was 12.

A wave of the world's pain washed over me. As I stood there in the middle of the terminal, really moved, I had to hold back my tears. As a mother, I could only imagine how these parents felt. The pain and the hope of the children came alive through the paintings, so full of color, and filled me. One said that the first time she flew was because she had been taking a plane to a hospital. People were rushing back and forth, waiting to go back to their real lives in that huge airport. But there, in the middle of all this noise and movement, I had a minute of silence thinking about what really matters in life. Missing our plane that morning in that context meant nothing.

It was a sobering moment and I was grateful to be in Houston that day. It doesn't matter how old we are or what kind of desperate moment we face in life; hope makes things better. Those paintings were my proof. Those brave warriors believed in a better future. They believed in healing. Others believe in a happy place at the gate of eternity where there is no more sorrow; a place where they can find total restoration, strength, and joy forever. They had hope. That was what gave them the strength to fight such an unfair battle. However, hope is the best thing to have when life becomes chaos; it gives us perspective and trust. It gives us encouragement when we find none; it gives us desire, it gives us that push we all need sometimes. Those children, like me, had hope. They were just braver.

Fear and Adventure

– Mexico-Germany –

I had never been as scared in my life as that day. At that moment, I was standing on a rock in the middle of a turbulent river in México. My brother had the wonderful idea to invite me tubing with some of his friends across the Sierra Madre canyon... in a river that had grown out of control because of the rains. I had the stupid idea to say yes. I needed an adventure.

We had started in a wild current that looked like chocolate because of the rains and it soon threw me out of my tube. My legs got all bruised because they were being hit against the rocks at the bottom. The river would move me in every direction against my will. I couldn't stop. I tried to swim but to no avail; the current was too strong. I somehow managed to rescue my tube and I climbed on top of that rock. I stood there, frightened. Ahead of me were 6 more hours of the same thing and it wasn't possible to go back. It took me about twenty minutes to calm down. Finally I left my rock of salvation and threw myself on top of the tube, into the water. Everybody had gone by and I was alone in that canyon. I knew that if I wanted to survive, I needed the group.

I was listening to a popular coach this week talk about fear and how many times it holds us back from doing what we really dreamed of - what we would like to accomplish and what we've wished to do since we were little. Brendon Burchard says that there are 3 types of fears. The fear of loss (losing safety), the fear of pain (it would make me uncomfortable), and the fear that the outcome will not be what I wanted.

Two years ago, I decided to do something that I'd wanted to do since I was a little girl: write a book. The process was long and sometimes the story I was writing would take me to places I wasn't intending to touch. I was afraid that all my work would have to go into the trashcan if I didn't find an editorial house that was willing to bet for my book. I wrote numerous letters to find an agent who would be willing to represent me - with no success. There were numerous times I just felt discourage and fearful.

This experience reminded me of the mountain river - of the immense fear I had that the river would drown me (although I had a safety vest) and how terrifying it was to go on that adventure. I read an acronym about fear the other day that I really liked. It read something like this: F.E.A.R. Face Everything And Run or Face Everything And Rise.

We are living in a world of fear right now. The pandemic has changed the way we think about meeting friends or family, hugging, kissing, working... everything seems a big challenge and fear almost has control of us. I think, like in the mountain river, we need the group - we need each other to run this marathon with hope. Maybe we can't meet in person or touch, but we still have words to encourage one another. We still have music, we still have poetry and letters to write when the times get rough.

It's a little bit like printing a book; you need a whole team by your side. An editor, a graphic designer, a printing company, a group of people who are willing to help you along the way. A

group of people with whom you can run ideas back and forth. A group of people who are willing to go with you on an adventure and stay by your side.

I believe that, in this moment of our lives, we need each other more than ever. I needed my friends in that river, with their encouraging words, their cheers, and their help at the end of the adventure that finally took me out of that long canyon .When faced with fear, it's good to have someone to hold our hearts and say, “whatever happens, I'll still be here for you”. That's what my brother did that day. Rest assured that, for the rest of my life, I'll never forget it.

My last wish is that we all face the challenge in front of us with courage; that fear does not prevent us from being part of our own adventure.

The joy of Food

– Mexico –

An ancient author and king once said; “nothing is better for a man than to eat and drink and enjoy his work. I have also seen that this is from the hand of God.” (Ecclesiastes 2:24). His name was King Solomon and, according to his life’s biography, he was one of the wisest men that ever existed. So, why not? Let’s talk about food.

Food is one of the things I enjoy most in life. Certain plates have the ability to penetrate my tastebuds in a way that awakens the memories and emotions of the person I shared it with. This is how my Mexican heart thinks about food, because in this culture food has to be shared and eaten with the ones you loved; it is rude to let somebody eat alone. On this note, let me tell you a story about a plate that changed the course of my love life.

I ate it on a cold day, when the light of the sun was hiding behind the clouds in a Michigan sky that was shedding its snowflakes on us. Perhaps that is why, in contrast, I felt that the brightness and warmth of love was so intense. The feeling was changing the weather around me from the inside out. The warm plate of food that was served on my table that morning was called a “gypsy plate”. I can still taste it. The mixture of mushrooms, potatoes, onions, garlic, and green and red peppers slowly melted into my mouth. My friend Andrzej bought it from J. C., a small restaurant in town that I used to visit every Sunday morning with my girlfriends. He knew that I liked it very much. We ate together, talked, and he asked me if I thought I could learn his mother tongue (he had already learned Spanish by this point). I said yes. After that delicious breakfast, he asked me to be his girlfriend. Of course, I said yes; we married a year and a half later.

I didn’t know at that point that he happened to have a mother who is one of the best cooks in the world. I have married into a family that sure knows how to cook good Polish food. Lucky me! To my family’s defense, I have to say that my mother’s Colombian food and my Mexican grandmother’s dishes combined are also very good; they had been part of my most cherished childhood memories. Now, cooking has become an interesting and exciting international journey for me.

Once in while I make my dear exiled husband comfort food from his culture. Just yesterday I was cooking a recipe that his mother taught me, when suddenly a longing for her presence overwhelmed me. Right then and there I wished to cross the ocean at once, stand in her kitchen, and hug her. Food makes love come alive. This same feeling is the one that used to grab me when I made flour tortillas, arepas, and fried plantains while my family was so far away that it hurt. Reunion means a wonderful meal together in my family. For many years I lived far from mother, but I remember with clarity how she would prepare the best dishes for our day of arrival. It was her way of telling us, “I am glad you are home.”

Last, but not least, with time I have discovered that making food together with friends and family has the beautiful ability to bond hearts. That’s the main reason I’m starting to bake cookies with my children in this Mexican winter; I never waste the opportunity to cook with others. I have

learned some of the best recipes from friends and whenever I prepare them, their faces come back to my mind, no matter what part of the world I'm in. There's no doubt that, in friendship, some of the best memories and talks happen around a table.

The Christmas season is approaching, and I believe there's no better way to be loving than inviting people to our table. Invite those around us who are away from their families, who may be foreigners among us, who may be sick or orphaned, widows, sad, or lonely and in need of friends. Let us spread the aroma of our food and wrap our arms around them. Let's offer love and, as one of my favorite authors put it, "*Only by love is love awoken*" (E. White). What a better way to start than eating together? That's why I say, let love begin! Let's grab our baking pans or pots and invite these people in. Let's have the courage and love to do something different this season. Bon Appetit!

Happiness in Prague

– Germany –

Night was falling. The light in the sky was changing slowly, from the natural blue of a clear sky to the red and yellows of a beautiful sunset. We walked slowly, enjoying the moment, quietly feeling each other's hearts, hearing the street music, taking pictures, feeling the cool breeze over our faces, and watching a beautiful sunset fall on Charles' Bridge in the city of Prague.

To be there with my friends meant I had to leave my husband in charge of the household - complete with two children - for a whole week. To be honest, it took some courage to take this trip. Not because of my husband's inability to take care of our children, but because of my own inability to follow the map that guided me to another country. For my happy relief, my copilot was great at this task.

Prague is one of those cities where, when you see it for the first time, there's this sensation that time hasn't passed - that there are still things in this world that war cannot destroy, that love can actually last. Stories seem to be written all over the streets, it made me so happy.

That night as we walked by the river bay, a sensation of happiness and gladness overtook my heart. I watched the sun say its last goodbyes to our beautiful day in Prague together. I knew in that brief moment that I was celebrating friendship. I asked my friends:

“Do you girls feel happy? Do you girls feel happy right now?”

“Yes,” they said.

“You see? Girls can be happy alone, if they have each other!”

I liked a quote that explains this concept with more clarity. From Elizabeth Gilbert, it reads: “When women are gathered together with no man around, they don't have to be anything in particular, they can just be.” This is how I felt that night.

I believe it's good to write about happiness because we often tend to forget the good parts of life and focus on the gray spots. In the middle of the pandemic we have deprived ourselves of many things, but let's not deprive ourselves of joy.

I would therefore like to finish this reflection with the invitation to write down a happy moment in your life - and also give you 10 ideas from the Company Action for Happiness, based in Wales, that can improve your happiness level:

1. Do good things for others
2. Connect with people
3. Exercise
4. Take notice of the beautiful things around you
5. Keep learning new things; engage in new projects
6. Have goals to look forward to
7. Learn more about resilience
8. Look for what's good and what you're grateful for
9. Be comfortable with who you are

10. Find your purpose in life

Remember that when you're happy and content with yourself, you are able to love unconditionally and with a deeper love. You love because you are free.

The joy of sex, cuddling, and affection

– Germany –

I recently heard a story about the second world war in France - it came from a classmate that was learning German with me. We were talking about sex and she said that when the bombs were falling in Paris is when the most love making was done. I cannot guarantee that her story is true, but I think it sounds interesting. Making love in the middle of chaos and fear can actually put you in touch with a deep side of the human soul that cannot be reached any other way. It could be a nice way to die. It's a popular subject these days to talk about all the baby boom that will happen after this 2020. Not only because couples are home all day, but because it's the perfect stress relief for many of us.

Like Dr. Davison once put it, I like to believe that, "sexual intimacy is the very flame of God." There is nothing more beautiful out there that we can do on this side of life; it makes us find ourselves over and over again, it makes us rejoice at the pleasure of touch. At least that's what it does for me. However, I have also realized through the years that physical love can have many forms; it doesn't have to be found just in sex.

The first people who taught me about this were my parents, then my siblings, then my friends, and in the last years my children. You see, I have two children who love cuddling. My first-born, Jonathan, came out a natural. Sophia learned about it with time and by example, but she still gives you hugs only when she wants. That's still fine with me, as long as she does it.

In contrast, her brother taught me from the first year of his life that he was the perfect description in my vocabulary for the word affection. At night, he used to like for me to lay down beside him and hold his hands while he fell asleep. These days, he still likes for me to lay by him and read him a story before I turn off his lights. We've also taught them to sing songs at the end of the week and, after a story, wish each other a happy week with a hug and a kiss. I've found no bigger pleasure before dad comes home from his day of work than to cuddle with my two children, side by side, and watch a film together - or just read a book about animals.

Here in Germany I am well aware that touch can vary from culture to culture. This is confirmed by psychologist Sidney Journeaux, who observed friends sitting at a Café in different parts of the world. It was noted that the English touch each other zero times per hour, in contrast with the French with up to 110 times per hour and Puerto Ricans with 180 times per hour!

Dr. Dacher Kertzel from Berkeley, who spent years of his life learning about touch, says that this is our primary language of compassion. Touch also builds up cooperative relationships, boosts our immune systems, calms cardiovascular stress, and can trigger the release of oxytocin, aka the "love hormone". It promotes trust and generosity. In other words, like the famous artist Michelangelo said about his painting in the capilla XVI, "to touch can be to give life".

So I hope today, as you go about your day, you can spend some time with your family (after you wash your hands) touching, embracing, caressing, kissing, cuddling, brushing your

children's hair, having sex, and being grateful for this now-seldom opportunity in a world that has forbidden us to touch.

In the end, in these stressful times where affection can be forgotten, I would like to leave you with the famous quote by Pihu: "Never leave a relationship for its few faults. Nobody is perfect. Nobody is correct at all times. In the end, affection is greater than perfection."

When someone dies

– Germany –

With just one call, your world can fall apart. It only takes a moment - two words, maybe four - and suddenly you find yourself falling into an abyss that seems infinite. You know for sure that, at the end, you will only find darkness. Suddenly, the life that you thought was yours - that flowed with calm and joy, like a transparent river - collapses.

Three years ago, I was late to leave the classroom for my break after working for an hour and a half with my German course. I had recently moved to Germany and I could barely introduce myself in German. While everyone rushed out, I stayed for a few more minutes to talk with the teacher about my registration for the following month. When we finished and the teacher and I were leaving, from the other side of the room a cry of anguish was heard. A desperate cry had come out from the mouth of Paola, who threw her phone on the floor. She was my classmate and neighbor in seats.

“Antonia,” she said to the teacher, “My father is dead.” With this statement, she stood up from her chair and collapsed to the floor crying. Her whole body, which always seemed very strong to me, began to shake like a wet and defenseless feather.

Along with the teacher and a classmate from Sri Lanka who had remained in the classroom, we threw ourselves to the floor with her to touch some part of her body. It was so that she would feel the closeness of love that only women know how to offer in these times. We were from four different continents - Asia, Europe, America, and Africa - but in that instant, the language barrier collapsed. Instead, I saw the burning fathom of union, empathy, and love in the face of a painful death. Paola's pain was incredible; she had a strange feeling of anger and her lips trembled as she explained in more detail. She clutched her heart, almost wanting to rip it out.

After about twenty minutes our classmates began to slowly enter the room and found us around Paola, who had now sat back in her chair. In whispers, the teacher explained what was happening and slowly, one by one, almost everyone reverently surrounded her, silently respecting the moment. They were taking her hands, her shoulders, offering a strong hug. A colleague brought hot coffee, another cups in which to serve it. The Italians did not leave her for a moment and spoke to her in beautiful Italian or French with affection. They made her drink the coffee.

It was one of the most touching moments I'd experienced in a classroom because I understood with actions that, no matter the culture, the language, or the part of the world we come from, the pain of death is universal. It made me see how much empathy, respect, affection, and solidarity awakens in the ones around the person experiencing pain.

Today we are in a world that's experiencing an amazing awakening to the pain of others because of the pandemic. We are also offered an opportunity for empathy, respect, and sending messages of love and support. Like one of the author I much admired said, “Trying to alleviate the pain of others is one of the noblest moral actions that we can undertake.” (Roberto Badenas, Frente

al dolor). Like the Dalai Lama said, “if you want that others be happy, practice compassion, if you want to be happy, practice compassion.

I hope that as we go through this valley of shadows and death, we can remember the words of the great German writer Goethe: “There is no painful situation that cannot be ennobled, either by the way of acting, or by the way of enduring.” May we all have the strength to endure.