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Spiraling

During COVID-19, people's lives suddenly changed, and many faced severely unjust experiences. This article focuses on one such group—mothers who work in higher education. It draws on research and informal discussions with women across Asia, Europe, Australia, and the United States. It is a story about the fictional characters, Li and Laura, but is informed by international research about mothers in academia with children learning at home during these unprecedented times.

For Li living in Asia, she felt the stress of the world when the virus officially was deemed a pandemic. It was like she and her home country of China were being blamed for the spread. Yet she still had to work to do—hundreds of students to teach, her own children to help through the stressful time, and her ailing mothers to care for, all in full lockdown. Her mind raced: What can I do? How do I make sure my family is okay?

Across the world in the United States, Laura heard the news of “some kind of virus” threatening the world, but it didn't seem real, until her good friend suddenly became really sick. Her fear skyrocketed. She tried to pretend everything was okay but couldn't stop thinking: What will Dana think? She's only four and won't understand why she was just sent home for the year. Then Laura's university closed its doors and required a quick overhaul of all her courses. The blackhole that Laura had been trying to avoid since her divorce started to envelop her again.

Li and Laura found one another online. They hadn't expected to become friends, weren't looking to, but ultimately it was their friendship that drew them out of depression, anxiety, and fear to see the potential for their lives and for the world as a whole.

Introduction

1. Li

“Mama?” said Yoon-Ha softly, as she looked up from her homework. The girl had just turned seven years old and sat patiently every day at the new desk, the beautiful new one which her ailing grandmother had recently ordered. Li glanced at her daughter, lifting her eyes from her computer and the books surrounding her. Deep inside, Li was proud of Yoon-Ha—of seeing her confidently practice her work, of seeing her commit to finish every page assigned, of seeing her consideration for others. But on the surface, Li had to maintain a different demeanour. She felt pressure to mimic how she grew up, always deferential to her elders and always trying to work better and harder.

Li’s heart longed to respond to Yoon-Ha’s call with gentle words and a soft gaze. Maybe something like she’d been reading in the mothering group she’d recently found online. Something like, *Hi Yoon-Ha, what do you need my dear? I love you and want to help you. Right now, mama has work, but I’ll be able to talk more soon, okay?*

She fought with herself as other words started to build in her mind: *Go back to your work. Stop bothering me. Can’t you see I’m busy?* But instead, she somehow found a middle ground with a direct and non-emotional response: “I’m about to start my Zoom class, Yoon-Ha. Why don’t you save your questions until I’m done?”

This was the new normal in many parts of Asia, which was the case in her homeland of China, as well as where she lived now with her family in Korea. Since the end of February, many places had been on lockdown because of the virus. It came suddenly, just like the warnings from her ancestors who foresaw of such times. *But really, a virus? How could something so small, wreck such havoc?!* This wasn’t a real question Li had though. She knew the reality of health crises. It was her training after all, as a public health specialist. Li had internalized a message about her work. She would often think, *Off to save the world!* But then question, herself, *why have I put so much pressure on myself, right?* Instead, Li felt like a small piece of a puzzle that was missing the box-top, working towards something that she couldn’t quite figure out but which she was pushed forwards to complete. She had spent years in university and graduate school studying disease and health, examining challenges facing rural and urban communities, as well as working to devise solutions that could be applied across all communities. Growing up in a collectivist culture instilled in her the idea that everyone works together for a common goal, and ending disease always seemed like the most obvious direction. She would think, *everyone gets sick at some point in their life, right? So why not work to help everyone feel better.* It was a huge goal—fixing everyone, healing communities, and bringing wellness to a whole country or even region.

1. Laura

Thousands of miles away, in the United States, sat Laura staring at the TV. She couldn't believe what she was seeing and wondered, *can this really be happening? It doesn't make any sense. Maybe it's like SARS, which was mostly an Asian issue, right?* Laura could feel her throat start to tighten, a sure sign that she was dealing with fear. Her therapist had told to look for these kinds of somatic responses in her body, especially after major changes, like the end of her marriage. She had been young when she got married. She fell in love with the idea of having a soul mate, someone to finish her sentences and spend time with whenever she felt lonely. Years of American pop culture created the image of the young, handsome white man completing the broken heart of the equally beautiful and almost always white woman. The *Jerry McGuire* complex for sure. Marriages after that blockbuster can be traced back to vows with "You complete me," and Laura's was no exception. As she thought back to that beatific day many years ago—the flowy, poofy dress, the flower girls, the cherubic music—all she could think was *how could I have been so stupid?*

Laura had a streak of beating herself up. She would think back to a decision she made thirty years before as a young child and berate herself for days about how she could have chosen one path over another. She would question why she had chosen seemingly simple things, like the colour of a teapot, the design for a shower curtain, while more important decisions loomed large. Her degree, the city she was living in, when to have children, and lastly, her choice of partner all made her cringe. All made her feel like she had somehow opened the wrong book and gone down a path meant for someone else.

Why did I marry him? she would ask herself this again and again. Her therapist suggested self-help books (which made her feel like she wasn't trying hard enough), meditation (which made her feel spastic as she couldn't sit still), and yoga (which made her feel old). The last time Laura talked with her therapist—*Was it really already a month ago?*—she suggested finding community groups to meet with and talk through issues of grief. Yet the idea of showing up at some random space, or worse yet at a church community room, made her feel too vulnerable and exposed. Worse than having others see her weakness would be to show such a feeling in a place of worship. So, she kept up the brave face to others, appearing as if everything was normal—*I'm fine, you know. It's just life, right? What about you?* She'd respond to anyone who asked. She didn't let anyone know how she struggled; she didn't even admit much of her struggles to herself and definitely not to her young daughter who idolized her every move.

2. Li

Li squinted as she tried to focus her eyes on the screen. She had spent the last ten hours answering her students' questions, but she saw more emails and now texts asking for help. They needed her; they were scared about their grades and about the virus. So, Li tried her best; she answered every question as thoroughly as possible all while trying to learn the latest requirements from her university. Her internal monologue was extensive: *I have to record all my lectures now, okay, so that means I need to find a better video camera and somehow set up our living room to look like an office. How am I going to do that? How can I make sure that my daughter or my mother doesn't walk through in the middle?* Fortunately, Li had recently taken a course for online teaching; it was one of the latest university "recommendations." For Li, this meant she was required to learn more and do more for her work. And she did. In this case, it did seem to pay off, as she was at least a bit ahead of the curve in suddenly being thrust into online teaching. But her students, many of them struggled. The undergraduates didn't all have personal computers and didn't have the space at home to have a private space for class without others disturbing them.

Looking at the intricately carved wooden clock she had bought on her trip last year to Kazakhstan, she noticed it was close to 11:00 p.m. and jerked upright. *Why was it so quiet?* she asked herself. *Where was Yoon-Ha? Where was her mother? Where did they go? It's not like we live in a huge house. We live in a high rise squeezed together with everyone else! They haven't eaten. They must be desperate!*

"Yoon-Ha! Are you okay?!" Li called out anxiously, not knowing what the response was going to be.

From the far side of the apartment, Li heard a mumbled, soft voice "Hi Mama. We're over here." Followed by a softer response, "Please don't be upset." Li squeezed from behind her makeshift desk in the living room to the bedroom to find her daughter and mother snuggled together on the floor. Yoon-Ha was brushing her grandmother's hair as they sat beside the bed underneath a bedsheet atop chairs. *They created a fort! Where did Yoon-Ha learn that?* Then Li saw the food laid out; from the look of it, all their plates and silverware were lined up like a buffet on the floor.

Li felt a frog in her throat. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought about all the work it would take to put away the food (that which wasn't destroyed already) and wash all the dishes. She was at her wits end and just wanted to run away, or scream, or both. But she couldn't. Li had a seven-year-old and a mother who was sick. She had to take care of them first. So, she did.

2. Laura

On most days, Laura could keep her fear at bay. This virus was really starting to freak her out though. It was supposed to be contained in China, but then she heard how it was spreading throughout Asia and how a traveller in Europe was found to have gotten sick. She heard about some people in the United States also coming down with a bad cold, a flu, or maybe the virus. And just yesterday, one of her good friends had to be hospitalized. So, today was not one of the days that her fear felt manageable. Laura felt alone, her husband gone, and her therapy session out of reach. She didn't even have any colleagues to bump into and chat with to ease some tension.

Has it really been three weeks of teaching online? Laura wondered. Her university had suddenly called all students back from internships and study abroad trips in the middle of March. At the time, she thought they were being overly cautious. *Why bring people back from Italy when the virus thing is mostly in Asia?* But then things changed worldwide, and it turned out the university had made a good decision.

For the past three weeks, Laura had been redesigning her courses. First, she used the university's online platform. It was clunky, but it worked. Then it was suggested to try something more creative to engage students. They kept on suggesting more things to include—more apps, more online programs, more platforms. It was suggested to create polls, surveys, to include presentations and collaborative opportunities, and to make sure to have synchronous times to see your students but also to make sure to have asynchronous where students can catch up. *Really?* she wondered. *There is just too much to learn. And these students need the basics of higher education, not bells and whistles.* Laura felt overwhelmed and remembered her therapist's suggestion to close her eyes and to breathe in peace and serenity and breathe out stress and fear. *Okay, breathe in peace and serenity and breathe out this f***ing nonsense ridiculous stress and fear!* It wasn't exactly the peaceful meditation her therapist intended, but it did bring some relief.

While she was in the breathing out stage, frowning with eyes pierced shut, she jumped as something touched her shoulder. "What?!" It was her daughter Dana. At only four years old, Dana was bubbly, with the wide-eyed wonder of childhood. Her curly dark hair cascaded around her oval face. Laura would look into her daughter's eyes and see stories of her great grandparents—the altars, the incense, and the intricately woven cultural tapestry of their lives. Like many of her students, Laura, too, was a first-generation graduate. *Maybe this is why I push myself so hard,* she thought.

Dana was leaning on her mother's shoulders now, "What are you doing Mama?" Reaching behind her, Laura quickly and gingerly pulled her daughter around her back into her lap, "Ah mami! Por que estás despierta ahora, cariña?"

Why are you awake now my dear?” When talking to her daughter, Laura tried to forget everything else and just focus there. She had read about that once on one of those mothering groups—”Try to be present with your child. This is their now, and there is no future or past for them.” So, she tried. Laura listened as Dana started to talk about her *pesadilla*, the bad dream where some bad creature came and made her never see her friends again. Unfortunately, the dream wasn’t too far from the truth. That virus she had seen spreading from day to day led to Dana’s preschool closing indefinitely, which meant her daughter hadn’t seen her friends for quite a while.

3. Li

With everyone finally asleep, Li lay there thinking. *Great, there’s quiet but now I can’t focus. I can’t think and yet I can’t work or sleep. Didn’t those American children’s stories say something about counting sheep? Why sheep?* After over an hour of trying to sleep, her back started to hurt from trying to lie still in the bed. Li wasn’t great at listening to her internal voice. Hearing voices was accepted in her family; it was accepted that spirits and messages would emerge at various times. The voice often tried to reach her, to tell her things: “Remember, you’re allowed to take care of yourself. You’re a smart, courageous, brave woman, like your grandparents before you.” She even somehow managed to ignore the voice even with direct messages: *Time to take a break. You haven’t eaten all day. Time to get up. You know that feeling in your lower stomach? That’s your body saying you need to go to the bathroom.* But Li tried to push those messages away to focus more on her work and her family, which made it even more strange this night when she did listen.

The little voice suggested she find somewhere to go where she wouldn’t feel so alone. It was 1:00 a.m. now. Li knew she couldn’t leave the apartment just in case her daughter or mother suddenly needed her. But she also knew deeply that she needed to find someone to talk to as well as commiserate and connect with. Her friends in town all seemed to have it together, but it was 1:00 a.m., so she didn’t feel as if she could call them, even if she had wanted to. She thought about her colleagues in her department: *I wonder what they’re doing now? Probably writing yet another top-tier journal article or getting their graduate students to do it for them.* Li had been fighting some negative feelings about her position in her university for a few years now. She had graduated from the top university in Korea, but it took a good four years to land a full-time secure job. During that time, she worked as a lecturer at various universities while her classmates—her male classmates—all got hired for better positions than hers, even some earning the extremely rare, tenure-track university ones.

Ugh. Stop focusing on that. Just do your work.

So, Li started thinking who else she could reach out to. She did have some

friends in other parts of the world that theoretically she could have texted or even called at this time of night, but what would she say? *Hey, it's 1am here, and I'm a mess. How are you?* (Thinking back years later, Li did realize, that that is exactly what she could say to a friend. That was exactly what she later learned to do to reach out when she was feeling lonely.) So, she went to find a different solution. Li's fingers took over, and they started typing in the search bar. *Panic attacks, no, that's not it. Attention deficit disorder, no that doesn't seem right either. Cervical cancer, hmm. I have been having some discomfort lately... NO, that's not what's going on.*

Amid the number of medical conditions popping up in her browser, she also happened upon the mothering group she had stumbled upon in the past. It seemed that the search function not only expanded into future potential health problems but also remembered a history that had brought relief.

3. Laura

Laura hung up the phone, trying not to throw it across the room. Her soon-to-be ex-husband was calling with just one more request. *He calls them requests, but they're demands, and I'm so sick of it!* She swallowed hard tensing her body, took a deep breath, and went to check on Dana sitting on the floor in the other room. Now that the preschools had all closed, the only option for a snippet of time to do her own work was enrolling her daughter in online classes. Generally, they were lacking in some manner or another, either ill conceived (*Really, you want the kids to sit silently for an hour?*) or missing something on the technology side (*We can't hear you with all the video glitches, which makes it hard to learn the song you're trying to teach*). But Laura tried to think about how lucky she was compared to others. She at least had a job, even if it was a nontenure track position. Her daughter was healthy, and she now had the whole house to herself. *Was that a good thing? I guess that means I can rearrange the bedroom like I've wanted to for years. It's the little wins, right?*

She tried to focus on the positives as she walked over and snuggled next to her daughter. Dana was squinting her eyes and leaning close to the iPad trying to understand what her art teacher wanted her to do next.

Opening her laptop, Laura started to review her five classes. All of them had to be adjusted for teaching online, two of which she'd never taught before. Again, she tried to focus on the positive. *I have a job.* She wanted to advocate and talk to leaders, to administrators, or to anyone who would listen. *Teaching full time and having a child at home learning are too much. Isn't there something the university can do?* She was grateful for the job (she told herself this again and again). And she wanted things to change. Even when she wasn't teaching online, the fact she had been in a nontenure track job teaching the classes nobody else wanted was frustrating, to say the least. She saw her white colleagues promoted; she saw men she had taught hired into positions she wanted. And there she

remained—Laura as the Latina scholar, the Indigenous scholar, and now, the single mother scholar (*ugh*, she thought, “*single mother*” sounds like bad words).

Her colleagues didn’t mention their kids, at all. As a student in a different department, Laura never knew who had kids. She assumed everyone had chosen to be childless or all the kids were grown. When she was hired as a faculty member in an education field, she assumed people would discuss their families. *I bet faculty just don’t talk to their students about their families.* It was a surprise then when it took almost a year for her to learn who in the department had children. Many of them had children Dana’s age even, but families weren’t mentioned, and family members were never invited to come to events. It was like a taboo to have a family. Laura thought more about this. *Maybe it’s not a taboo for everyone, as the men in the department seem to be very proud of showing pictures of their kids when asked.* Laura soon saw the taboo about having a family existed for women. Being a mother was taboo. She knew she was supposed to be a mother, culturally. *Being childless doesn’t look good. Someone might think I’m incapable of having kids. “Baren” the term family would throw around to ensure newlyweds would try to have kids quickly.*

Scrolling to her inbox, Laura saw the tiny little red light indicating her unread messages. She felt a chill come over her. *I don’t even know where to start. How could there be so many messages sent in the last hour?* Laura’s vision started to blur. She didn’t know up from down. Then she was jerked back to the present moment by her daughter’s voice and crayons falling to the ground.

Okay, get it together Laura. Moving from the messages hounding her, she opened her social media account, going to that one space that brought her relief many months ago, the mothering group.

4. Li

Scrolling through posts, Li saw how other mothers were struggling with finding their way forward during the pandemic. Mothers shared stories about trying to find ways to care for children at home when their jobs were being scaled back. Others talked about the requirements to continue working face-to-face, even though they had health issues of their own. And others shared specific problems they were encountering at work.

Li was drawn to one anonymous thread. The mother had posted “Remember, this isn’t a vacation.” The woman went on to explain that she worked full time as an administrator. She explained how one day in March, everyone was sent home with the requirement to work from home. They were told to make sure to find a quiet space to work away from family interruptions and to make sure to call or email back anyone who may contact them within ten minutes. And lastly, their managers had reminded everyone to not “goof off,” since, as they wrote, “This isn’t a vacation.”

*Whoa. How could anyone think that working at home during COVID, especially as a mother who may have childcare responsibilities, is vacationing? Although Li had various social media accounts, she didn't post much and didn't engage in many conversations. But in this instance, she was drawn to say something—to show support for this mother who was also working in academia. Li thought *I think she's in the United Kingdom? Well, that doesn't matter. One way or another, the message the poor woman received was entirely rude, disrespectful, and maybe even a type of bullying.**

4. Laura

Something about the online mothering group really spoke to Laura. She liked the way the mothers would encourage one another—in their publications and in their teaching—and hear each other vent when things were hard. Most of those vents were anonymous, like the one that quickly rose to the top of her page. *Wow, 128 comments.* Laura started reading through them.

How could they think you were on vacation?!

WTF? Hang in there.

I'm going through something similar here but as a faculty member. The pressure to keep working non-stop and submit all our deliverables for grants is ridiculous. It's like they don't realize we're working during a pandemic.

You wouldn't believe the conversation I just had with a male colleague. I asked him how things were going, thinking that perhaps he was struggling to find time in his house to work with his three kids, just as I have been. But instead, he said, "Things are great actually. Life is so efficient now. I don't even have to commute to work. I've been able to do so much more writing than in the past." I wanted to punch him in the throat, or cry.

I also talked to another dad at my university, but he was totally stressed out. For the first time ever he said, he totally appreciated everything his kids' teachers did. He talked about his two kids being home all day and not giving him any peace. They had homework to do and Zoom classes but wouldn't sit in front of the computer patiently and instead would interrupt him when he was teaching online. At least he had someone else at home to take care of the kids most of the day.

Scrolling down, Laura read the most recent comment on the thread:

I hear that you're not on vacation. You're struggling, just like the rest of us forced into an unmanageable situation to take care of children learning at home and also our fulltime jobs. It's so strange how leadership doesn't seem to notice the needs of caretakers. For me, not

only do I have a young child at home but also a mother to care for. If you want to chat, it's 1am out here in Korea and would be happy to have a late-night talk.

5. Li and Laura

After she had pressed “Enter” on her post, Li just sat staring at the computer. She sat partially frozen from her courage to share a bit about her life in a public-ish arena (it was a private group), and from anticipating a message she hoped would show up.

Laura looked at her clock. It was just now 11:00 a.m. *11:00 a.m. here and 1:00 a.m. there.* Her mind was racing. She felt a deep urge to reach out to the woman in Korea who wrote that encouraging post.

A number “1” shining brightly on her computer suddenly showed up, indicating that Li had a new message:

Hi Li, My name is Laura, and I live in the United States. I saw your post to that mother about “not vacationing” and I was really touched by your response. I hope it's okay that I wrote, even though I'm not the person from the anonymous post 😊. There was just something in what you wrote that really spoke to me, and I could use to talk to someone who understands too.

Laura was proud of herself for reaching out. It's what her therapist recommended: “Find someone who understands what you're going through.” It was a little thing, to reach out, but for the first time in a while, Laura felt genuinely calm. Her mind was now gently wandering, until she heard a small ding, indicating she had a new message:

I'm so glad you reached out Laura! My mind was going somewhere I didn't want at 1:00 a.m. You know what they say, “Your mind is a dangerous place to go alone” 😬 I would love to chat!! So, here's a bit about me. Well things, I didn't already share 😊. My department is great ... in theory 😊. But I'm the only woman and the only one with fulltime responsibilities to care take of children and also a parent. My colleagues are really nice, but they just don't understand the extra toll this virus has taken on me, and, of course other mothers out here in Korea. Because here, mostly its mothers who are expected to manage everything—find someone to take care of kids, their schoolwork, the household chores, cooking too, and if there are elderly parents, then that too. Before everything closed down, I was managing though. My daughter was in school from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and then a friend would take her to private lessons, so I had the whole day to do my

work. My mother was taken care of by a local girl I hired, and she cooked and cleaned too. But now the girl had to return home, and I can't bring anyone in to help. Enough from me 😊. Tell me about you?

Li was now fully awake. She had moved into the kitchen, turned on a light, and even started to make tea. Then she paced, waiting for Laura to respond. She heard a ding:

Oh wow, Li, that sounds hard to be the only woman and to also have your mother with you to take care of! My colleagues are mostly women, but it's weird here 😊. Nobody talks about their families. It's like we're supposed to forget they exist when we come to work. But my daughter is a part of me; she's only four and needs me. If I left all thoughts of her at home when I went to work, it would be like I was cutting off one of my arms. But maybe that's part of my cultural upbringing; we're supposed to always think of family first. *La familia* as we call it.

As the first person in my family with a university degree, nobody else understands what I do, especially now that I'm online teaching. They just see me on my computer and figure they can talk to me whenever, call whenever, text whenever, and get a response immediately 😊. Maybe that email about not being a vacation is because some families think it is! So, yeah, my family thinks I'm on vacation, but I'm so not. I'm actually going through a divorce 😊, although it's for the best. We weren't compatible, and he just brought so much stress to my life. Our daughter doesn't get it. She's still just trying to figure when she can go back to class and see all her friends. Poor kiddo. She misses sharing her toys. She used to come home everyday with a new toy from a friend (sigh).

Anyway, I'm hoping to be promoted soon, hopefully to a secure job finally. Mine is just a contract from year to year. At least it's not class by class, but it still sucks because it seems like I've been pigeonholed into this position. I've heard about the academic pipeline "leaking" for mothers, but this is ridiculous! For me, it feels like nobody sent me the invitation to the pipeline. Or they decided to send me one for the wrong pipeline, the sewage line 😊.

Across time and space, Li and Laura wrote to each other. On that first day and night, they wrote back and forth for over two hours straight. Each waited eagerly for the other to respond, and they shared more details about their academic lives, their home lives, their cultural upbringing, and their aspirations. That was the hardest part for both of them. Neither of them grew up seeing how to consider their own needs as necessary, or even important. But something about the virus made them reconsider things. Thinking about health was a way to reconsider the importance of their lives. As mothers who

cared deeply for their children and who were responsible for their wellbeing, they needed to stay healthy, physically at least.

Over time, Li and Laura found encouragement in taking care of themselves. They started with the basics, helping each other to remember to eat regularly and even go to the bathroom. Both things they had been terrible at previously. They texted each other daily, jokingly checking in to see what they each had eaten for lunch or dinner. A gentle reminder that it is important to eat meals. One day, they started seeing how many times the other went to the bathroom. Through this practice, they started to learn and relearn fundamental aspects of self-care—essential components for them to effectively take care of themselves and anyone else, too.

Their jobs hadn't changed, their bosses didn't see their work any differently, their daughters were still at home learning full-time, but they felt different. For Li, not having any domestic help was still quite a challenge and often an impediment to what she wanted to achieve, but she also realized that maybe she could lower the bar. Maybe, just maybe, she was doing enough work.

For Laura, the pressure she felt to be 100 per cent at work and 100 per cent with her family became less important as she saw her colleagues and others less often. *This must be that contradictory demand of being the ideal worker and ideal mother, huh? Well, it will have to wait for someone else to grab hold!* thought Laura. So, if she stayed off most social media and chose carefully who she spoke to, Laura could keep moving forward.

Coda

This time, Li decided she wanted to try something different. She wanted to take care of herself, and she knew it was important for her daughter and her mother too. For her to be at her best, she knew she needed to stop working when she was exhausted, and she knew she needed to eat. So, she tried something she remembered her daughter had done. She took out all the food from the fridge and all the plates and silverware and created a cocooned area. This time though, she set it up in the living room, an easier place to clean. *I can take care of myself, be responsible, and be sensible*, she thought, smiling to herself. This time she looked over to Yoon-Ha; her black hair neatly pulled into pigtails at the nape of her neck. "Hi Yoon-Ha, I'm over here." Then she added a little more quietly, and with a smile and a laugh, "Don't be mad."

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