

A New Life Beyond the Screen(s): My COVID-19 Re-Evolution

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It was the morning of 12 March 2020 — my birthday, 43 years of a ‘normal’ life. Our director summoned all the employees to the courtyard and briefly explained that we had to leave our offices immediately due to COVID-19 restrictions imposed by our national and local governments.

Just a few days earlier, the same reason had forced me to postpone to unknown date an important educational event involving more than 100 registered teachers, an event I had been organizing for weeks.

Many of us already knew that during the previous days, other colleagues and professors were also forced to leave their activities and go into quarantine, because other colleagues or family members could be possible sources of contagion.

On 9 March, an astonished and unprepared Nation had started to experience a new life, floundering amongst sudden personal and public limitations, fear, contradictory information, health emergency, death. All at once.

Suddenly the whole of Sicily, my town, me, too, had to face rules and impositions, spelling very different living — and working — standards; for most people, hard to accept and interiorize as ‘the current standards’.

Fear spread everywhere. People in my town started to struggle with a number of strict limitations imposed by the Mayor, including a daily curfew at 6 pm and long lines to enter, one at a time, empty grocery stores. Ambulances with sirens blaring crossed the town night and day and police cars were the only vehicles on the street.



Figure 1. Army patrol during lockdown in Messina. Photo by the Author.

My ten-year relationship had roughly been broken by my partner just a few days before the lockdown started, leaving me completely alone in dealing with my own fear and

commitments. Forced to stay in my empty flat, I watched this strange Spring beginning. It was still rainy and cold, but the sea was unusually quiet. Sea traffic was suspended, too, maintaining just a couple of ferries a day to guarantee emergency services and commuters crossings to and from Calabria. The directors agreed that our University could not stop just then. It was to be an anchor for the entire community, while the world around was experiencing such an earthquake. We were informed that we would continue working at home for an undefined time — depending on the evolution of the virus. Our ICT specialists quickly developed and shared systems to connect us to each other, with students, professors and external users, by web or phone; teaching and examinations — even graduations! — were to be held by web only.

My personal computer and phone quickly became a sort of appendage; my living room became my new ‘always open’ office, with my three cats feeling scared and confused by all those ringtones and disembodied voices.

While we were just trying to understand how to re-organize our work through new software and applications, we also quickly began to understand that our usual customers and stakeholders, too, were experiencing something new, often acting or reacting with an unusual aggressiveness.

Even if my standard customers are usually defined as ‘qualified’ (school teachers, university students, public officials), and I am certainly not a computer specialist, I quickly realized that most of them had many problems in using the most common technologies or managing a ‘professional’ relationship through them. My daily work started to become harder than ever, as the days passed and the whole situation seemed to get worse — especially from the economic point of view, due to the general closure of businesses and job stop and loss for most people.

During the first days, I was the only one of my team with an available ‘virtual phone number’ for our customers. I received thousands of calls every day, till late afternoon. My head kept telling me ‘You have to be kinder than before, Monica. People are scared and confused, keep calm even if they are aggressive. You can’t know what’s happening to them at this moment [...]; so, be kind. And helpful. Right now, the right word can do a lot.’ And so, maybe for the first time, I started practicing empathy. At the same time, I was facing abandonment, loneliness and a sense of emptiness — and lots of everyday practical problems, too, caused by the restrictions in my town. Still, I learned to measure my voice, my reactions, my emotions, while at the other end people talked about their personal issues, more than about objective difficulties with a specific procedure to be followed. I could describe thousands of peculiar calls and e-mails I received and answered during those days — always reacting as if I was living in a different time, in a different world, where any matter could be easily solved by a couple of clicks on my pc and a few encouraging words.

One day, all members of my organizational unit received a really weird e-mail, written in capital letters. It read: ‘*E’ urgente parlarvi e non comunico bene tramite email, per favore potete telefonarmi: é importante. Il mio numero é ... Grazie. Mi chiamo ... e sono di Reggio*

Calabria' (I need to speak urgently to you and I'm not so capable of communicating by e-mail, can you please call me? It's important. My phone number is ... Thank you. My name is ... and I'm from Reggio Calabria).

Our first reaction was — understandably, I suppose — equally weird. Our work concerns higher education and continuing education, and is mostly related to people with university degrees and highly specialized people, so we could never have imagined that, in 2020, when almost every aspect of our lives is computer-based, someone involved in public education would be unable to write and send a 'normal' e-mail. However, after minutes of giggling in our video-chat (one of the means we were using daily to talk to each other and our colleagues), our director invited us to reflect on this fact as a sad picture of the general state of the public schools in our country and especially here, in the South, where economic and social difficulties affect every kind of public and private issues. In public education, teachers and prospective teachers — at any level, as we experience daily in our work — often suffer from the digital divide; and, unfortunately, not only that. Anyway, someone had to answer the lady. And just because I was still the only one in my unit with a working web phone it fell to me.

The lady answered with a mix of surprise and emotion. She had not really expected a call from us. She started crying: it was the first time she had used the e-mail system, she explained with a thousand thanks. She was totally unaware of basic ICT and was sure no one would answer, finding her stupid and out of touch. In the past, her son managed all her 'digital' life but, due to lockdown, he was locked in another town and could help her only by giving instructions by phone. Her 'problem' was solved in a couple of minutes. But I took about one hour to reassure her and explain how to send and answer an e-mail autonomously and check information on our institutional web pages. Once again, at the end of that call, I was surprised by my own patience and way of interacting. I was really becoming a different me. Even my colleagues noticed it. I started to receive daily personal message of thanks from our clients. It was strange to me, but good.

And so, by the end of March, many things and habits — and relationships at any level, including my working routine and personal life — had drastically changed, maybe forever.

It is the end of June now. Lockdown has finished, many restrictions have ceased, our lives are resuming their normal course day by day; even if we are still partially working from home; even if we have to be booked in advance in order to be physically present in the office — twice a week, must put on protective face masks every time we get there and must avoid contact with other colleagues and clients. The emergency is not finished and — they say — it could restart in the coming months.

When I am home, I still see the same sea from my windows. Sometimes, I hear children playing in the neighbouring courtyards, and people strolling by on the Riviera. Sometimes, I still hear sirens blaring. But now, beyond my screen(s), there is a different world and a different life. There is a different me.