



## **“Manifestos of Care & the New Normal”**

**By Elizabeth A. Osborne**

In the final days of my MATC presidency, March 5-8, 2020, we convened at the Embassy Suites on Chicago’s Magnificent Mile. That meeting—far more dangerous than we recognized at the time—was punctuated by unsettling moments when we learned of infections at individual campuses, university travel bans, and shifts to online teaching. On March 11, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. On March 13, President Trump declared a nationwide emergency. By the 15<sup>th</sup>, schools and businesses shut down, and our traumatic, unending journey with the pandemic began.<sup>1</sup> Our Chicago conference would be the last moment of “normalcy” most of us would experience for a long time.

The traumas of 2020 and 2021 (and apparently 2022 too, thanks to Omicron) impacted each of us differently. The transition to remote work, teaching, and socializing forced us to invest in technology and learn far more than we ever dreamed about Zoom. Theatre artists rapidly found themselves unemployed as the industry collapsed under the weight of closures. Parents of young children struggled to care for kids while working from home, with embarrassing family moments broadcast to meetings with colleagues and classes of kindergarteners. Parents of

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<sup>1</sup> CDC, “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 4, 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>.

teenagers wistfully remembered the days when their beloved children headed off to school, friends, and activities that diverted some of their teen angst elsewhere. Millions of households found wonder in pets, and many meetings paused as cacophonies of barking rang out due to a delivery or passing garbage truck. Single people struggled to connect with friends and family to ward off the incredible loneliness of a perpetually empty home. Unemployment skyrocketed. Millions of our loved ones fell ill, and far too many never recovered.

Grief, fear, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, anger, confusion...these have been grueling years, but not only because of the pandemic. In 2020 alone, the nation erupted in a necessary racial reckoning, with widespread protests in response to police brutality and the murders of unarmed Black people like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. Trump supporters challenged the 2020 election results with “the big lie,” leading to a violent political insurrection in the Capitol and Trump’s second impeachment in the final days of his presidency. Wildfires ripped through California, hurricanes devastated the Gulf Coast, and a Texas winter storm left 246 dead after causing catastrophic failures in the state’s power grid.<sup>2</sup> It seemed like the world was collapsing around us. And while 2021 seemed like it would herald the end of this nightmare...it didn’t.

Amid all this, our little MATC gathering felt simultaneously terribly insignificant and *absolutely vital*. What would canceling our conference mean for the future of this organization that so many of us love? And the pain of missing friends and colleagues was awful. How could MATC offer support during such a harrowing time? What did our community need now, at this particular moment in the pandemic?

Research from the Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) shows U.S.

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2 Patrick Svitek, “Texas Puts Final Estimate of Winter Storm Death Toll at 246,” *The Texas Tribune*, January 2, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/02/texas-winter-storm-final-death-toll-246/>.

depression rates tripled within one year of the pandemic’s onset, leaping from 8.5 percent in early 2020 to 27.8 percent in March 2021—when our virtual event took place. Worse, they continue to increase. By October 2021, BUSPH registered depression in 32.8 percent of adults—one-third of the population. Women, unmarried adults, and adults in low-income households were most vulnerable: women were 1.6 times more likely to show symptoms of depression than men; those living alone were 1.6 times more likely than individuals in stable, long-term partnerships; and adults with household incomes below \$20,000 were *seven times* more likely to suffer from depression than those with incomes of \$75,000 or more.<sup>3</sup> BIPOC communities have suffered disproportionately, with significantly higher unemployment, illness, and death rates than whites.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the past two years have laid bare one systemic failure after another: widespread racism, misogyny, gender inequities, class disparities, and biases against those with disabilities. Mental health, already an issue for fine arts academics and theatre workers, has become a major national concern.

Amidst the uncertainty and chaos of 2020, the MATC Executive Committee made the painful determination that we could not move forward with a face-to-face meeting in March 2021. Vaccines were still a distant hope when we had to make the decision. Universities prohibited travel. Hiring freezes devastated the job market. Even those lucky enough to have full-time employment wondered whether their departments and universities would survive. Covid-19 infection numbers climbed inexorably, overwhelming hospitals. The conference could not go on.

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3 Catherine K. Ettman et al., “Persistent Depressive Symptoms during COVID-19: A National, Population-Representative, Longitudinal Study of U.S. Adults,” *The Lancet Regional Health - Americas* 5 (January 2022): 1, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2021.100091>.

4 Michael D. Yates, “COVID-19, Economic Depression, and the Black Lives Matter Protests,” *Monthly Review*, September 1, 2020, 16, [https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-072-04-2020-08\\_2](https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-072-04-2020-08_2).

Initially, we planned to shift to a radical and exciting virtual conference centered on the theme of Resistance. Our conference planner, the indomitable La Donna Forsgren (University of Notre Dame), envisioned a virtual conference that dug deeply into our institutional responsibilities and challenged our thinking around race and accessibility. But it soon became apparent that doing this event well would require far more than we could give—financially, emotionally, and in our own labor. Volunteers staff MATC; none of us are event-planning experts, and we all have jobs and lives outside of this organization. The labor required to plan our growing conference has been untenable for years, particularly since it often falls on early-career scholars and educators. The pandemic made this fact impossible to set aside any longer.

The Executive Committee worked to regroup. We streamlined to the bare minimum: one curated session, which I coordinated, and a themed happy hour, coordinated by associate conference planner Shannon Walsh (Louisiana State University). I worked with a fantastic committee: Shelby Lunderman (Seattle Pacific University), Angie Ahlgren (Bowling Green State University), and Rachel Bauer (Sacred Heart University), and we were frequently joined by Shannon Walsh and MATC president Chris Woodworth (Hobart and William Smith Colleges). We recognized the profound exhaustion and despair, the frustration and anxiety, and the lack of support and community that permeated our hearts and minds. And so, perhaps because we could fathom nothing else, we discussed how this session could offer some hope or at least commiseration. What strategies could we employ to survive, collectively and individually? How might we use this moment to confront the normalized ways we tear down ourselves and one another? How could we challenge the silencing of harm in our classrooms, theatres, and scholarship? How could our institutions intervene? What would a “Manifesto of Care” look like?

Five speakers took up the challenge: Rachel Bauer, Laura Dougherty (Hamline

University), John Fletcher (Louisiana State University), and Scott Magelssen (University of Washington). We asked them to interpret our prompt broadly and write the “Manifesto of Care” that they felt this moment demanded. They responded in amazing and beautiful ways, each with their own unique stories and perspectives.

Some of our speakers focused on our experiences within institutions. Patricia Ybarra counseled us on stepping away. She named the many forms of violence embraced by research institutions—the need to constantly prove one’s worth, the hierarchy of power that displaces graduate students and contingent laborers, the ever-present imposter syndrome—and argued that refusing to clean up other people’s messes *modeled* care for our successors. Her words ring true for many of us: “Caring is *not* passing on institutional, raced, gendered, and class-based trauma out of the best of intentions.” Scott Magelssen explored another form of care. He called for us to recognize how our collective trauma has manifested in “compassion-fatigue,” when our exhausted bodies and psyches seek to protect by steering us *away* from compassion. Bad days are human, “falling behind” is a social construct, and this topsy-turvy moment suggests the need for a field-wide reconsideration of expectations. One solution, Magelssen argues, is to enact more realistic rubrics for success in *all* that we do, a practice that could reap rewards long past the end of the pandemic.

Other speakers saw the potential for change within individuals. Using the metaphor of driving—particularly driving on Baton Rouge’s busy, convoluted roads—John Fletcher encouraged us to step back from the intensity of our daily lives and recognize how we all affect one another. He asked, what energy do we want to put out in the world? If our actions define us, in the car and our professional lives, recognizing our priorities and impact on others can help us re-center, as can spiritual and communal work. Rachel Bauer similarly asked how we care for

ourselves when faced with major change and uncertainty, a challenge she confronted with her family while beginning a new job in the fall of 2020. She proposed that we reconceptualize self-care as an *ethics* of care rather than a promise to occasionally indulge in a massage or schedule a respite reading fiction while soaking in the tub. Finally, Laura Dougherty challenged us to *conspire*—to breathe together. This simple action turns individuals into a united community for just a moment, opening up the possibility of more extended moments of civic belonging. She reminded us to “*get it together and get together*”—to trust in our training, listen to ourselves and one another, and seek out the relationships that will sustain us in all the facets of our lives.

In MATC’s 2021 Virtual Event, Ybarra, Magelssen, Fletcher, Bauer, and Dougherty collectively challenged us to reject a “norm” that devalued our humanity, our compassion, and our communities. Instead, they argued, *this is the moment* to envision a new normal. What would an ethics of care look like in our fields, and how might we extend it to our institutions? How might we apply more realistic rubrics for success? And most important, how can we nurture ourselves and our communities, both through the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond? Many of our speakers graciously revised their essays for publication here in *Theatre/Practice*—an open-access venue found on MATC’s website—so their provocations and insights can be freely read (or revisited), regardless of institutional affiliation.

I wrote this introduction in the January of 2022, after the Delta variant’s rampage and amidst the Omicron explosion. Many institutions have returned to campus teaching, often without masking, vaccine mandates, or social distancing. University and theatre jobs are beginning to appear again, and I suspect the “Great Resignation” will open more positions for emerging scholars and artists. But are our institutions demonstrating their care for us? Are we following through on our promises of self-care? What are the consequences of forgetting—or

forgoing—the pandemic’s lessons?

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