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Hadar Aviram
UC Hastings College of Law, aviramh@uchastings.edu

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THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD: ZOOM AS A POTESKIN VILLAGE

Hadar Aviram *

The time has come to click the “join” button once more. It is the end of the semester, and our colleague Abe, chair of our ad-hoc task force for online teaching, has convened an online teaching excellence panel. The purveyors of said excellence are four faculty members whose evaluations showed that they were, as his email said, “online teaching rockstars.” Unfathomably, I am one of the four, and the last scheduled to present.

One by one, little rectangles pop against the black backdrop of the screen, like the bubbles my three-year-old son and I blow in the backyard out of a viscous mix of dishwashing liquid, water, and glycerin. Our academic dean summarizes the aggregate outcomes of teaching evaluations: the students like it when we plan small group discussions, but not too much; when we bring lightheartedness into the classroom, but discourage misuse of the chat function; when we express empathy and are human, but display mastery of the technology; when we are reasonable and flexible, but have flawless Internet connectivity. I take copious notes. My three online teaching rockstar colleagues speak of their use of breakout rooms, applying insights from online learning studies. They talk about camera policies, chat rooms, polls. It’s my turn, and I’ve asked Abe to make me a host, which in times of health and sanity used to mean preparing tasty morsels and warm beverages on an attractive tray and saying, “*come on in!*” but in these times of plague merely means that I can subject others to the dubious esthetics of my screen. Which I proceed to do, because it enables me to show my electronic casebook and its exciting multimedia features and boast the quality of its interface with my classroom management software. I talk about flipped classroom models and prerecorded lectures. I flip to PowerPoint to show my revamped set of slides and how I’ve designed them to grab attention and illustrate complex concepts, like the car and container warrantless search doctrine. I flip back to the website to show the discussion forums. I talk fast, animatedly, my face popping on and off the screen to fascinate and enlighten, illustrating my recently acquired Zoom wizardry.

I’m talking around something.

I said “unfathomably” earlier because it is plainly obvious to me that things, pedagogically speaking, were very far from rockstar quality in the

* UC Hastings College of the Law

spring. A popular lecturer whose classroom success hinged on charisma and current-events-entertainment, sort of a cross between an arena concert and a stand-up comedy show, I was propelled into action by the prospect of a shutdown, upon which I cobbled up hastily recorded videos using my usual, sparse slide deck, and retreated into asynchronous teaching (the only set-up I could guarantee given our full-time childcare schedule) and discussion boards. Even constructing this rickety scaffolding was a heavy lift. A twenty-minute lecturette, delivered smoothly and lucidly, in a comprehensible manner, with seamless transitions into and out of a full deck of PowerPoint slides, takes hours of preparation and invariably (at least for me) multiple recording takes. It is much, much harder to prepare than a two-hour live class. After all, the latter is what I've been doing for a living for twenty years; being in a rectangle on a screen and providing a smooth "product" is not. Most of the teaching evaluations for the spring were appreciative; unfortunately, as is always the case, appreciative people seldom take the time to write a magnum opus in their evaluations. The few that weren't were blistering in their rudeness, the coup-de-grâce being the breathtakingly vicious "it's not my fault that she has a kid." It was (and still is) difficult to imagine a male instructor receiving this comment. As a consequence of the negative bias of the mind, in a sea of seventy praising comments the mind glommed to this one comment, robbing me of the little sleep I could scrounge between bedtime stories, emergency milk bottles, and post-nightmare-comforting. I couldn't even blame whoever had written it: the pandemic has created a sense of compassion deficit, and, as Michael Stipe reminded us in the nineties, everybody hurts.

I did get my act together in the fall. I put together a fresh set of slides, prerecorded the entire semester, prepared problem sets for each and every class, played music on my Spotify account during the ten minutes before class, organized special sessions around current events. The students in the fall were much happier than their spring counterparts. One of them wrote the dean and said she was learning a lot more because of this method. I know they learned more, because I visited the breakout rooms, and because the exams are orders of magnitude better than the spring batch. They felt that they learned a lot, and they felt cared for. One person memorably (and cluelessly) wrote, "at first, I thought she was trying to get out of giving lectures." All's well that ends well.

I'm still talking around something.

On the teaching panel, my colleagues reflect on what helped them succeed. Was it the use of technology? Was it reorganizing class materials? Or perhaps a kind word on the side to struggling students afflicted by disease, family misery, poverty, which—let's face it—was a substantial subset of the class? Maybe encouraging discussion in a nonjudgmental way?

Let's stop beating around the bush. I'm the exact same teacher that I was in the spring. The one difference between the spring and fall semesters of 2020: **My son's preschool opened in July.**

I say this out loud on the panel, explain that all these teaching innovations are attributable to this one dramatic development in our family life. Once the preschool opened, we could take turns with drop-off and pick-up, giving me mornings alone on Zoom with my students, without fear of interruption. Once the preschool opened, I could peacefully create slides and record multiple takes for every video. Once the preschool opened, I had the ability to drop by my office, now mostly out of bounds but eerily quiet, find good books and adapt problems from cases and notes. It is crystal clear to me that this is the one variable that made a difference. I expect a chorus of agreement, but there's a brief silence, and then someone asks about pinning videos to their profile. But a few moments later, like gentle raindrops, come the comments on the chat window, addressed to me only, unreadable to the rest of our faculty. *"Thank you for saying that. Thank you for openly acknowledging childcare. Me too. I can't do Zoom kindergarten anymore. I would not survive without my kid's school. I feel less bad now."*

There is a partly apocryphal story about Grigory Potemkin, an 18th century Russian nobleman, who in preparation of Queen Catherine's royal visit in 1783 set out to fabricate idealized villages for her to see from her carriage. Time Magazine recounts the story: "[P]asteboard facades of pretty towns were set up at a distance on riverbanks. At stops, she'd be greeted by regiments of Amazonian snipers or fields set ablaze by burning braziers and exploding rockets spelling her initials; whole populations of serfs were moved around and dressed up in fanciful garb to flaunt a prosperity that didn't exist (later precipitating famine in the region)."¹

As is the case with everyone else in the universe, it has been nine months now that I have been represented professionally to the world through a rectangle in my home. The people who talk to me every day on Zoom—students, colleagues, TV interviewers, podcast organizers, conference moderators—don't see a picturesque Zoom background behind me. I know such things are available, because my colleagues (the ones without children) show up to faculty meeting with our school logo, or some tropical island scene, floating behind them, the contours of their hair and ears melting into it whenever they slightly bob their heads. I confess I haven't had the time or wherewithal to figure out how to conjure one. Instead, I have found the one semi-rectangular part of a wall in my house that simulates a work-like

¹ Ishaan Tharoor, *Shhh.... It's Classified: Potemkin Villages*, TIME (Aug. 6, 2010), http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2008962_2008964_2009010,00.html.

environment. There are books behind me, they are shelved in a way that makes me look semi-professional, and two makeshift lamps cast light on my face that makes me visible (if not professionally prepped) for TV purposes. Pivot my screen an inch up, down, right, or left, and less professionally presentable parts of my home life come into the frame: the storage area under the stairs, a painting that a man in prison in Brazil once gifted me, the door to the room where I work, from which partner, child, or cats, may emerge at any moment. In other words, like all of you, I live in a Potemkin village.

The Potemkin village is, essentially, the opposite of the math teacher's exhortation to "show your work." The Zoom rectangle, a window in the Potemkin home, depicts oneself and the products of one's mind—in my case, lecturettes, TV interviews, functioning at meetings, public speaking—as a carefully framed product, hiding from view insufficient hours of sluggish preparation in suboptimal conditions, the resulting mental exhaustion, and the impact on one's physical health, mental wellbeing, and family life.

Let's pause for a minute to consider the backdrop to this constant march of exhaustion and inadequacy: you are peeking into a very fortunate life, that of a happy, love-filled home with two gainfully employed and comfortably salaried parents to an only child. Moreover, the division of labor at my home is more egalitarian than the unhealthy dynamic that has driven women out of the workforce² because their male partners have developed "strategic helplessness," as Rebecca Solnit calls it, in regard to parenting their own children.³ We are also extremely fortunate in that our son, while still very young and in need of constant engagement, does not have special needs. That those of us sitting atop mountains of privilege write think pieces of this genre⁴ tells you volumes about the lives of our friends and neighbors who can't even draw breath to complain, let alone compose essays about said complaints. All around us, friends and neighbors work jobs with inflexible hours; write into the night; have gotten fired from their jobs and are already scrambling to send out resumés; raise their children as single parents, with little or no help from the outside; battle the daily grind of supporting children with special needs

² Caroline Kitchener, *'I Had to Choose Being a Mother': With No Child Care or Summer Camps, Women Are Being Edged Out of the Workforce*, THE LILY (May 22, 2020), https://www.thelily.com/i-had-to-choose-being-a-mother-with-no-child-care-or-summer-camps-women-are-being-edged-out-of-the-workforce/?fbclid=IwAR2ly86prejuEcAQqkEJPi82QhIzusMqpm33G3R_d89oSHOp2JN1kyKTljM.

³ Rebecca Solnit, *Masculinity as Radical Selfishness: Rebecca Solnit on the Maskless Men of the Pandemic*, LITERARY HUB (May 29, 2020), <https://lithub.com/masculinity-as-radical-selfishness-rebecca-solnit-on-the-maskless-men-of-the-pandemic/>.

⁴ Chloe Cooney, *The Parents Are Not Alright*, GEN (April 5, 2020), <https://gen.medium.com/parents-are-not-ok-66ab2a3e42d9>; Sabrina Orah Mark, *Fuck the Bread. The Bread Is Over.*, THE PARIS REVIEW (May 7, 2020), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/05/07/fuck-the-bread-the-bread-is-over/>; Donna Laverdiere, *The Parents Are Still Not OK*, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE (July 9, 2020), <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/The-parents-are-still-not-OK-15395730.php>.

and challenging medical condition. They love and care for their children. And they step in and out of their respective rectangles, fronting as Ideal Workers.

Even in the context of our good fortune and social advantage, things were rough in the spring. For four months, my partner and I had no childcare and no extended family support; we took turns spending the day with our son, effectively working only through his naps and after he went to sleep. Our shifts constantly teetered on the brink of disaster and unexpected surprises, evoking panic that should have been unmerited; after all, we were working with people who were subjected to the same pandemic.

Was the pressure internally or externally inflicted? At some point in the spring I was invited to give a TV interview (I forget the topic: some station or other in the relentless dystopian parade the Trump administration treated us to). Even for five minutes on air, I would need about twenty minutes of preparation. We carefully scheduled our work and childcare shifts that day to enable me to do the interview behind a closed door while my partner cared for our child. Forty minutes before the interview, my partner was called into his office on an emergency and I was left in sole charge of my child who, blissfully, was napping at the time. The interview was scheduled for the hour in which he was to wake up. The office is forty minutes away from our home, discounting traffic. I spent my allotted twenty prep minutes trying to calm my pounding heart and wipe my sweaty palms, my mind racing through pacification and damage control strategies. What if he wakes up while I do this? Do I leave the interview and go to him? Does he leave his bed and enter the room? The mind produced worst-case scenarios. My child has blond curls and blue eyes. Will it come off as completely tone deaf if I hug him and express comfort on screen on a day in which so many of my friends are out protesting the heartbreaking challenges of raising Black children to be potential suspects? potential shooting victims? And what if I get incensed on air and say the wrong thing—because I am exhausted and sleep deprived and did patchy preparation—and whatever I say germinates on the Petri dish of collective rage that we are all experiencing?

Thankfully, my son napped through the interview, which went without a hitch. But that's not the point, of course. There is nothing here that is special or unique to me. We all have cultivated these Potemkin villages because this is what is expected of us, and we are all good little cogs because we want to pay our rents and mortgages and bills. Nor is any of this unique to the virus era. Like the Zen teachers of yore, the ones in old stories who used to slap monks into awakening, COVID-19 is not a gentle, kind teacher (it would be quite something to see the virus' teaching evaluations, come to think about it.) It has exposed the ugly truth we knew all along: we live in an economy that values some activities, grossly devalues others (caregiving, caregiving, caregiving), and consistently tells you to hide your work. Our families are a

sideshow to be tucked out of sight. Our caring natures are weaknesses, deficiencies, to be criticized for. Our loved ones are inconveniencing the economy.

It is tempting to unburden ourselves of responsibility here and hurl it at the patriarchy's unaware representatives, such as the well-meaning male faculty member who, at one of our faculty meetings, in which some of us explained that we were struggling to attend because of our kids, helpfully recommended a marvelous piece of software he had discovered that eliminates background noises (because, of course, it is our children, partners, and companion animals who need to be muted, lest the giant work machine be disrupted.) But we are entirely complicit in our own subjugation: the relief—no, the rapture—we experienced when the preschool opened is instructive. True, our son was delighted to go back to school; he made friends, enjoyed the attention of the teachers, and learned a lot. We were happy about all that. But our inner cogs were also relieved that we can go back on schedule, produce, produce, produce, and keep the wheels of the giant machine rolling. This must be why, in the name of “work-life balance,” we rally for “affordable childcare” instead of rallying for meaningful lives. We cheered for Elizabeth Warren's marvelous speech at the Democratic National Convention, adopting the slogan, “childcare is infrastructure,” forgetting that the infrastructure facilitates a cult of work out of balance. The struggle is perverted: we fight for paid childcare for nine to ten hours a day, a lifeline that allows us to do our paid, socially valued work, instead of fighting for sensible workdays and reasonable expectations that give us actual time in the afternoon with our children.

What happens when these lies are exposed—when your Potemkin village is breached—is instructive. A few years ago, Professor Robert Kelly gave an interview about South Korea to the BBC.⁵ He did it from his home, and the footage of the interview reveals how carefully he crafted his Potemkin village: a world map behind him, a bookshelf on his left. Halfway through the interview, his two children, Marion and James, came into the room. Kelly's wife, Kim, pounced on the floor in an effort to corral the children and get them out of the room. Kelly's interview footage—what he would hope would bring professional acclaim, because speaking on the BBC on international politics is a very big deal—instantaneously became an object lesson on Twitter, a canvas upon which millions of people suddenly projected their worldviews and opinions. Notably, the endless dissection and opining skewed in every which direction: Is it professional? What about the wife?

⁵ Simon Osborne, *The Expert Whose Children Gatecrashed His TV Interview: 'I Thought I'd Blown It in Front of the Whole World'*, THE GUARDIAN (Dec. 20, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/dec/20/robert-kelly-south-korea-bbc-kids-gatecrash-viral-storm>.

Gender critiques were lobbed. Counterexamples of how he could display warm fatherhood and a positive model of vulnerability abounded. Everyone had Something to Say. In a Potemkin village, any time a crumb of one's real life drops onto the rectangle, one becomes a morality tale. As Kelly said, "I did not stand up because, as they say, the show must go on. . . Had I stood up and broken out of frame, any semblance of professionalism would have been lost."⁶ Damned if you do and damned if you don't. I should know: I've given TV interviews with my child pulling on my pants where the camera can't see. I've given TV interviews in which news camera crew spent ten minutes scouring my house for a rectangle containing no evidence of children. I've given TV legal analysis for hours coming in and out of a green room I converted to a playroom for my son, with TV crew helping out periodically during the five minutes I was onscreen. I'm sure a lot of this is imperfect, displays flawed professionalism, displays flawed mothering. Outraged? Be my guest; take your grievances to Twitter.

The irony is that the very things unfit to display in our Potemkin windows are what fuels our world-improving project. The exhausting quotidian care for our son lit up our dystopia, infused it with joy, called upon us to find gemstones of mirth for him. I was reminded of Roberto Benigni's marvelous *Life Is Beautiful*,⁷ criticized at the time for trivializing the Holocaust.⁸ Was Benigni trying to say something about the horrors of the Nazi regime? Or, more generally, about the essence and gift of parenting, not only to children, but to parents also? Our son's vitality and joy also fueled our slow crawl out of the slog and despair of the news toward becoming active participants in the struggle to deliver aging and infirm people behind bars from the pandemic catastrophe. Ire was not lacking even before, starting of course with the villain in the White House who, like a reverse, perverse King Midas, turned everything he touched, from pandemic response through the right to peaceful assembly to the election's results, to ash. But the brief interlude, the one meditative breath granted us by the miracle of the preschool, allowed us the space to channel that anger productively, into articles, op-eds, podcasts, and media appearances,⁹ to support as best we could the thousands of families experiencing the true depth of despair.

⁶ Scott Stump, 'BBC Dad' Reflects on Viral Work-from-Home Moment: 'Mostly Fun, Sometimes Weird', TODAY, (Mar. 17, 2020), <https://www.today.com/parents/bbc-dad-revisits-his-family-s-viral-moment-one-year-t124934>.

⁷ LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL (Miramax, Cecchi Gori Group Tiger Cinema 1996).

⁸ Brian Logan, *Does This Man Really Think the Holocaust Was a Big Joke?*, THE GUARDIAN (Jan. 29, 1999, 7:14 PM), <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/1999/jan/29/awardsandprizes>.

⁹ Hadar Aviram, *California's COVID-19 Prison Disaster and the Trap of Palatable Reform*, BOOM CALIFORNIA (Aug. 10, 2020), <https://boomcalifornia.org/2020/08/10/californias-covid-19-prison-disaster-and-the-trap-of-palatable-reform/>; Hadar Aviram, *Governor Newsom's prison-release plan is not enough*, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE (July 15, 2020),

I am at peace now with online teaching and learning—or, perhaps, a more fitting term is “truce”—as it hangs upon the comforting support of childcare. I have learned many important lessons about the ephemeral nature of ego, about letting go of a twenty-five-appearances book tour, about melting into the material so the students can absorb it irrespective of my delivery. Some of what I’ve learned is so useful that I will incorporate it into my post-plague work. The gratitude for my family will gladden my heart and raise my spirits for the rest of my days. I will also carry with me the bitterness, the unrelenting slog, the exhaustion, and the absurd expectations, as an awakening into the nature of suffering in a society that values abstract productivity over tangible relationships. After the hellish spring semester ended, I came across the incredible story of Daniel Thorson, who completed a seventy-five-day Buddhist retreat and emerged into the poorly written dystopian fantasy of the pandemic.¹⁰ In the article, he was trying to make sense of it all. I still am. I wish we could all awaken from this dehumanizing nightmare, in all its facets.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/Gov-Newsom-s-prison-release-plan-is-not-enough-15408726.php>; Hadar Aviram, Prisons Should Be a Priority for COVID-19 Vaccine, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE (Dec. 4, 2020), <https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/Prisons-should-be-a-priority-for-COVID-vaccine-15774745.php>.

¹⁰ Ellen Barry, ‘*Did I Miss Anything?*’: A man emerges from a 75-Day silent retreat in Vermont, BOSTON.COM (June 4, 2020), <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2020/06/04/did-i-miss-anything-a-man-emerges-from-a-75-day-silent-retreat-in-vermont>.