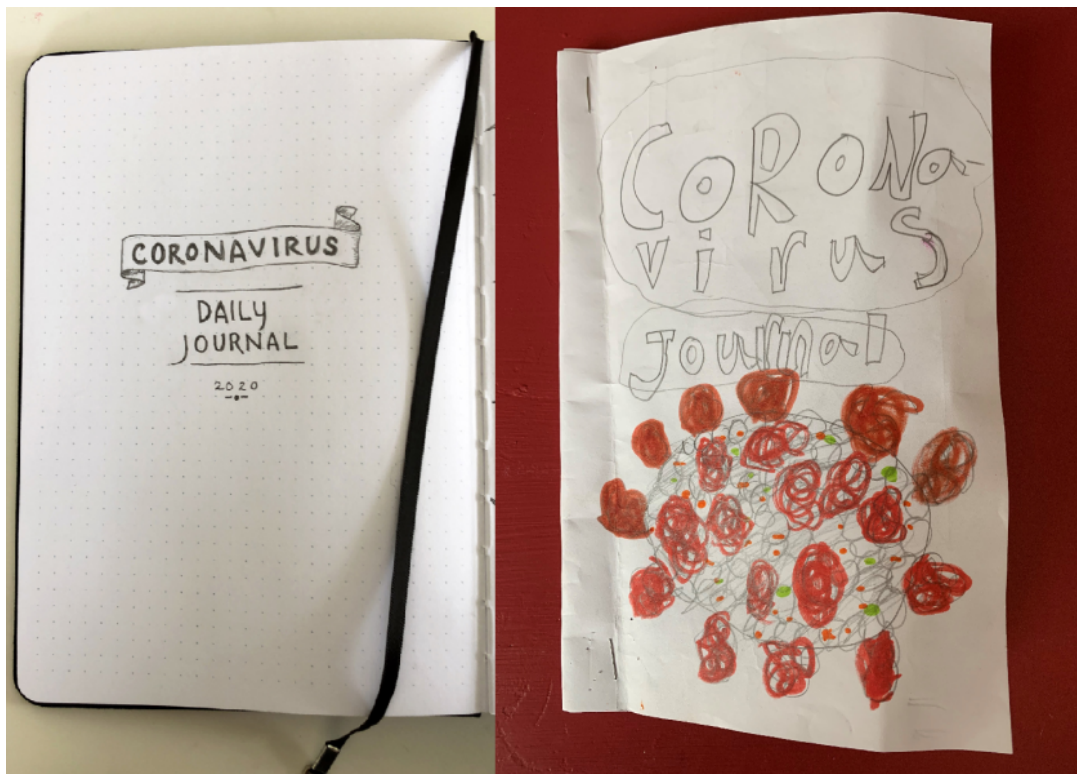


# Journaling the coronavirus pandemic: ‘I’m scared.’ ‘Can we get a dog?’ ‘Everything just feels odd’

By [MARISA GERBER](#) STAFF WRITER  
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Kelly Milligan’s mind drifted back to the days after Sept. 11 and the Boston Marathon bombing. These days felt a bit like those did and, yet, completely distinct.

This moment wasn't finite — it wasn't one day, and it won't be one week. Nobody knows exactly how long it will last.

But it already feels historic, so two weeks ago, Milligan, a 48-year-old graphic designer who works at a university and lives in Acton, Mass., cracked open her new black journal. She labeled one of the first pages: "CORONAVIRUS DAILY JOURNAL 2020."

In what feels like an instant, our daily rhythms and routines have morphed into realities that, even two weeks ago, would have looked unrecognizable. As each strange, stressful day started to bleed into the next, Milligan and countless others across the globe decided that if she wanted to remember these days a year or a lifetime from now, she needed to actively construct her memory.

She needed to start a journal.



Some of Kelly Milligan's entries.

Everything was moving quickly, and she wanted to remember when the governor of Massachusetts declared a state of emergency and she and her daughter sat on the couch in silence. She wanted to remember the small details, too, as when how after her third trip to the grocery store,

her daughters still managed to think of two things she hadn't bought — brown sugar and Nesquik.

“Do I have to bring the entire grocery store home?” she jotted down beneath her Day 2 sketch.

Usually it was just Milligan and her 17-year-old daughter at home, but now her older daughter, a sophomore, had moved home from college and they all were adjusting to living together again.

Her college-age daughter had been scheduled to compete at a dance competition in Daytona, Fla. She'd looked forward to it for so long. Milligan was doing her best to comfort her — you're not alone in your disappointment or in your uncertainty.

Milligan wants to remember the moments of levity, too, as she adjusts to working from home. She wants to remember hearing her daughters shout requests from the next room.

“Mom! Can we get a dog?”

“Mom! Can I go out?”

‘I’m scared. The reports coming out of Italy are  
horrific’

5/12/20

Cool, overcast (40's)  
Things are evolving quickly -  
(The other day Starbucks wouldn't  
give me coffee in a mug).

We had a lot of cancellations +  
no-shows today. Seeing resp. illnesses  
of course. Spoke to Health Dept for a  
bit. Their main role is to help  
facilitate testing, which is still  
limited to voluntary PUI customers.  
It feels like there is a hurricane  
offshore, we're barely upwind and  
wondering how bad it will be.

It's scary. The reports coming  
out of Italy are horrific.  
We are working on social distancing  
+ other mitigation strategies to  
flatten the curve. Just announced  
that school is closed Fri-  
Mon.  
I may have to avoid my folks.

An entry from Peter Lipson.

Peter Lipson thought about his grandfather's old letters — the beautiful

penmanship and the excavated memories about life around Boston in the early 20th century.

Lipson, 52, a doctor who works in a medical clinic in Farmington Hills, Mich., thought specifically about the letter his grandfather wrote recounting memories of the house on Elmo Street, where he lived when he and his siblings all contracted scarlet fever.

“The city came and put a red tag on the door indicating we were in quarantine,” his grandfather wrote. “My mother, all alone, took care of us and we were isolated in the front room for 5 weeks.”

With that letter in mind, Lipson, an on-and-off journal-keeper, recently vowed to write an entry, even a short one, every day. Some days it might just be a line about the weather or a sentence so short it speaks for itself: “I’m home, I’m going to bed.”

“Those are the feelings I’m trying to get down,” he said, “so, assuming I survive this, when I look back, I can see what it was like.”

Two Thursdays ago, he wrote a longer entry — “3/12/20 *Cool, overcast, 40’s*,” it begins — talking about how quickly everything has evolved. Just the other day, he wrote, it had seemed noteworthy that Starbucks had refused to serve his coffee in a mug. Now schools were canceled, and testing for coronavirus in his area was still limited.

“It feels like there is a hurricane offshore and we’re boarding up windows wondering how bad it will be,” he wrote. “I’m scared. The reports coming out of Italy are horrific.”

Then his mind drifted to his parents, who are 93 and 86, and he wrote, “I may have to avoid my folks.” Since writing that entry, Lipson has decided that, even though his parents live down the street and they often eat at least one meal together a week, they couldn’t see each other for a while.

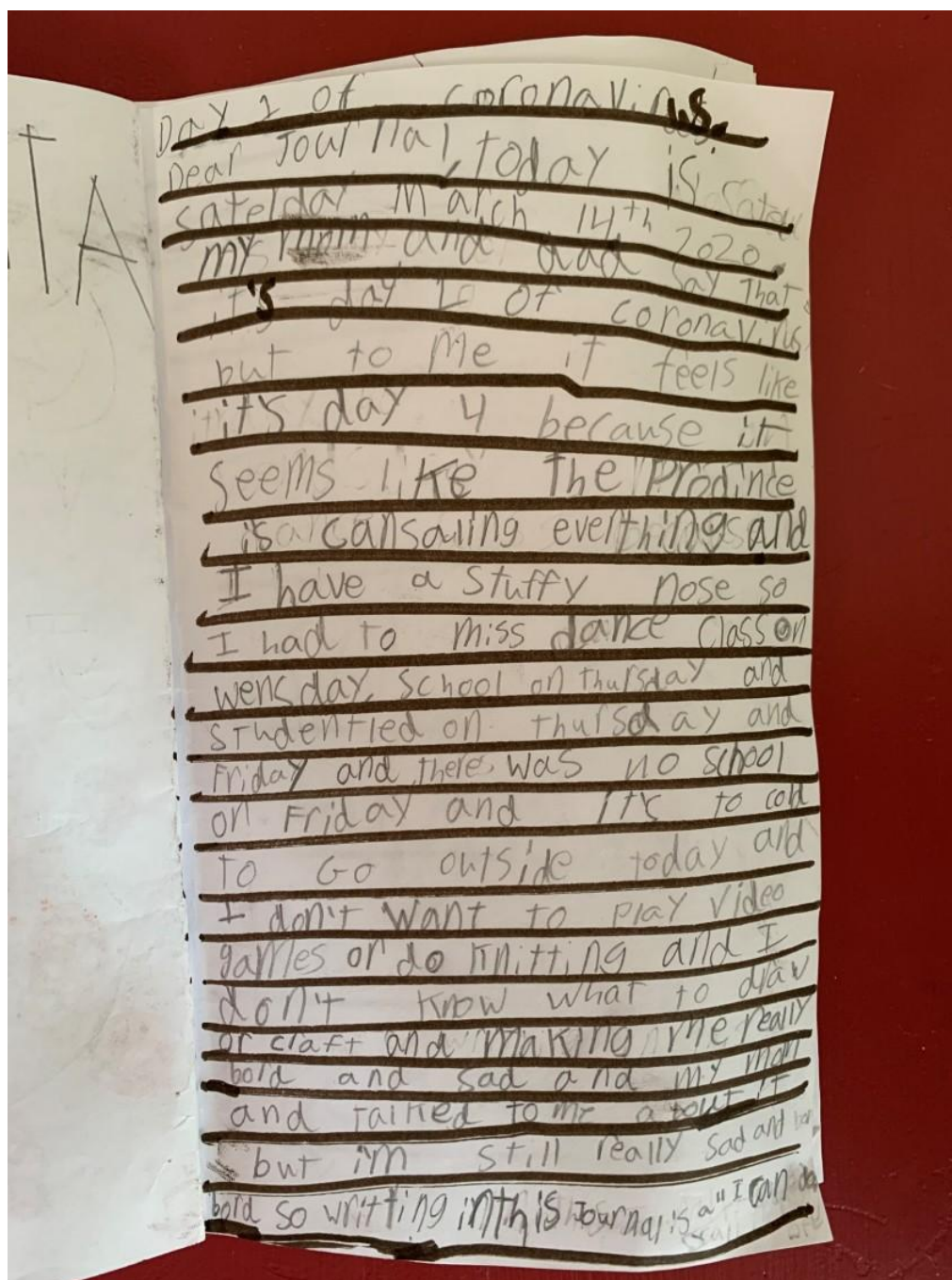
Every second with someone that age is important, he told himself, but what if he got the virus and passed it to them? It was too risky. Phone calls would have to do for now.

A few days later, Lipson wrote an entry saying he was scared and had texted his attorney, asking whether his own estate plan was in order. His attorney stopped by later, he wrote, and had him sign some papers.

In the office on a recent afternoon, Lipson spotted a colleague carrying hand sanitizer and laughed. “Oh,” he said, “you found some liquid gold there.”

Although they are telling patients experiencing respiratory problems to avoid coming into the clinic to prevent the spread of the virus, Lipson said he plans to keep his office open throughout the pandemic. He has patients with diabetes and high-blood pressure and all kinds of other problems that don’t change just because everything else around us has.

‘My mom and dad say that it’s day 1 of  
coronavirus’



An entry from 7-year-old Loretta Aporius.

Loretta Aporius likes math and she really, really likes writing. She loves recess and eating snacks and talking to her teacher. So a couple of weeks ago, when her parents told her that school was canceled because of coronavirus, the 7-year-old from Winnipeg, Canada, was crushed.

"Disappointment," she said, softly, "and sadness."

But then she talked to her father, who suggested that she start a journal to remember these strange days. Loretta folded a stack of papers, stapled them together and labeled the cover with bubble letters and a drawing of a red-and-green orb. She used a ruler and markers to add lines.

“Dear Journal,” she wrote on the first page, “today is Saturday, March 14<sup>th</sup> 2020. My mom and dad say that it’s day 1 of coronavirus but to me it feels like it’s day 4.”

It felt like everything in her province of Manitoba was being canceled, Loretta wrote, and she’d had to miss dance class the other day, because she had a stuffy nose. Today it is too cold to go outside, she wrote, and she didn’t feel like playing video games or knitting.

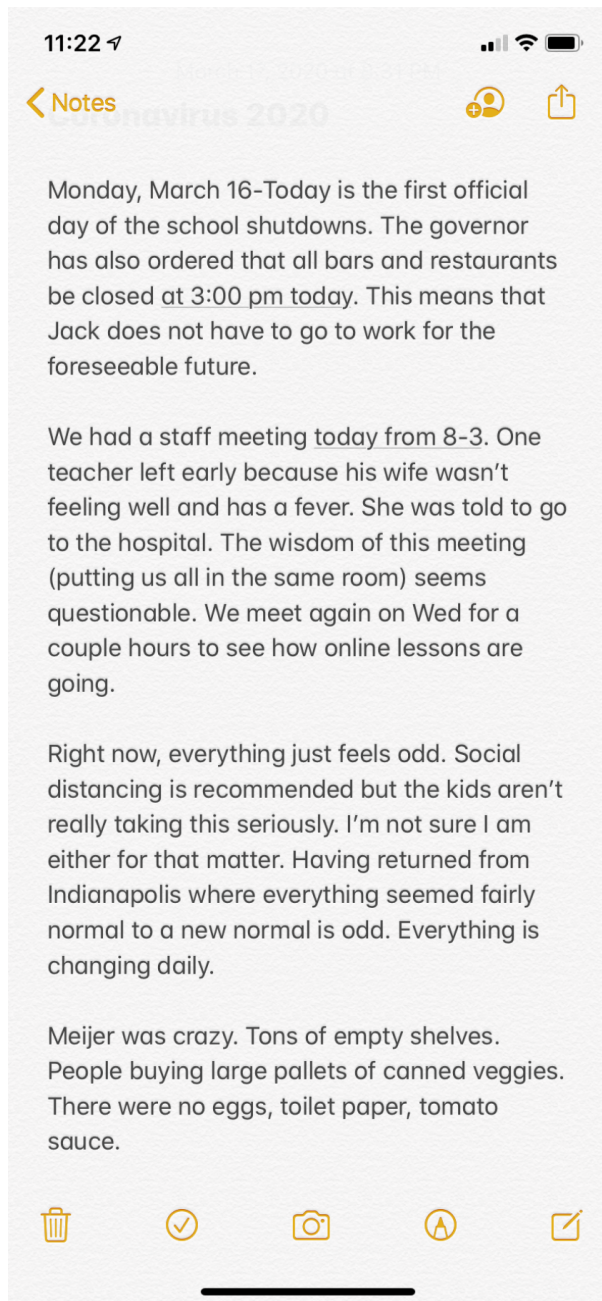
“I’m still really sad and bored,” she wrote, “so writing in this journal is all I can do.”

Loretta thinks that one day she might read her journal to her children or her grandchildren. Or if nothing else, she says, maybe it will help her sometime in the future. “If a virus goes around the world when I’m older,” she said, “I could look at the journal and be prepared.”

But for now, coronavirus means no birthday parties or sleepovers or play dates. It means that 12 people in her city — or maybe her province, she couldn’t quite remember — already had the virus last week and she hoped they weren’t older people, because she knew it was worse for them. She knew, too, that everyone should avoid groups and keep doing what they’re doing to stay safe.

“Keep washing our hands a lot,” she said, “and keep covering up our coughs.”

‘Right now, everything just feels odd’



An entry from Jessica's journal.

It was two Thursdays ago, and the Big 10 basketball tournament had just

been canceled. She wouldn't be able to watch her beloved Michigan State Spartans play, but she had already booked a place to stay in Indianapolis, and Airbnb wasn't yet offering refunds.

So, Jessica — a 44-year-old teacher in Saginaw, Mich., who asked to be identified by only her first name — hopped in the car with her husband, her cousin and her cousin's husband and drove five hours south. They explored the city and went to breweries, which weren't super-crowded, so they could keep their distance. Their phones buzzed constantly with coronavirus updates. More cases, more closures.

"What in the world?" she remembers saying aloud. On the drive back to Michigan, they stopped at Cracker Barrel. Normally, the waitress said, it'd be a two-hour wait, but today there was none.

Jessica watched as employees disinfected the salt and pepper shakers and wiped down the spindles of each chair. Everything started to feel momentous.

She thought about her husband's grandparents, who were from Germany, and stories they told about fleeing during the war — stories that had always seemed unrelatable. She thought about how her current reality would one day sound pretty unrelatable to her own grandchildren.

She started jotting down short entries on the Notes app on her iPhone.

On March 16, she wrote, the school shutdown had officially begun, and the governor had ordered all bars and restaurants to close at 3 p.m., which meant her son wouldn't have work for the foreseeable future.

She had attended a staff meeting earlier in the day, she wrote, and another teacher had left early because his wife had a fever and she was told to go to the hospital.

"Right now," she typed, "everything just feels odd."

Social distancing was recommended, but kids didn't seem to be taking it very seriously and she wasn't sure what to make of it herself. It was still so strange, she wrote, to have returned from Indianapolis, where things

seemed mostly normal, to this new reality. She ended her entry with an update about her trip to Meijer supermarket.

“Crazy,” she wrote. “Tons of empty shelves. People buying large pallets of canned veggies. There were no eggs, toilet paper, tomato sauce.”

‘Am I going to be able to land a job?’

**March 16-17, 2020**

Guess what...I got less hours at my job yay 😊 just today we made less than \$100 in sales which is not common for us since we are pretty busy and in a saturated intersection. Today looked like a ghost town. 6:00am I hardly saw headlights of cars out in the roads or people pulling in into our plaza in which my job (donut shop) is located in. Also, I found out all my classes are moved online. GREAT.

I personally don't like that my classes are moved online. I'm losing a lot of my senior year: my research symposium, internship, capstone job interviews and graduation 😞 I don't know how this would affect me after I "graduate". Am I going to be able to land a job? Would I need to find an internship? All these questions are running through my head 😞 At first I did not process this thoroughly until the media started to announce more restrictions on social gatherings, restaurants, theaters, bars, etc.

I started taking pictures of grocery stores and it's crazy to see all these cars parked but so little left in the shelves. People are wildin lol. (But there was still plenty of gluten free bread left 😊😊)

welp. nothing to do today but to finish up my research for capstone, meet online with my group for my strategic campaigns course and workout. Another entry tomorrow y'all! Stay safe 😊

Entries in Sara Juarez's journal.

“Guess what ... I got less hours at my job yay,” Sara Juarez wrote in a sarcastic entry in a Word doc dated March 16-17, 2020.

She added an upside-down smiley-face emoji.

The 21-year-old college student, who lives with her parents and siblings in the small town of Fate, Texas, works at a doughnut shop in a strip mall. During a Monday shift, when the shop made only \$75 the whole day, Juarez began to realize just how serious this was. Early in her shift, she looked outside and saw almost no headlights on the streets.

“Today looked like a ghost town,” she wrote, adding that she'd just found out that her classes at the University of North Texas at Dallas, where she studies

communications, were all going to be online.

Most of the things that she had expected to define her senior year — her research symposium, her internship with the North Texas Tollway Authority, her walk across the stage at graduation — would look completely different, if they happened at all.

“Am I going to be able to land a job?” she wrote. “Would I need to line up an internship? All these questions are running through my head.”

Juarez has started snapping photos, too, and while she sometimes types her thoughts into a Word document, she’s also started jotting down things in a notebook. Eventually, she said, she plans to put all her journal entries together on her website.

Later in her entry about classes moving online, Juarez recounted her recent experience at a nearby Walmart.

“People are wilding lol,” she wrote, noting that the only items left on the bread shelves recently were packages of the gluten-free bread.

“Another entry tomorrow y’all!” she signed off. “Stay safe.”



Marisa Gerber

Marisa Gerber is a narrative writer at the Los Angeles Times. She joined the paper in 2012 and has written about criminal justice, immigration and gentrification. She grew up in Nogales, Ariz.

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