

Reflection

Feeling Boxed In, And Moving Beyond It

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My cousin Liz and I chat by phone about her 10-year-old son Rique Ray's recent drawing. "He calls it 'The Death and Destruction of My Favorite Characters,'" she explains. We both look at the cartoonish figures, each in their own separate boxes getting squeezed into smaller and smaller spaces until colors—their true colors?—burst out. "Geez," she says, "I hope these represent Disney characters and not, well ..." We both laugh and seem to be thinking the same thing: "Not us."

Rique Ray lives with autism and expresses himself more easily through art than words so it is hard to garner what exactly he was thinking when he drew it, but we both agree it seems to capture what the pandemic experience has been like for our families. We've all been boxed in with the same people day after day after day. It feels like the rooms are getting smaller and our faces more scrunched. On the bad days, it feels like we are reduced to bulging eyeballs staring at one another. You again? Didn't we talk about dishes left in the sink? About you not disturbing me when I've put a sign on the bedroom door? About turning the volume down on the TV while your dad is on a Zoom conference in the living room?

I remember texting another relative, my sister-in-law, during the early days of COVID to see if I could set up a time to Zoom with my nephew. I was missing him and thought it'd be nice to just see his face some night that week. She immediately texted back, "Are you available now?" In between a thousand work emails, she had been trying for weeks to keep 5-year-old Ollie learning his alphabet and entertained with creative art projects, even online tours of the zoo. But, apparently, just before I texted, Ollie had the gumption to tell her,

"You need to go to 'Fun Mom School,'" and she'd lost it. When I reached Ollie on FaceTime, he was sitting with a blanket and his stuffed tiger inside a large cardboard box. "My mom says that this is a secret cave and that I need to hide in here until she finds me," Ollie reported. We talked about tigers and how much he was missing his "wife," 4-year-old Emma, next door. We talked about why moms sometimes yell even though they love you and why this nevertheless feels very unfair. After about a half-hour, his mom did come looking for him. It was OK now to get out of the box.

It is a message that we are all slowly beginning to hear. With vaccinations we can see a wider range of possibilities for social interaction. And for some of us, that is hard also. One of my sister's children hated attending high school online. The other one loved it and has no desire to return. The idea of "getting back to normal" isn't always all that appealing, especially for those who were bored in the classroom even more than in the living room. Those who were bullied or suffered social anxiety. Those who were exhausted by the frantic pace of activity that used to be regular life. Who wants to go back to that? There are some redeeming aspects to life in a box, especially if



you are able to have a blanket and a stuffed animal in there.

All of which leads me to think back to a conversation I had several years ago while serving as the Sunday school catechist for a group of 9 to 12 year olds. We were reading the story of Noah and the Great Flood. We talked about the scene of death and destruction the Bible paints — not only people, but animals perishing under waves of water. It was a great puzzlement to the children and, again, seemed unfair to them that animals should be washed away when it was the humans who had sinned. When you read the story of the flood straight out of the book of Genesis, it really is a very sad story. Indeed, after finishing the last verse, we sat in silence for a while before the somber mystery of it all. And then one of the children said, “Well, you know, it’s different when the fish tell the story.” “Yeah,” another started to giggle, “When whale grandparents talk about the flood with their grandkids, they call it ‘The Golden Age of the Ocean.’” A number of others chimed in, “I bet they say, ‘It was the best time ever. It was when we ruled the world.’”

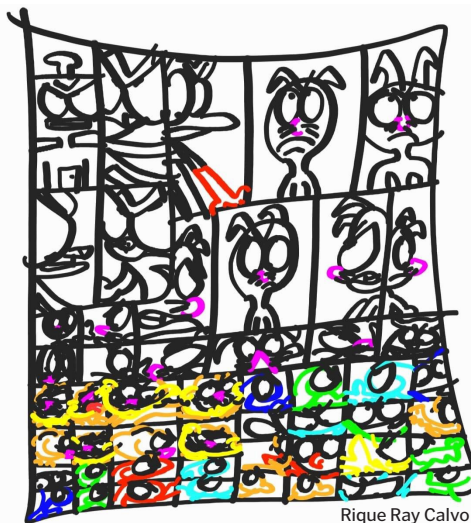
I wonder in the future how our children will tell the story of this time? It definitely has been a season of death and destruction. And I imagine many will remember forever the tension and anxiety, anger and sadness that permeated daily family life. They will remember the absence of grandparents and cousins and their “wives” next door. They will remember graduations and proms and tournaments missed because they were stuck in a box. More grievously, there will be thousands upon thousands who remember being hungry. Some evicted from the “boxes” they once called home. Most tragically of all, more than 37,000 U.S. children will remember losing a parent to COVID, according to a recent JAMA Pediatrics analysis.

And, without losing sight of the somber mystery of it all — not even for a moment — I imagine many will also remember it as a time of tenderness and genuine closeness. A time when they “ruled” what felt like their whole “world.” A time when for months on end, they had their parents all to themselves. A time when sibling bonds were cemented by hours and hours of running in circles around the same backyard in spring, summer, fall, winter, spring and now summer again. They will remember posting pictures of freshly baked pies on Instagram. Dusty Scrabble boards recovered from the basement. They will remember — but now with laughter — a time when their moms stuck them in boxes with blankets and stuffed friends.

Neither version of the story will be truer than the other. Both will be true at the very same time,

often within the very same family. Perhaps with time the many stories themselves will become squished together like the boxes in Rique Ray’s drawing. And maybe they’ll look back on the pandemic as a season in which the true colors of family life were squeezed out of us and we found out what we are really made of and who we really are to one another. And, yes, they’ll remember fiery red. There were definitely heated moments. But I hope they’ll also remember there was orange and yellow inside us. That there was orchid purple, cobalt blue and neon lime green. I pray they’ll look up at us, like Noah looking up at the sky years after the flood waters receded, and remember there was a rainbow.

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Rique Ray Calvo

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