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The Hamster Diaries

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Synopsis

When the pandemic hits, the author acquires a hamster, who provides some humorous anecdotes and some much-needed inspiration.

March 30, 2020:

Dear Diary,

Boy, things have changed this month. My daughter, who thought that she would be finishing up her last semester at nearby Kenyon College and graduating in May, is home finishing her classes online. We have one of her friend's vehicles in the driveway, because he left it at the Columbus airport when he flew home for spring break. We have also acquired a new pet — Ruth Bader Hamsberg. As you can probably guess, Ruthie, as we call her, is a hamster. Were we looking to get a hamster? No. Ruthie just needed a new home. Suffice it to say that college students should probably not make impulse purchases in pet stores after a couple of beers. Nevertheless, we are getting used to Ruthie. That is, everyone except our dog, Sean, who growls in her general direction whenever she dares to wake up during the daytime hours.

April 10, 2020:

Dear Diary,

I'm glad that the college students named Ruth after such an admirable person. I really like her name, and I find myself getting attached to the cute little way that she wrinkles up her nose and climbs all over the cage. My husband likes Ruthie, too. He even went out to purchase a new penthouse attachment so that she wouldn't feel too confined. I asked him

whether we could build an attachment onto our house so that we wouldn't feel so confined during this pandemic. He said that if I could find a contractor to do it for the same price as the hamster house expansion, then he was on board.

April 20, 2020:

Dear Diary,

My poor colleagues. They have all been working really hard on what seems to be called “the pivot”. Lucky for me, I am finishing up my sabbatical. Before this pandemic hit, I was able to travel to Utah, where a colleague and I made some good progress on a paper in dynamics. We are not finished, but we are at a point where we can both work on small pieces of the paper and communicate via email. So, I just hole up in my home office every day and work on my research. Sabbaticals can be rather lonely as it is, but with this pandemic, I feel even more isolated and alone. Ruth doesn't seem to mind being alone. In fact, she thrives on it. How does she do that?

April 30, 2020:

Dear Diary,

This morning I was really struggling with my research. I just couldn't figure out how to create a mapping that had property A but not property B. I tried a number of techniques, but nothing was working. To escape the frustration, I came downstairs and I immediately smelled something rather . . . unpleasant. It was time to clean Ruthie's cage, and it could not be avoided any longer. Oh well. My research wasn't getting anywhere, I thought, so I may as well complete this chore. As I placed Ruthie reluctantly in a small pen while I cleaned her cage, I told her that things would be nicer once she had a new, clean environment that didn't smell so bad. Once I was finished, I watched as Ruthie redecorated her cage, moving piles of fluff to precise locations throughout the cage and up into the penthouse. She had a job to do, but I imagined that she was busy in a happy sort of way since she was getting a fresh start. That was what I needed! I made myself a quick lunch, and then proceeded to clean up my cluttered desk. I removed everything from it, wiped it down, and replaced only those items that I needed for today's research — a few books, some blank paper, pencils, and my computer. Before the afternoon was over, I had a proof of one of the results in our paper. Thanks for the inspiration, Ruthie!

May 3, 2020:

Dear Diary,

UGH!!! The proof that I wrote a few days ago doesn't work after all. I found a flaw in my argument. I guess it is good that I found it now, rather than later, however, it seems like the whole proof needs an overhaul. The method that I used to construct the function just does not seem to work, so it's back to square one. As I watched Ruth tonight in her cage, she was running furiously on her wheel. Doesn't she notice that she never gets anywhere? Maybe she is trying to escape her cage and run until she gets to a big open field somewhere. She will never escape, but little Ruthie never gives up hope. She keeps on trying. Apparently that is what I need to do with my research. Just keep trying.

May 29, 2020:

Dear Diary,

Well, my sabbatical seems to be over. There was no graduation this year. Online classes just ended and that was that. Now there is a new flurry of email from my school discussing the ways in which we should prepare for fall. Things are going to be unpredictable, and students will be in different locations in the fall, so we must find ways to make our hybrid classrooms work effectively for everyone. We will need to accommodate a wide variety of students: those who are on campus, those off campus, those who get sick, those who have internet connection issues, and those who are in time zones 13 or more hours away. Upcoming summer workshops will be designed to help us navigate this new world of hybrid courses and changing times. I had better get to work now thinking about the start of classes in August. My plan is to create some video presentations that students can watch on their own time, and then we will spend our time together working on problems and discussing the more difficult topics within the course. I would essentially use these pandemic times to develop a completely "flipped classroom." But can I really do it? It will take a lot of time, work, and energy. Hmmm.

June 10, 2020:

Dear Diary,

OK, I was totally inspired by my hamster today. I woke up rather early, and Ruthie was energetically running around her cage as if she had

a purpose. She would go to the wheel and run a bit, and then she would scamper up to the penthouse, quickly climb down, and run around the cage. It was so entertaining! Then, all of a sudden, Ruthie did this amazing move! I don't know if it was accidental or if this was what she had been building up to all morning. She ran towards her little house, leapt onto the structure, and then did a back flip off of the house! This was all in one motion, kind of like she was a "parkour hamster." I really wish that I had caught this on my camera, because it would be going viral right now. She was so graceful! As I ate my breakfast, I kept thinking about Ruthie's amazing move, and I was inspired. If Ruthie could manage this flip, then I could certainly flip my classroom, right? How hard could it be?

July 1, 2020:

Dear Diary,

The weeklong workshop was overwhelming. There is so much to learn! I feel completely unprepared and very scared. In addition to helping students learn content and mastering new technologies, we need to build community among our students, who will be going through their own challenging times. Students will be confronting illness in their families, facing systemic racism, financial difficulties, new classroom modalities, and emotional problems. It's going to be a long year ahead, with no end to this pandemic in sight. I look over at Ruthie, who is asleep in her penthouse. A nap sounds like a great idea, Ruthie. If only I could go to sleep and wake up when this difficult year is over.

August 1, 2020:

Dear Diary,

I spoke to some of my neighbors during my afternoon dog walk. It seems that many folks are making clever Covid purchases. Families have added trampolines, tree houses, video game consoles, and swimming pools. This seems like a smart idea if you are looking to keep your kids entertained during this difficult summer. What have I acquired during this pandemic? A hamster. It's weird and unexpected, but she is keeping me entertained. I have even started talking to her in my pandemic loneliness. In an odd sort of way, I think that Ruthie is good for my mental health. Maybe everyone needs a pandemic hamster.

September 19, 2020:

Dear Diary,

Today is a sad day. Ruthie's namesake, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, passed away yesterday. So many of us are mourning her loss today. Even Ruth the hamster seems more subdued. I have often felt marginalized as a woman in mathematics, and I think that RBG must have felt the same when she was one of 9 women in her class of 500 at Harvard Law School. She persevered, and made a huge impact on the country. What a fantastic role model for all of us! I vow that I will keep being inspired by this strong woman. Ruthie, will you make sure that I keep RBG in mind? Thanks, RBH.

October 18, 2020:

Dear Diary,

Well, sadly there are no more in-person classes this semester. I was offering them once or twice a week, although recently more and more students were starting to attend online rather than in person. Unfortunately, there was a small outbreak of Covid-19 on campus and the decision was made to hold classes remotely for the remainder of the semester. It's the best decision, really. I just worry that some students will not do well when classes are fully remote. Some will do fine, but others seem to need those regular in-person class meetings in order to really engage with the class and learn well. It might just be too easy to fall behind with remote classes. I am hoping for the best!

November 1, 2020:

Dear Diary,

Ack!!! This semester is busier than any other semester in my 27 years of teaching. My classes are big and the students are more needy than ever. My office hours are filling up every week. I am working non-stop to get classes prepared in this new environment — making videos, updating Moodle, creating Moodle quizzes as a low-stakes form of assessment . . . it is so much! And the students really need help. Some need constant assistance with understanding vector spaces, triple integrals, and proofs, and some students just need someone to talk to. Others are sick or their family members are sick. I am offering extensions on homework assignments right and left —

which I am happy to do — but managing these requests takes a lot of time. And departmental duties and committee work do not stop because of the pandemic. I just feel like a hamster on a wheel, working nights and weekends, and never making enough headway to be able to relax. I am identifying with Ruthie more and more. Just gotta keep running on that wheel.

February 27, 2021:

Dear Diary,

Two manufacturers have made their vaccines available, and my mother was just able to get her first dose of the Pfizer vaccine! I have been so worried about getting sick myself, and about my loved ones getting sick. It takes a toll on you when there is this constant worry. Will the vaccines help us to worry less? Will this constant anxiety go away? I look over at my dog, who is doing great in the pandemic. He has received more attention than ever because someone is in the house pretty much all the time! Life is good for animals! Ruthie is blissfully sleeping in a pile of fluff. Jealous.

April 30, 2021:

Dear Diary,

It has been an incredibly busy year, and I am counting the days until this semester is over. I have worked harder this year than in any other year in my career as a mathematics professor. I am physically and mentally worn out from too many hours spent at my computer. My eyes are baggy, my body is larger and way out of shape. This summer will be one of recovery, I hope. I look over at Ruthie and laugh. She is trying to move some food to her upstairs location, but she has filled her cheeks so much that she doesn't fit in the little plastic tubing that leads up to her penthouse. She is getting stuck and it's hysterical! Hahaha. I take my bowl of Cheez-Its and my cherry soda and head upstairs to my computer for my 4pm committee meeting. Is anybody eating well during this pandemic?

May 10, 2021:

Dear Diary,

Graduation was this weekend. We held it outside. Everyone was masked. It was nice to celebrate the students and their achievements, but I just need some good rest. I still have a few more (non-senior) grades

to finish computing and then I will be done for a while. I hope. There are still incompletes that need to be finished, consultations with students, departmental duties to complete over the summer, and research to finish up. But, my hope is that I will be more relaxed. Honestly, this pandemic has put a lot of things into perspective. If my research paper takes a few more months, that is ok. If my house is a mess, that's ok too. Ruth is running on her wheel now. We will keep going, hoping for better times ahead. Go Ruthie, go!

Author bio:

Pamela Pierce is a professor of Mathematics at The College of Wooster, where she has worked for 27 years. Pam is active in the Summer Symposium in Real Analysis, which she has hosted twice. Recently she has co-edited a volume titled *Mathematical Themes in a First Year Seminar*, part of the MAA Notes series. Pam enjoys choral music and swimming and looks forward to traveling more in the future.
