Fall semester provided many opportunities to test and improve our resiliency. I'm proud to say students and faculty rose to the challenge, and everyone survived a very busy and, yes, unprecedented, semester with grace and humor. Inside these pages we've captured some of the successes and some of the heartbreaks as well. I hope you enjoy reading! -- Scott

INSIDE:

- CH-CH-CH-CH CHANGES ... FACULTY SHARE STORIES ABOUT THE UNUSUAL SEMESTER
- SPA ASKS IF YOU CAN SPARE SOME TIME TO ZOOM
- WE SHARE ABOUT OUR COOL NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH ULI AND THE ALUMNI WHO MAKE IT WORK
- HEAR HOW ONE GRAD STUDENT FROM SRI LANKA IS ADAPTING TO THE PANDEMIC
Author Gregory Williams shares experience growing up Black in Muncie

Gregory Williams, Ball State alumnus and author of *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He was Black*, spoke to Urban Planning students and faculty on Oct. 29. He was candid when speaking about his Muncie roots and his experiences as a Ball State student. Assistant Teaching Professor Teresa Jeter interviewed Williams, and students asked questions via Zoom.

Using donations from alumni, the Department of Urban Planning purchased 250 copies of William’s book and loaned them to students in the department and those taking targeted electives. Students and faculty were encouraged to read and discuss the book as part of the department’s diversity and inclusion efforts.

Having served as president of two universities and dean of a law school, Williams has had a successful career despite his early confusion about his racial identity as a child and his humble and troublesome beginnings. When asked if he ever felt tempted to pass as a White person, Williams responded, “to try to pass as a White person meant denying my Black relatives which would be unacceptable to me.”

When Jeter invited Williams to speak to Urban Planning students, he wondered what he could share that would be relevant for the students. It was apparent as the interview progressed that students were fully engaged and eager to learn as much as possible from someone who rose above life’s hardships.

After an hour interview, the last question posed to Williams was to ask what he would say to future urban planners, architects, nonprofit leaders, real estate developers, and civil employees about how to engage people and communities of colors. After thinking about the question for a few seconds, his emotional response was, “Be careful because you could be sitting across from a Gregory Williams.”
Building on a 44-year history of community engagement, the Urban Planning Department launched three initiatives last fall. The first was a storefront studio at the Muncie Mall to facilitate interaction with Muncie community members while meeting Covid-19 restrictions about physical distancing and accessibility.

Thanks to funding support from Mayor Ridenour, Delaware County Plan Commission, Ball Brothers Foundation, Community Foundation, BSU Office of Community Engagement, Provost Office, and CAP, the storefront opened.

The mall storefront hosted community projects for the Industry Neighborhood and Urban Light Community Development Corporation, Storer School Site, and the Delaware County Comprehensive Plan. These projects included community meetings with great turnouts.

The second initiative was the integration of UrbanPlan, a nationally renowned program developed by Urban Land Institute (ULI) – (the oldest and most extensive network of cross-disciplinary real estate and land use experts.) Over 100 freshmen participated in teams of six to compete in this real-world development challenge. These teams interacted with ULI members nationally in three Zoom reviews and a final presentation for the "City Council."

This initiative could not have been successful without UP alums Jennifer Milliken, senior director of ULI Indiana, and Adam Thies, ULI Indiana Management Committee president. Additionally, several UP alumni participated as reviewers and city council members, providing insight and challenging the students' plans.

The third initiative began with soliciting advice and guidance from a group of alumni we asked to serve on a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force for the department. Our goal is to evaluate and reflect on our program and our culture. We introduced a Department Common Reader program to bring together conversations, reflections, and aspirations for our community, the students, alumni, and faculty/staff to launch this effort. Thanks to Dr. Teresa Jeter's relationship with the author, we chose "Life on the Color Line" by Dr. Gregory Williams. We also integrated the book into PLAN 100, so all incoming freshmen received a copy of the book as part of their class reading assignment.

These initiatives will continue this spring as we strive to increase student opportunities and add new partners. Thank you for your support, time, financial donations, and insights. Fall 2020 was undoubtedly a challenging semester, one that will guide us into 2021!
Learning from teaching in 2020

By BRUCE FRANKEL, professor

Despite the surrounding health threat, I found 2020 to be most comfortable and instructive for me as I formulated a new pedagogy. I assigned, but found few to comply seriously with, student learning statements as to their professional educational objectives and effective methods of their learning. Both proved essential to the model.

The hybrid course, as applied to all in my course load, is one I wish I created decades ago as it presents few misgivings and many advantages for student learning. It also reveals more acutely students struggling for their own new learning model.

The hybrid model I forged with the full participation of my students calls for the choice of in-person or virtual meetings, and all course materials posted on Canvas. These materials include audio PowerPoints, detailed review questions for each PowerPoint, weekly discussion board topics (expand on what you found captivating, challenging, or missing in my lecture), and supportive materials for the assignments.

Each instruction was geared toward an assignment, presenting both theory and practical methods for solving problems faced by planners and developers. The multiplicity of PowerPoints reduced in scope to particular sections of the corresponding assignment. I hoped a clear roadmap to the course.

Each of my classes chose in-person meetings and the second weekly session devoted to the extensive homework. I responded along with some students to the discussion board, challenging its authors to address exploratory questions, and revealed my correction of any errors. Thus, the in-person weekly meeting addressed student-selected topics for

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Learning from teaching in 2020 ..... continued

discussion, a dialogue that to me is the essence of higher education.

To check on success and failure, we conducted both mid-course and end-course evaluations of what the course and its learners could be better. By mid-course I learned that more students now chose virtual learning, if for no other reason that no other UP course taken was live, as coming to campus proved a burden, especially those living far away.

Of greater concern was that some students simply chose not to take the course, while others relished in its format. BSU competes with the “Google Academy,” a dependency in finding answers to the assignments and to topics covered. Skipped were many PowerPoints and associated materials. Disposed was a discipline for student learning. Essentially, in need of student learning statements!

I have designed my course to be “Google proof,” requiring a discipline to use the concepts of the course to address the problem statements of the assignments. By and large these emanate from by professional experience, not particular to the Internet, but relevant to what our program is preparing students for.

In several courses I required 60+ question exam[s] of multiple-choice answers to test the conveyance of knowledge, but without the grades applied to the course. These similar to the AICP exam, and a gauge of both student and instructor accomplishment. As it “did not count,” far too many students did not take it seriously, as one student took only 6 minutes to complete.

In deferring grading classroom participation to my surprise, I discovered that doing so caused student to drop off, and only corrected by my mid-course posting of grades by week of all students on this measure.

The incidence of these faults fell heavily on second-year BUPDs who complained that this was nothing like high school. I asked, shouldn’t it be closer to what is required by professional practice, as I was not to prepare them for another round of secondary education. Alternately, where students respond well to the challenges, I invite them to grade their own assignments, along with my mark-up and evaluation [while deferring to their grades]. My requirement only is honesty to continue this practice. My premise is that on the job you ought to know how well you are doing before your supervisor informs you. Another skill we ought to teach here.

The discipline to learn is what some, albeit, and thankfully not all, are short of. Some of that is the disorientation thrown at us by the pandemic. Some my ignorance that grading shouldn’t, but does, make a motivational difference. The rest attributed to the process of student maturation while matriculating through our program.

I thrive on my personal interactions with students, who will learn more from an office visit or a hike in a state park with me. Spend an hour + with me where all I do is ask questions of you until you discover. We cannot lose this personal interaction, as what separates higher education from webinars or pouring over texts. The notion here is the tutorial method, not endemic to America.

What motivates me to reengage each term is to watching my students grow and create what they want to become. Life teaches us who we are. Education teaches us who we can be.

Looking forward to spring and hope you are, too.
Given the current climate in America where there is growing racial tension, disenfranchisement, and the marginalization of vulnerable populations, Scott Truex asked me to develop a course for Fall 2020 that would create a level of awareness and sensitivity about these and other issues that could benefit future urban planners. After thinking long and hard about his request, I created a course called Engaging Communities of Color.

The course provides students with a historical view and current perspectives of urban planning policies, federal regulations, and local planning decisions that have often led to inequities for communities of color. Based on the following engagement criteria of (1) Building Trust, (2) Building Relationships, (3) Building Equity, and, (4) Building Bridges; lectures, assignments, case studies, group discussions, and guest speakers provide a framework upon which students determine how to interact with communities of color.

Building Trust with communities of color requires understanding the history of restrictive covenants, residential segregation, redlining, and other actions that have negatively affected these communities, all of which have led to mistrust when outsiders try to engage them. Students understand that as future urban planners they will likely encounter mistrust in these communities, therefore, building trust is an important first step. Students have the opportunity to think critically and discuss strategies for building trust.

Building Relationships with communities of color requires understanding and accepting cultural differences. Students learn that being aware of cultural differences, examining one’s bias(es) about other cultures, getting to know people from other cultures, and listening to others from different cultures will help to build relationships in communities of color. Students also discover their biases by taking a bias survey.

Building Equity in communities of color is about first understanding that equity is not the same as equality. Students examine the core concepts of both and they develop planning strategies toward equitable outcomes when engaging communities of color.

Building Bridges in communities of color requires understanding, examining, and acknowledging disparities, and exploring actions that help bring community stakeholders alongside

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Elective ..... continued

community leaders in decision-making for the betterment of the community. Students develop strategies for effective community engagement that help build bridges and remove disparities. For the final assignment, each student created a planning guide specifically for engaging communities of color.

Students had an opportunity to dialogue with a number of guest speakers: Dr. Gregory Williams, author of *Life on the Color Line*; Marlene Dotson, president and CEO of the Indiana Latino Institute; Joy Rediger, president of Urban Light CDC, Mary and Cornelius Dollison, Muncie Whitely Neighborhood community activists; and Bishop Bernadel Jefferson, a community advocate in the water crisis in Flint City, Mich. Each shared their perspective about how to engage communities of color.

Jeter wins award

Dr. Jeter, MURP 1995, was honored for her many years of service to the university in November when the Ball State Alumni Association named her Volunteer of the Year!

We need your support on One Ball State Day

If you are in a position to do so, would you consider a donation to the department? Your funds help us feed students, pay for studio trip site visits, help with field trip costs, and meet so many other needs!

Donations can be made anytime at [https://www.bsu.edu/foundation/give](https://www.bsu.edu/foundation/give)

On April 6, the university will mark its third annual day of giving, called One Ball State Day. The day will feature special challenges and prizes along with a leaderboard showing donations. It’s a fun time to plan a gift of any amount.

When you donate, you choose where you want your money to go: to the university at large or to a specific college or department. To choose us, simply select Department of Urban Planning or add our fund number -- fund #605 -- to the optional "notes" box. Thank you!
The Student Planning Association had a rocky start for the 2020-2021 school year. It started in Spring of 2020, when emergency elections happened before leaving campus for a long quarantine. Officers were picked by the second- and third-year studios, and then were left to figure out how to continue the organization on their own devices.

I was elected president, and although I had big plans, I quickly realized that almost nothing could be done with Covid-19 restrictions in place. Things such as selling food in the CAP atrium could no longer happen, and in-person events were strictly limited. In-person biweekly SPA meetings were limited to just the people studying in the Urban Planning mall space, and the rest of the members were forced to Zoom into these meetings. The restrictions put a damper on events and meetings, and attendance dropped after the first meeting.

The first -- and only-- event of the semester was an October Fall Festival that partnered with the Association for Students in Historic Preservation. Treasurer Will Snyder bought pumpkins, and Social Media Coordinator Lauren Bouslog designed fliers to advertise the socially distanced, outdoor event. On the day of the event, Vice President Andrew Kanwit and I set up tables, while other members unloaded pumpkins and set up a painting station. After an hour of sitting in the rain, only four students showed up to paint pumpkins.

After a rough fall, SPA hopes to spend spring doing virtual professional development events with alumni in the planning field. The SPA executive members have discussed having an event where there are different alumni from different professions within the urban planning field that can share what they do, and maybe even do a mini project with a small group of students. Students would travel in small groups to different “stations” and learn about the different things that they can do with their degree in urban planning.

This would provide contacts that students could connect with and allow students to learn about things they may have never thought about. Another potential event we have discussed is having a LinkedIn learning session in which students can hear from alumni or LinkedIn professionals about how to build their profiles and learn other tips related to this social media service.

SPA did not do great over the first semester with all of the lovely things that 2020 has brought us, but we hope to bring spirits up with new events to build on professional and technical skills. I am looking forward to it and hope alumni will, too!
For the second year in a row, the co-requisite course offerings of the PLAN202 studio and the PLAN261 Planning Communication Techniques studied the continued story of the former Storer Elementary school site on Muncie’s northwest side. As the site continues to be demolished and cleared, neighbors and city officials, including Mayor Dan Ridenour and planning alumnus Zane Bishop gathered in August of 2020 at the Northside Church of God to discuss options for the site’s future. BUPD candidates in our second year, fresh from their first-year experience (most of which was in virtual learning modalities due to Covid-19) helped facilitate the discussion group portion of the meeting.

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Following a review with DoUP faculty, students were challenged to synthesize their ideas into a final presentation, with invited guests at our Muncie Mall Center including Mayor Ridenour, Councilman and neighborhood resident David Robinson, resident Erin Moore, resident Andrew Dale, neighborhood resident and CAP alumnus Ryan Ellsworth, Professor Emeritus Tony Costello, members of the press, and others. Students reflected how valuable it was to test, discuss, and receive direct feedback on their ideas in a safe socially distant format. While some proposals pushed the envelope in terms of layout and density, students have provided the city with a range of options for discussion on the future of the property, its ability to inject new life into the city’s northwest side, mitigate flooding issues on the site, and expand the tax base. As the pandemic continues to challenge our definitions and perceptions of character, livability and quality, the expanded residential types and recreational opportunities for sites like Storer will continue to inform the global discussion of planning for age-friendly communities.

(Work at right by sophomore Elise Jones.)
Partnership with ULI to present UrbanPlan workshops for 100+

This semester, the Department of Urban Planning teamed up with the Urban Land Institute to provide ULI’s interactive development program called UrbanPlan to more than 100 freshmen in PLAN 100.

UrbanPlan engages participants in dialogue about the challenging issues, varying private and public sector roles, complex tradeoffs, and economics at play in land use and development decisions.

PLAN 100 students were organized into 17 teams. Meeting times spread over two days were made all the more complex by required social distancing rules during the pandemic.

“Ball State’s Urban Planning Department was thrilled to partner with ULI Indiana to deliver this nationally renowned program,” said Scott Truex, PLAN 100 instructor and chair of the department. “This realistic exercise provided the opportunity for students to create solutions for the redevelopment of a hypothetical downtown. Through role-playing, teams generated development proposals that meet the community’s goals while considering the multiple forces that challenge real-world development. As an introduction to the vast field of urban planning, PLAN 100 includes many of the topics embedded in UrbanPlan, making it a great fit.”

Throughout the semester, ULI members served as volunteer facilitators, reviewing and challenging the student teams as they prepared for their final development pitches to additional volunteers playing the role of the City Council.

Two alumni were among volunteers playing key roles in the success of the class. Jennifer Milliken, senior director of ULI Indiana, put in countless hours finding volunteers and matching their schedules to those of the 17 teams. Adam Thies, district council chair, was also key in those efforts.

The use of Zoom meetings allowed the ULI-trained volunteers—located in Indianapolis and elsewhere—to interact with the students virtually. For the first two-thirds of the semester, the students met on campus in small classes with masks. For the final presentation, students were located in their individual homes but connected by Zoom.

Students also used an interactive site plan

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Introducing UrbanPlan to students is an opportunity to present the economics and urban planning demands of real estate development to designers early in their career paths, said ULI Indiana UrbanPlan co-chair Jenell Fairman, PE, LEED AP, deputy director of Carmel Redevelopment Commission.

“So often designers have a limited view of the costs of the work they are producing, or how a building project truly interacts with the surrounding community. In addition, often the wishes of stakeholders compete with one another or are not financially viable,” Fairman said. “Pairing site planning, financial analysis, and market needs with the wishes of various stakeholders is a great exercise that prompts discussions about what is best for a community to achieve its goals.”

Fairman noted that the UrbanPlan experience doesn’t just benefit the students.

“Bringing experienced developers and designers into the UrbanPlan experience with students is a mutually beneficial experience,” she said. “The students grow from the thoughtful questions that are asked by the facilitators, and the seasoned professionals gain new perspectives from students who have fresh ideas that often are not dampened by financial or logistical constraints. Many of the answers students provided helped me think about development from an entirely different perspective.”

“UrbanPlan helped the students view the project through the eyes of a particular user, which brings out more well-rounded ideas,” added M.J. Meneley, PLA, ASLA, principal at Hitchcock Design Group. "In addition, students learned how to stand behind their decisions in a challenging scenario where there is no right or wrong answer.”

The partnership is continuing this spring semester.
The year 2021 is around the corner as I write this, and undoubtedly the year 2020 was a challenging experience for everyone. However, being an international student, I had to go through many difficult situations during this pandemic. I assume it is the same for all the other international students. A few international students suffered a lot since their family members were diagnosed positive for Covid-19 back in their home countries.

Nevertheless, the best thing was that international students helped each other in many ways to stay strong, vibrant, and mentally stable. Frequent calls, messages, and small bubble gatherings made everybody comfortable. We came together to cherish our lives here in the US and keep us on track to achieve our academic goals, the utmost reasons we are here for.

My graduate assistantship work started in Fall 2020 with the Delaware-Muncie Planning Commission. It was the very first time I experienced the planning related office culture as an international student. It allowed me to explore the real-world planning implications and offered me a different atmosphere to learn more about planning in practice. I enjoyed my time in the office. It gave me ample time and space to think and act regardless of the existing pandemic situation and family matters back in my home country. However, the friendly talks with my colleagues enlightened my perception about planning policies, project funding mechanisms, zoning regulations, and many more.

I was mainly assigned to GIS-related tasks, but the staff encouraged me to explore beyond the office assignments. Consequently, I started to attend the monthly Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) and plan commission meetings which eventually enhanced my skill sets.

During the BZA meetings, we got to meet people from different levels requesting variances through presenting their cases. However, I was astonished by the way the
people presented their cases. They came up with well-organized presentations and all the required documents with shreds of evidence. The way the BZA encouraged public participation was awe-inspiring. The board patiently listened to what people had to say. Everybody respected each other's concerns, thoughts, and ideas. I could easily compare the so-called concept of “public participation”, prevalent in my country vs. my experiences in the US and realize that there is a lot to learn yet.

Moreover, they also planned to formulate rules to run their businesses according to Covid-19 preventive measures instructed by the health department. For example, a lady requested a variance for a home-based salon, and she shared that her salon would allow only one customer per hour and the salon will extensively serve the neighborhood only. Thus, there will be no additional traffic due to this new business set up in that particular neighborhood.

All these experiences gave me insights into people's creativity for finding different ways for their survival. It surprised me how they took some time to analyze the situation and start their small actions gradually. I observed closing down of the shops and economic downshifts and at the same time saw people start their journeys on a small scale. As a planning student, I believe it will make a colossal impact in the near future; as we know, every big thing starts with a small step.

I used to take public transportation to reach the office every morning. On my way, I noticed small-scale businesses like restaurants, saloons, and pubs closed due to the pandemic situation. Most of the small-scale businesses located in Muncie downtown were adversely impacted and made the existing condition more severe by bringing economic hardships as a consequence.

On the other hand, during my BZA meetings, I saw quite a few notable requests for variances from people in neighborhoods for starting home-based small-scale businesses. They wanted to start their businesses to respond to the existing pandemic situation to earn some money and provide services for neighbors at the same time.

Sharing parking spaces with neighbors and finding ways to manage traffic and sharing resources to make their business successful were impressive phases of their negotiation processes.
Gardening fills pandemic summer calendar for Dr. Yoo's family

By SANGLIM YOO, associate professor

During the second week of March, BSU made a quick and abrupt transition to 100 percent online instruction for the rest of the spring semester, and like almost everybody else, I started to work from home. A pandemic was never in my plan for 2020, as I originally planned for a study abroad program at Seoul, Korea, during the Summer 1 period. CAP Korea 2020 successfully recruited a good number of students, but Covid-19 halted almost everything. Not only CAP Korea 2020, but in-person classes, commencement celebrations, travel, summer camp, Sunday service, visiting new restaurants, to name a few. Probably for the first time in my life, I stayed home, without any plan for the near future.

While staying at home with family, I needed to figure out something productive for my 11-year-old son. If I had not, he would have ended up playing Nintendo Switch all through the summer. That may be the only thing that I cannot bear. My search goals were clear and simple. Find something that requires him some level of commitment, can give him some level of achievement, and requires regular physical activity. Out of a couple of finalists, my son chose backyard gardening.

Ordering a raised garden bed and assembling it was the easiest part of the procedure. But filling it in with garden soil was a totally different issue. The very unfortunate reality was that my husband and I were such city kids, we had very little or no experience in real gardening at all. Backyard gardening only existed in our heads as a very tranquil and bucolic image. My husband headed to Lowe’s in high spirits, and on his way back home, he called me with a very tired voice and said he would need serious help.

Armed with old sweatshirts and up-state New York salt-stained Hunter rain boots, I thought I was more than ready to help, whatever the ‘help’ means. When my husband pulled the car into our driveway, we faced the reality of manual labor and a nasty smell of cow manure. My husband and I, who do not even own a dolly cart,
Pandemic gardening ..... continued

pathetically struggled to take these heavy bags from the driveway to the backyard holding each corner of a bag, trying not to breathe through our noses, wanting none of our neighbors to laugh out loud watching us.

After the pathetic manual labor, everything went pretty smoothly. Watering the garden and pulling weeds were my son’s daily chores that he truly enjoyed. Through the summer, this small backyard garden was amazingly productive. We stopped buying cucumber, summer squash, and zucchini from the grocery store. Two jalapeno plants produced a lot more than we could consume. Sweet basil grew like a weed. Pulling carrots in the late autumn from the ground was a total joy. As novices, we were pretty successful. I was amazed by the power of nature. Thanks to smelly and nutritious cow manure, I believe.

And fall 2020 began. We all spent the weirdest and the most challenging semester ever, even without fall break and the field trip week, but in the end, we all finished strong. I enjoyed the students’ presentations on population projection and its implication to urban planning and food desert analysis. I truly appreciated all of my students’ hard work.

After finishing the challenging, nerve-racking, and extraordinary semester, I binge-watched a short Netflix show. I need to confess here; I am not a TV person at all, so I cannot watch long series because I usually try to avoid commitment to a certain show. I hate zombie movies, and I only watch TV for mental refreshment and relaxation. Thus, my choice was "Somebody Feed Phil." It is a show in which "Everybody Loves Raymond" producer Phil Rosenthal travels the world from Bangkok to the Mississippi Delta to take in the local cuisine and culture. Gee, it satisfied me, quenched my hunger for travel and food which I miss the most during this 2020 pandemic. I finished episodes for Seoul (of course!), Tel Aviv, Saigon, New Orleans, San Francisco, and on and on and on, then found that there was an episode on Chicago. Why not, I thought, as my family usually spent every holiday with relatives living in the suburb of Chicago, I thought that I knew the city pretty well. This episode totally satisfied me. I was even making a list of restaurants...
that we never visited while watching the Chicago episode.

All of a sudden, the show host started to talk about food deserts. If you were one of my students, then you will probably recall a food desert mapping project, a long-standing final project for PLAN 412/512 Introduction to GIS for Urban Planning, defining food deserts as places where you can’t get fresh produces and where you can’t get fresh food of any kind.

The Urban Growers Collective and the Fresh Moves mobile market came during the next scenes of the show. Out of curiosity, I googled both. Launched in the fall of 2017, the Urban Growers Collective demonstrated the development of community-based food systems and supported communities in developing systems of their own where food is grown, prepared, and distributed within the community itself.

All the food comes from farms in Chicago. Surprising. The Fresh Move mobile market launched in 2015, with two Chicago Transit Authority buses no longer in service. This enabled the Urban Growers Collective to provide locally-grown organic and sustainable foods to ten neighborhoods on Chicago’s south and west sides.

Thanks to Netflix and Mr. Rosenthal, all of the segments of my pandemic story started to make a whole scene including food, urban gardens, food desert, and fighting hunger.

I personally believe food is the most important part of general human rights and am glad Muncie has abundant resources and ongoing endeavors: 12 active community gardens, Muncie Urban Garden Initiative, 8Twelve Coalition, Second Harvest Foodbank of East Central Indiana, and many neighborhood-level and community-level efforts.

What’s my response in the middle of winter, also in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic? I signed up for the Second Harvest Foodbank’s volunteer opportunity and worked at the warehouse a couple of times during the winter break, sorting food items and packaging them for the tailgate distributions.

My very favorite Netflix show of the season was “The Queen’s Gambit,” but the program that was the most inspirational and made me act like a responsible planner was “Somebody Feed Phil.” What is yours?
My sabbatical of being and doing

By MICHAEL BURAYIDI, professor

As I write this reflective piece, my sabbatical is coming to an end. When I applied for the sabbatical in 2019, I had planned my time off to do some travel and expand my research on shopping malls in the Midwest to the national level. Hardly did I know Covid-19 was going to upend these plans. As someone with comorbidity factors I tried to decrease my risk of infection by spending most of my time at home, either working on the computer or simply “being.” As I will explain later, it is the “being” and not the “doing” part that I would say has had the most impact on my life during the sabbatical.

On the doing part, I can report several accomplishments during my time off. I refined my paper on shopping malls and got it accepted for publication in the Journal of Real Estate Literature. I made presentations to professional organizations. One such presentation was made to the Land Economics Foundation and the Chicago ELI chapter, an organization that focuses on the study of land economics. I also got some media publicity with several radio show appearances to discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic will impact the design and planning of cities. I was even propositioned by a head hunter for a senior academic position but one that I opted not to pursue.

I tell you all of this just to say this: The ego loves validation and external recognition, but there is no lasting satisfaction in it. The ego is never satisfied, and worldly possessions and achievements do not provide lasting contentment for the ego. In recognition of this deficiency, I pressed the reset button in my life. I turned my attention to my being rather than my doing. For it is only in the being that one can find true satisfaction in life.

The pursuit of the ego through doing creates suffering. The state of being is a state of rest. In this state, one is completely fulfilled and there is no yearning. Yet, all creativity, right action, love, and compassion flow from this state. Being occurs outside of the psychological, mind conditioned self. In this state the ego dissolves, and all that is left is openness to the world. All doing that flows from this state no longer seeks to boost the ego and yet brings the most satisfaction.

You may have heard the story of the Spafford family. Horatio Spafford was a prominent Chicago lawyer and real estate investor. In 1871 the Chicago Fire decimated his property. Two years after the fire, his family decided to vacation in Europe, but Horatio was held back by a business matter (specifically a zoning hearing for you planners) so his wife and children left without him. En route to Europe in the Atlantic
My sabbatical ..... continued

Ocean a British ship rammed their vessel and sank it. His four daughters died in the collision. His wife Anna survived and was flown to Europe for treatment.

This was an unimaginable tragedy for the family. When Horatio got the message of the accident, he left Chicago to be with his sick wife in Europe. On his way the captain of the ship in which he was sailing told him they had reached the spot in the ocean at which his daughters had died. While others would have been torched by this, Horatio responded from a state of rest. Rather than asking, “Why me?” his response was, “It is well, it is well with my soul.” By doing so he helped to transform the world.

A state of rest is a state of presence. It quiets the mind. While the mind is a wonderful instrument when needed, it doesn’t always have to be on. The uniqueness of the human species is that we are the only creatures that have a sense of the past, present and future. Unfortunately, most humans rarely live in the present. Our conditioning through years of sensory accumulation means we carry around a baggage in our minds that often distorts reality. So each of us live in a separate world even though we may be experiencing the same phenomenon. Our environment is clouded by judgments based on our past experiences. Presence quiets the mind and allows the flourishing of consciousness.

We get glimpses of presence in everyday life, but the goal is to make this a normal part of daily life. We witness the state of presence when a basketball player stands at the arc and is attempting a three-point shot at the basket. We see presence in the face of the rock climber who seeks the next grip that will propel them to the top of the mountain. We feel an exhilaration after a long climb to the mountain top not because we are out of breath but because our mind stops for a while because we are so tired.

I sought and continue to seek presence not just for a moment but throughout the day. With presence, there are no problems, just challenges as one confronts issues of the now. This is because most problems are mind created, the outcome of past memories and future projections. So we become restless.

Presence enables me to turn off my mind and simply be. We return to our true nature free of conditioning. This is a very freeing state. In this state we realize that we have everything we need to be happy, not from the outside world but from within ourselves. Material things of the world don’t disappear, but they lose the priority we once bestowed on them. In this state there is no duality, you and me, friends and enemies, judgment of others. You simply are! It is from this state also that quality decisions can be made free of prejudices and our conditioned mind.

A sabbatical is a period of rejuvenation. I can certainly confirm that my time off has helped to transform me from the inside out. Too often, we seek to change the world from without and not from within. However, there can be no global salvation without individual salvation. There can be no universal peace without individual peace. Perhaps we should give as much attention to fixing the problems of the self as we’ve given to the outside. This is my goal. Will you join me in this quest?
There are no bright sides to Covid-19. Too many people have died, too many others are ill, and innumerable others have had their lives ruined by losing their jobs, savings and homes. I do, however, appreciate a good laugh at my own expense. For example, though I am a scholar of planning, when it comes to work, I’m better at improvising than planning. Give me a month to prepare for a big meeting, and I’ll squander it. Tell me that a meeting I’ve forgotten about is starting, and I’ll do surprisingly well. The same has been true of my experience with Covid.

I was not prepared, but when it came time to improvise teaching, scholarship and community engaged work, I did all right. I’d like to take credit for this, but the real glory goes to whichever architect designed my garage with a window looking out on my hedgerow. In front of that window, at my desk, teaching classes, writing, and managing my community engagement activities I found my refuge.

Classes went online in the Spring of 2020, when the virus was new, unknown and scary, (as opposed to being old, known and terrifying, now).

I knew that I did not want come to campus. I mentioned that I was not prepared for Covid, but I think it would be more accurate to say that I was actively ignoring all signs and all advice that it would disrupt my job.

I moved my office the day that CAP was closing, with no preparation. As students and faculty were glumly moping around the halls of third floor CAP, I popped into the undergraduate studio and offered two students $20 to help me move out of my office. I found a cart.

We loaded it with my computer, my desk, my books, and two file cabinets. The cart was so heavy and cumbersome that we could not get it up the ramp from the basement of CAP to the parking lot. Luckily, I had driven to work in my very small two-door hatchback, which I backed over the curb and down the ramp. We shoved my stuff in, but the tailgate would not close, and so I used an internet cable to tie it down.

At home, I reassembled my desk in front of the garage window, found a space heater, and got back to work.