



STAR Initiative

## Reflections on Life during a Pandemic: *Saudade* and Spring Blossoms

“*Saudade*,” I pronounced clumsily, reading the cover of a small book I picked up while pursuing a dusty Lisbon bookshop. Attempting to translate the term, my partner eventually acquiesced, “there’s really no equivalent in English,” he said. It’s not nostalgia, and it’s not captured by love or melancholy alone. In Portuguese, *saudade* describes a complex emotional state of longing for what is lost and a sense of repressed hope and enthusiasm for the future, all while knowing that what is lost may not ever be had again. It is memory and emotion, grief and hope, happiness and sadness, all happening at once. The feeling may refer to a person, a beloved place, a time in your life, or it may be general, with an abstracted sense of that which is lost.

Over the past several weeks, I have found myself returning to this Portuguese concept. Amidst the great challenges of the pandemic, from the catastrophic death toll to the enduring uncertainty, this period calls to mind a profound sense of loss and longing for what does not exist in the present. The present moment is often interrupted by memories of life before the quarantine and the anticipation of what will come next. At times, I am transported back to that sunny afternoon last summer, lazily roaming the cobbled streets, perusing the shops, and squeezing into a packed restaurant for a drink. The remoteness of that time, its inaccessibility, even the memory of our conversation in the bookstore, all call on the *saudade* of today.

In our communities, life during this period is instead marked by the stillness of the streets, lines outside the supermarkets, and the hidden expressions of others behind cloth masks. But this time has also given rise to a renewed focus on interpersonal connection, generous outpourings of service, and upstart volunteer organizations. I do not know another time in my life with such resounding mutual concern for the health and wellbeing of others within our community. The fear and distancing measures have challenged us to tap into our common humanity, and in doing so, we have in many ways bolstered our collective resilience.

Many of the complexities of today are reflected in this concept of *saudade*, which holds love, loss, and hope simultaneously. It is woven into a culture of the seafaring Portuguese people, who knew well the sadness to see those they loved depart on voyages to distant seas, perhaps to never return. It came to inspire generations of artists, musicians, poets, and authors. Through the expression of the multitude of emotional responses to life during the pandemic, perhaps we are growing and reshaping our own culture.

I embrace this feeling and find balance in the world around me, which calls me to the present moment. The afternoon rain and the pink flower buds springing up outside my kitchen window provide that signal that nature’s great tradition carries on. Today, clusters of rosy buds beam

confidently up at the sun. While the blossoms outside my window bask in the present, I allow myself to wade in gratitude for this moment, precarious as it may be.

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