



We cannot accept war as the norm

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Abstract

This individual teachers' narrative describes the advent of the Russia-Ukraine war, the emotional response at a time of displacement, and endeavouring to teach online.

Keywords

language education, teaching in wartime, displacement of academics

Our usual lifestyle, so innate to us, has become both our strength and our weakness. It is our strength because we cannot accept war as the norm and instead strive to maintain our standards of dignity, helpfulness, and fulfilment. However, it is also our weakness because these standards seem to differ from the harsh new reality we face.

Dear reader, what I am going to share with you won't be "a masterpiece" or the work of a skilful writer. I wish I had a bit of flair to do it. What I do have are my mere reflections on the things we all experienced this or that way back in early 2022.

Pre-story

Monday evening, 21 February 2022 (?)

I was finishing my English class in a preparatory course for high school students. Warnings and open discussions about a coming war were in the air. Everyone was in a dilemma—would it begin, or were we ignoring reality? One of my students approached me to ask for my opinion. My answer was certain—it would happen soon. She left the classroom, obviously overburdened by a feeling that was beyond her age.

On the early morning of Thursday, February 24th – only now do I realise that this was the moment of our cognitive dissonance, ever since we have been trying to fit our peaceful, habitual life into the new wartime reality. Our usual lifestyle, so innate to us, has become both our strength and our weakness. It is our strength because we cannot accept war as the norm and instead strive to maintain our standards of dignity, helpfulness, and

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fulfilment. However, it is also our weakness because these standards seem to differ from the harsh new reality we face).

Once again, back to 24 February 2022

Typically, on Thursdays, I woke up at 5:30, but this time it wasn't to my alarm clock—it was to the sound of bomb explosions outside. So, it began. I looked at my strangely packed “emergency backpack” with documents, medicine, bottled water, chocolate, biscuits, a warm sweater, and a pair of woollen socks—items we had all been advised to keep ready. (Now it sounds funny but flashed back it was “a must”)... I made my coffee—I needed a clear mind—and called my daughter, her husband, and my two grandchildren (11 and 8). Olena, my daughter, sounded panicked. Then I called my son—he didn't answer for quite a while, or so it seemed. Eventually, we managed to agree on a place to meet and discuss what to do next.

The dark grey morning gradually crept into a dark night, with sporadically hectic streets, long queues at ATMs and supermarkets, no cash, empty shelves of durable food, no public transport, and scarce gasoline.

My son and I were darting from one street to another, searching for any working supermarket amidst the air raid alarms. Everyone had to abandon their shopping and rush outside during each alarm. Luckily, we managed to secure some canned food, a few loaves of bread, smoked sausages, and packets of cereals. The trolleys of all customers in a shop were filled with food that nobody would have bought in such quantities a day ago. You might be amused to know that when a Ukrainian woman says there's nothing to eat or cook, it usually means there's enough food to feed a dozen people for a week. This sentiment, I suspect, has been ingrained since the Holodomor times, and now we were bracing for a similar catastrophe: Russia, our eternal tormentor, was attempting to annihilate us.

Our first (and others to follow) full scaled war night was in the underground car parking lot of my daughter's block of flats—thankfully, it was newly built and seemed safe. Air raid alarms sounded horribly now and then. During a first long night in the shelter, my 11-year-old grandson told me about his morning on February 24. He was woken up by an annoying and endless phone ring – that was his best friend Kyrylo, who had been refusing to pack his things despite his parents' demands until he reached Andrew (my grandson) to warn him about the danger. Oh boy, that was a moment when every adult recognised the value of genuine friendship and loyalty!

The place was filled with babies in their prams, older children, their parents, seniors, pets, and cars. The concrete ground was covered with carry mats, cardboard layers, and folded chairs squeezed into tiny spaces, all mixed with pillows and blankets. It even had its own rhythm—deadly silent during the bombing while we were trying to calculate the distance from the hit and our shelter, so much so that I don't even remember the babies crying at such moments, and bustling in between. Food and toilets were upstairs in the flats.

The atmosphere inside and outside was becoming increasingly dramatic. We had never been on any messengers so much in our previous lives as we were now at a moment when the whole country joined dozens of Telegram channels to get the smallest details on the current situation – all people around seemed bent over their smartphones in one hand and mirroring the content on their faces. Quickly spreading news was not promising, and the chances of taking children away from Kyiv were diminishing with every passing hour.

Then came the moment of making a major decision—to flee from Kyiv. The fears, tears, and psychological vulnerability and instability of the two young children in our family were compelling reasons for that.

At 5 in the morning on February 27, we headed for Truskavets, in the Lviv region. A friend of my daughter managed to find a two-bedroom flat for the five of us, which was incredibly lucky at the time. The day we arrived in Truskavets, we finally had a stable mobile connection and internet!

Then, a touching moment came. I received a feed of messages from my Canadian journalist friend I had known since 1991. She was genuinely concerned about my country and my family, offering a list of addresses of people in Canada who were eager to host us. That was my turn to appreciate the valuable sign of true friendship. I was sitting and silently crying, and wishing all life blessings to my dear friend Marylin. I immediately recalled almost a year of long talks about everything, nice dinners at my mom's place, business interviews she conducted in Kyiv while I was her interpreter, and short trips around Ukraine. Marylin, who preferred to be called Marussia to reflect her Ukrainian origin, proved a simple truth—it doesn't matter if you're in touch with your friend regularly; what matters is that they are there for you when you need their help.

After a week of adjusting to our new environment, we began looking for activities while I was waiting for my university to resume teaching my classes for baccalaureate students. My daughter, a practicing psychologist, was waiting to be contacted by her clients, and my son-in-law was waiting for his foreign-affiliated bank to provide further instructions. Meanwhile, my grandchildren got acquainted with other children displaced from different parts of Ukraine. I wonder whether you ever experienced anything similar to “uncertainty of unforeseeable future” – a longer explanation might be required. It was not about Ukraine and Ukrainian Military Forces – we knew our country will stand. Our concerns were about sufficient ammunition, timing of world support and our political authority activities.

One day, a former mayor of the city invited my grandchildren and other internally displaced children to visit the local music school (more correct name is school of arts), offering them a chance to find something interesting to do, all for free. I'm not sure if you are accustomed to free services, but it was not typical for Kyiv. I felt a bit embarrassed and naturally asked if I could do anything in return, such as teaching English to the children at the music school. They thought it was a good idea to arrange English classes for displaced children.

The announcement was placed on the school's Facebook page, and the next day, more than 50 children of different ages (9-17) were on the list! After meeting all the children, I decided to divide them into two classes: one group for general English (ages 9-14) and the other to prepare 15-17-year-olds for their school-leaving exam. And there was an article about the music school and us in March 2022. It's in Ukrainian but modern tools allow to read it in any languages. Here is the link: <https://suspilne.media/lviv/219320-vikladaci-volonteri-zajmautsa-z-ditmi-pereselencami-fotoreportaz-zi-skoli-mistectv-na-lvivsini/>.

In April the things looked a bit like they were improving. My daughter, my son-in-law, my grandchildren and I were back to our routine. May I just remind you that at that time we all were “living online” because of the COVID-19 pandemic? I spent my mornings teaching online classes from the cozy corner of a local cafe. The cafe owners, understanding our

situation, had graciously allowed me to use their space. Their top-notch coffee and delicious desserts became a comforting part of my day. In the afternoons, I volunteered at the music school, teaching English to the displaced children. This was not just about language lessons; it was about giving these children a sense of normality and a distraction from the chaos that had uprooted their lives. I have always known that being active helps to cope with any hardship as you have no time to complain.

That very period of resuming classes at my university was the most emotional - absolutely every and each of my students shared their personal experiences from 24, February until now - we were all crying...talking...supporting, appreciating each other. That was the moment when we all understood the real value of life, peace, freedom, and pride of being Ukrainian. Teaching during wartime is a challenge itself, blending the need for educational continuity with the harsh realities of conflict. Teachers must navigate disrupted routines, scarce resources, and the emotional burdens on both themselves and their students. We reckon that education serves as a crucial pillar, giving a sense of normality and hope. It becomes a powerful tool for maintaining an image of stability, fostering critical thinking, and nurturing resilience in young minds. In such times, a teacher is embodying a source of strength, guidance, and inspiration for students striving to learn amidst the chaos. And so, we kept going, one day at a time, inching closer to a victory that we knew was not just about reclaiming our land, but also about reclaiming our lives, our dreams, and our future.