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Keep Calm and Enjoy Your PhD: Notes on Joy, Difficulty, and Care

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"Keep Calm and Enjoy Your PhD: Notes on Joy, Difficulty, and Care"

The invitation to give a talk for the participants of the AEDEAN Doctoral Seminar, which was celebrated in early July 2025 in Santander, made me feel both immensely honored and somewhat challenged. First came thankfulness for everyone who made it possible for me to enjoy that special event, full of talented PhD students and scholars, including some very dear friends. What a treat to be part of it! What luxury to be able to escape to this beautiful place by the ocean, with perfect temperature in the middle of the boiling summer! Gratitude was thus the first thing I experienced and it is relevant to start thus, for I believe this is one of the most—if not the most—important emotions that are also associated to the PhD. I remember that, a long, long time ago, whenever I was stuck in my own dissertation writing, I used to think about the acknowledgements I was going to write, to the point that I had them all figured out in my head way before the thesis was even close to being ready! To me, this was a reminder that I was not alone, and that no matter how important the thesis is, it is never as important as having good people to share it with. We should always remember that the academic is inherently, unavoidably personal. In a context where this might be taken to indicate a lack of professionalism or seriousness, we should vindicate it and cherish it.

At the same time, however, I also experienced great insecurity. What should I, what could I talk about? What can I say that students can potentially learn from or be inspired by? There are so many things in the PhD world, so much information about the process, publications, conference papers, scholarship applications, research stays, and a long etcetera. I cannot even claim to be an expert in any of those. So, I thought, if I were in the audience, what would I like to hear about? In the process of reflection, the words of Toni Morrison accounting for her origins as a writer came to my mind. She explained in several interviews that at some point in her life, when she could not find the experience of black women accounted for in literature, she decided to write the book she would have wanted to read herself. I do not intend to establish any kind of comparison between Morrison and me, but I did find great inspiration in this. What did I miss from my own PhD experience? What is the most important thing that I would have liked to be told in the process? This led me to my decision to talk about the joy that can—and this is my main point, should—be involved in the PhD, that long road which drains you of energy, time, social life, romance, and so many more things, but which is also fulfilling, inspiring and rewarding like nothing else can. There is, I am well aware, an inherent contradiction here—how can you feel joy when something is so incredibly taxing? As my dear Walt Whitman famously wrote in "Song of Myself,"

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
>
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

We should not be afraid of contradiction, but embrace it. When we do, we see that it is perfectly possible—in fact, it is unavoidable, and also desirable—for the process of completing a PhD to be both extremely challenging and uniquely exciting.

Yet, we do not usually talk about the joy. More often than not, we focus on the stress and difficulties of a PhD, but it is also important to acknowledge the positives. If you decide to do so, you must know that you will be going against the grain, practicing a kind of swimming upstream in the present context. You can choose this path or not, and, either way, this is a deliberate choice. What a relevant word this is, *deliberate*! One may remember Henry David Thoreau's words in *Walden* about why he decided to go and live in the woods. He wrote,

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. (97)

Thoreau was speaking about a different project—about living simply, in harmony with nature—but his ideas can also be relevant to the PhD experience. My point is that making a deliberate effort to focus on joy rather than dwelling only on the challenges—which is what we dwell on, more often than not—matters.

The importance of this lies in the fact that what we focus our attention on tends to grow. This is something that all of us have probably perceived intuitively, but it has also been demonstrated by psychologists. As defined by the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, *selective attention*—also called *controlled attention*, *directed attention*, or *executive attention*—explains how we concentrate on certain stimuli while ignoring others. Interestingly, the stimuli that we focus on are those that align with our goals or mental frameworks. To this we need to add *confirmation bias*, defined as "the tendency to gather evidence that confirms preexisting expectations, typically by emphasizing or pursuing supporting evidence while dismissing or failing to seek contradictory evidence." This means that once we focus on a belief or idea, our brain tends to seek out and interpret information that confirms it, thus reinforcing such focus. Needless to say, the fact that we tend to see the things that we already believe, and simultaneously search for evidence to confirm it shapes our experience of reality profoundly. If we add recent developments in neuroscience to this, especially through the concept of *neuroplasticity*, or "the ability of the nervous

system to change in response to experience or environmental stimulation," we see that what we focus on literally grows in our brain's wiring. This is at the basis of *positive psychology*, a field of research that focuses on the psychological states, individual traits or character strengths and social institutions "that enhance subjective well-being and make life most worth living." As reflected in the *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* manual—which changes the focus from mental illness as categorized in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—, well-being and resilience can be cultivated by focusing on strengths and positive experiences. What we learn with a quick look at these terms and theories is that if we focus on affirming aspects of our academic work, we can reinforce the neural pathways associated with motivation and joy.[1]

Apart from psychological and neuroscientific theories, we, language people, literature people know that words and stories shape the way we look at the world and ourselves. Personal and cultural narratives do not only represent life—they shape life and identity. The stories we tell ourselves and others are, therefore, profoundly important. We can—and should—focus on stories of growth and resilience to reinforce those experiences within our communities. What all this means in the context of doctoral research is that deliberately attending to moments of curiosity, intellectual growth or achievements is more than a matter of attitude: it is a strategic intervention which can make a difference in our long-term engagement with the PhD journey.

It is important to clarify that my emphasis on joy should not be confused with the contemporary imperative to perform happiness at all times that Byung-Chul Han observes in texts like *The Burnout Society*. For Han, we are living in a society obsessed with achievement and the constant invitations to produce, optimize and remain positive are in fact contemporary culture's way to discipline us. This is not only exhausting but also a form of violence: the individual internalizes this pressure to maximize their own performance, which ultimately becomes a form of self-exploitation. The focus on joy I have in mind is very far from an attempt to discipline anybody—in fact, it is precisely the opposite, a call to rebellion, to dissenting. Moreover, it is focused on the process of researching rather than productivity. Most importantly, it is based on relationships. In my view, curiosity, connection, and insight coexist with doubt, frustration, vulnerability. The latter are not failures to overcome but key elements in the process of becoming a scholar. Thus, joy is not an obligation but a reminder and an invitation to make the most of the journey you have chosen.

Precisely because the focus on joy is not meant to erase difficulty, it is important to acknowledge that writing a PhD dissertation is not easy. It requires great commitment and discipline to manage the long, demanding process of research, analysis, and writing. Moreover, it is common to feel insecurity and doubts about your self-worth, especially when you are constantly being tested. You need to present a paper and everybody is looking at you, and you are afraid they will figure out how much you don't know; you need to have your work evaluated by the doctoral commission, ANECA, a hiring committee… There are so many opportunities to feel that you don't do enough, that you don't know enough! It is no wonder that academics in general and doctoral students in particular are associated with a high rate of mental health problems. PhD students should be well aware of the difficulties they are going to face, and supervisors should be very open about this from the beginning. Of course it is not easy to stay positive in this context, and if we add the times of uncertainty and chaos we are living in, even trying to do so becomes a sort of revolutionary act. Yet negative discourses about academia seem to outweigh the positive right now, and we need to redress the balance.

Because theory is never truly separate from life—and because even when we focus on the personal, we often feel compelled to draw on the wisdom of smarter people, a tendency that academics eventually become very good at—I will be looking for support in a few concepts that I believe can be useful here.

First, the idea of **self-care**. I am recovering the original sense given by Audre Lorde, whose ideas are still extremely relevant today. In her 1988 essay collection *A Burst of Light*, Lorde reframed self-care not as luxury, but as essential for survival under oppression, connecting it to resilience and engagement. She wrote:

> I had to examine in my dreams as well as in my immune function test the devastating effects of overextension. Overextending myself is not stretching myself. […] Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare. (130)

Lorde, a black lesbian feminist poet and writer, was living with cancer at the time she wrote this, and we need to consider such particular context. Different though the circumstances may be, we know that the academic world can

1 All these definitions and ideas are available at https://dictionary.apa.org/

be inhospitable. We may be ignored, ill-treated, silenced, marginalized, underpaid, overburdened, overwhelmed, or precarized in various ways due to the fact that we are PhD students, people of the humanities, of a certain age, or because of other identity-defining features like gender, race, class, nationality, or ability. Self-care is more relevant and urgent when the system is not precisely interested in us thriving in it or enjoying it, for very often it seems to be the opposite. In this respect, self-care is a kind of resistance, and therefore, a political question.

One thing to note is that Lorde's formulation is not the same as the idea of self-care most generalized at present, when it is more often than not stripped of its political emphasis, and absorbed by neoliberalism through individualism and consumerism.[2] The idea of self-care I am evoking is not primordially about finding me-time or putting my wishes or needs above everybody else's. Lorde speaks of self-care as tending to one's body, mind, and spirit, and always does so in connection to other people. The importance of communal self-care cannot be overstated, for it is clear that we cannot do this alone. Moreover, self-care is emphatically not, as André Spicer puts it, a "cheap replacement for social care." It should never serve as a substitute for governments and institutions providing resources to take care of us, because, basically, it is their job to do this. Another disclaimer: one central problem with the current self-care discourse is that it can become yet another burden. The system frequently expects us to care for ourselves and we may be blamed when we struggle. Responsibility should never rest solely on the individual, for some issues require structural issues: more funding, more support, systemic change… Needless to say, this is where community becomes essential. By community, I mean a web of support—a tribe of friends, family, colleagues; institutional networks like the university, the PhD circle, and the broader academic world; as well as initiatives you can seek out, such as the AEDEAN Doctoral Seminar or the AEDEAN community as a whole.

Another compelling idea that Audre Lorde offers is that of **the erotic**. At first glance, linking the PhD to the erotic may seem unexpected, even eccentric. Yet, the PhD experience *should* be erotic, at least if we follow Lorde's own conceptualization. As she argues in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," part of *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), her notion of the erotic as a source of power can change how we understand not only personal life but also intellectual and academic work. I need to clarify that Lorde is reclaiming the erotic from its limited sexual connotations. In her understanding, it is not just about sex, but a source of deep, embodied knowledge, a site of presence and connection, and a creative energy that drives us toward truth and integrity. As she writes, "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (53). Although I do not think the erotic should be limited to the female, we can understand why this is a relevant vindication for women especially, for we have been objectified, discriminated against, and so much more, on account of the patriarchal conception of the body. Women are of course not the only ones, and if we think of racialized bodies, for example, we have another realm where the erotic can be vindicated as a strategy. In any case, if the erotic is a way of knowing not through disembodied rationalism but through felt experience, it can serve as a powerful counter to academic alienation. What counts as knowledge should include embodied, affective, and intuitive forms as well. I think this can be connected to joy, for in research work—like that leading to the PhD dissertation—one of the moments when we feel most alive and fulfilled is when a sentence clicks, when we're surprised by an idea, a connection we have made, something we have figured out. This is evidence of the erotic, that full-bodied knowing, and it is so joyful, indeed! Lorde says: "once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" (57). She also argues that the erotic is not trivial pleasure but a demand for excellence. Joy can, therefore, be a research ethics, for it calls us back to meaningful inquiry, and it can keep us honest, in deep connection to the truth.

Lorde also insists that the erotic is not private, but political. In her words, "Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world" (59). This is connected to the joy that emerges from community learning spaces—such as the AEDEAN Doctoral Seminar—which can be immensely inspiring and transformative. In a way, the erotic becomes a radical reclaiming of meaning beyond hyper-productivity and burnout. I truly believe that not everything needs to be citation-counted or reduced to a ckecklist of items in our resume, and all those other things that have to do with profit-based academic work and which PhD students know very well. Some things matter simply because they feel right. Although academia often trains us to distrust feeling, and being serious is interpreted as detachment and distance, Lorde seems to be granting us permission to go in a different direction. This is good for PhD students but also for academics at large: I encourage you to try to think of a moment in your PhD when you felt fully alive—perhaps on account of an insight, a moment of awe, a connection. This is the erotic and it is a form of intellectual integrity and honesty. If you have experienced it, cherish it, relive it, look for it again and again. If you haven't… go for it!

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2 See André Spicer's ideas on this in 'Self-care': How a Radical Feminist Idea was Stripped of Politics for the Mass Market" (2019).

I also think that Sarah Ahmed's idea of the **killjoy** can help us here. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed explains how the figure of the feminist killjoy is a reminder that "When you expose a problem you pose a problem" (37). The joy she is killing as a feminist is not exactly the joy I am trying to foster in the context of the PhD. She refers to the public signs of joy that are hiding and displacing bad feelings or behavior under its surface. This is like sweeping things under the carpet. Thus, the killjoy is someone who brings that to the surface, who names what others would prefer to keep hidden or repressed under that false appearance of public joy; who refuses to perform cheerfulness in unjust or exclusionary settings, and who is often accused of being too sensitive, too serious, too negative. We could probably develop a new concept—"the PhD killjoy"—by bringing together all these elements. But here's the deal: it is important to note that not conforming to the superficial appearance of something being right does by no means indicate a failure of character. On the contrary, it can be a practice of resistance, of ethical clarity, and of deep intellectual engagement. So, if you feel that you are being asked to fit in rather than question the way things work; expected to remain silent in the face of unjust practices; encouraged to suppress feelings of discomfort, especially if you are marginalized in any way, then considering the killjoy stance can help reframe those feelings and responses not as weaknesses but as signs of integrity and attunement. For one thing, this can help us all to be fine with saying "no" to certain practices in academia, and at the end of the day, to try to find our own way in it and make it better.

In *Complaint!* (2021), Ahmed also observes that academic institutions often individualize structural problems, turning systemic barriers into "personal" failures. In short, institutions deflect responsibility by portraying those who do not fit in as insufficiently resilient rather than acknowledging the fact that there might be something wrong with the institution itself. **Solidarity** counters the isolation derived from this by affirming that you are not alone, and that you are not the only person going through this. Solidarity does not assume that we are all the same or going through the same; we can be different but we do "live on common ground" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 189). It is about sharing commitment through difficulty, about establishing an ethical relation in spite of our differences. This means that solidarity is made and reinforced through practice, creating spaces to be together and establishing meaningful relations of support. In a culture that promotes the lone genius, vindicating a strong community of mutual care is a necessary act.

Another critic that I want to bring to the conversation is Rebecca Solnit. I am interested in her vision of uncertainty as fertility; of beauty and joy as radical responses to difficulty; and of art, intellect, and activism as overlapping acts of hope and care. This is especially relevant in the difficult times we are living in right now. What Solnit does is turn uncertainty into a method of discovery and joy. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005), she writes: "Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction, and somewhere in the terra incognita in between lies a life of discovery" (6). Getting lost is a generative, creative, and even pleasurable experience. So, don't take this the wrong way, but… *get lost*! And if you feel confused or lacking direction, try to reconsider this feeling, to reframe it as essential to discovery, and, therefore, learning. After all, as Solnit says in *Hope in the Dark* (2004, 2016), "The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as the grave" (5). I cannot overstate the relevance of this idea: darkness can be gestational. This changes the meaning of obstacles in general. And in particular, something like the second-year blues in the PhD, which you may have experienced already, may be not just an obstacle but a necessary step in the process.

This also leads us to try to embrace, following Solnit, hope as much as we can. Hope is, in her words, "a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away" (*Hope* xi). Expectedly, hope thrives on uncertainty: "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act" (xiv). The PhD's unknown outcome can be paired with Solnit's "spaciousness," and uncertainty here equals agency. Hope is not a naïve optimism but a way of living with uncertainty and still choosing to act. Because the future is genuinely open, what we do matters. This also connects to joy. In Solnit's words, "Joy doesn't betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection" (24).

Bringing together Solnit's spaciousness of uncertainty with Lorde's erotic power and Ahmed's killjoy solidarity, we can argue that to keep calm and enjoy your PhD is not to deny its darkness; it is to work in that darkness with curiosity, making community, and trying to enjoy not knowing exactly what happens next. As I see it, the choice of path that one can take for the PhD presents us with either a railroad, with a fixed path, laid out in advance, or a walk in the woods, where you can follow an existing trail, change direction, or tread your own. This is in fact not an either/or choice, for the two approaches can be combined, and different phases of the PhD will probably require different strategies. Still, the planning v. exploration visualization helps, for it points to the balance that I believe should be our aim: be organized, but avoid perfectionism and the urge to control everything; stay open to surprise and embrace uncertainty; be ready to follow your plans, and be ready to take a U-turn too! In short, we can draw inspiration to rekindle our love for the PhD again and again by listening to these lessons on how we can practice joy in several intertwined ways:

- Joy as a stance: a mindset that lets us sit with discomfort, speak inconvenient truths, and hold space for both care and self-care without apology.
- Joy as a method: a creative engine that rewards curiosity and treats surprise as the source of insight.
- Joy as kin-making: a communal ethic aimed at weaving solidarity and mutual support.
- Joy as politics: a deliberate, hopeful choice to keep curiosity alive so that scholarship remains a site of transformation rather than mere production.

Taken together, these four faces of joy remind us that research is not only something we do but a way we can live—body, mind, and heart opening up to others from the conviction born of the changes we want to see in the world.

These ideas can be used to illustrate particular aspects of the PhD. What follows is an attempt to gather my thoughts into a few tips of sorts. I am quite sure they will not be especially innovative or original, but I hope at least some of them prove useful along the way.

The first thing I would definitely say to any PhD student willing to listen is **stay open and fall in love**. Do this deliberately. Be open not just with your eyes or through the intellect but with your whole self. What you are doing for your PhD is never too far away from life and it should be in direct communication with it. Seeing this, feeling it can be a form of happiness. The most rewarding thing about the PhD is how it is full of promise and opportunity: curiosity, excitement, development. You learn a lot, you get to read interesting things and meet amazing people, you get to travel to conferences and see places… Being willing to learn from others, to embrace new ideas, perspectives and challenges will make the experience much more productive and also enjoyable. In order to stay open and fall in love, I think you should always remember that what you are doing is meaningful. Your PhD journey is a unique and exciting opportunity to deeply explore a subject you care about, and to contribute to your field as you develop your skills and expertise. If you are interested in self-growth, you will like what the PhD does to you.

I believe passion is the most powerful fuel—it's what makes the world go around!—and this is why you should choose a research area you are truly enthusiastic about. Once you have done that, remind yourself regularly why you chose it. Choose it again, every day. It's like falling in love—and then choosing to *stay* in love. Passion will carry you far, but staying committed takes effort, too. Always remember the privilege of depth and devotion: you can spend hours and hours, perhaps all day, reading, writing, and thinking. *Reading, writing, and thinking*. This is luxury! Spoiler: it will most likely not happen, ever again. You are spending more time with your topic of research than with many family members, friends, or partners. You will love it, you will get mad at it… And you will get to know it like nobody else will until it becomes a part of yourself. I remember being in the midst of my PhD when a colleague, a year or two ahead of me and already a Doctor, expressed that she *missed* the PhD. I must admit that, at the time, I did not get it: how can anyone miss *this*? Yet, with some distance, I began to understand. It is the intensity one misses. The engagement, the sense of purpose. You may not always know *how* to do it, but you know exactly *what* must be done: write that dissertation. There is a clarity in this and it is precious. Believe it or not, you may very well miss it when it's over.

Of course this is not the whole story. You will also feel not in love. Bored. Tired. Not convinced at all. Doubting yourself and everything else. When this happens—not *if*, but *when*—I would say, **just go with the flow**: we are alive, we are constantly changing, and we won't feel the same throughout a single day—let alone over the entire course of the PhD journey. Don't judge yourself based on this. Also, **embrace the power of the normal**. Everything that happens to you is probably normal. I know, because I tell my PhD students this all the time, that just saying "don't worry, this is normal" does not necessarily make things ok. One can believe it intellectually but we need to absorb it emotionally as well, and that takes longer. But repeating it to yourself is a great start. We are individuals, and we are special, but perhaps not as special as we think we are, in the sense that if we talk to other people, we are very likely to find that similar things happen to them as well. I guess the trick is to try to find some balance between being unique and being part of a group. This is why speaking, telling our stories, and strengthening the sense of community is so important. We need to know that we belong, that we are not alone.

As you can see, trying to focus on the positive is by no means a denial of hardship. There are challenges, of course. Apart from the things that happen to us as individuals living in the world, there is the generalized post-pandemic exhaustion, institutional pressures, uncertainty, and so much more. We would prefer not to have to go through negative experiences in life at all, but the truth is that we need to learn how to **tolerate frustration**, and how to make the most of it. Because we need frustration in order to learn! It probably signals that your mind is working hard, that you are about to figure something out, or on the edge of a transformation. So, we should try to listen to frustration as we would a good teacher. I am not trying to reproduce the old ideas about "learning the hard way," or "no pain, no gain," although it is true that

progress—including learning—requires effort and sometimes discomfort. I prefer the one that goes "experience is the best teacher." As you grow older, you learn to tell yourself something like "this, too, will pass," because you have been through more difficult experiences before, and you know they have a way of working themselves out.

Another key thing that you can do is **choose the people** you invite into the play or movie that is your PhD. Although you don't write the whole script, you can be the casting director and choose who joins the cast and who doesn't. So, yes, this is about the people around you—those you work with, talk to, learn from—and how they can shape your experience as much as the research itself. Some people will inspire you. Others might challenge you. Some will model behavior you want to follow; others will show you exactly what not to do. All of them teach you something. Keep your eyes and ears open—especially when you're still figuring things out. And do make the most of the opportunity to meet interesting people—there are so many interesting people in the academic world!—and enjoy every moment spent connecting with them.

Before **choosing a supervisor**—or asking a supervisor to choose *you*—you should talk to them, really talk. Ask questions, make sure you know what to expect. Also, be honest about your expectations and commitment. This will help getting this relationship right, and remember, this is a very important relationship. Apart from the supervisor, and because you need to remember that no single person can meet all your needs, try to build a network of mentors, colleagues, friends. Some will give you technical help. Others will offer encouragement when you're down. Some will simply remind you who you are outside the PhD. All of them matter. And of course, consider that, just as you look to others for help, support, or inspiration, someone else may be looking to you. Be generous when you can and contribute to the larger community. This will always come back in a good way.

This leads to something else I think is crucial: **share your experience**. Talk to people. When you speak openly about what you're going through—especially the hard parts—you give others permission to do the same. And that builds a sense of belonging that can carry you through the toughest parts of the journey. When I was in the process, it was just as important and helpful for me to talk to people who knew what I was talking about as it was to hang out with people who had absolutely no idea what I was talking about (I am still thankful for their patience!). I think you need both perspectives, one to find community and company in the process, and the other to keep you grounded in life beyond the PhD. And of course, laugh when you can, cry if you need to. And let people be a part of it.

While you're doing all that, remember to **focus on care**. This may sound obvious, but I don't think it is said enough in academic spaces. More often than not, we separate academic work from the emotional world, but they are not separate. We are caring animals and you should care for yourself, for others, for your work, and for the ideas and ethics that guide you. First, self-care is serious work. It is not selfish or indulgent—it's essential. Sleep. Move. Eat. Take breaks. Laugh. Call a friend. Go outside. Do something that reminds you who you are outside your research. The work will still be there when you get back—and you'll be better equipped to do it. It is not always easy to see, but caring also means protecting your own boundaries. Take your work seriously, yes—but not too seriously. Boundaries are part of care too: knowing when to stop working, when to say no, when to step back. PhD work (and all academic work for that matter) has the superpower to invade every single minute and inch of your life if you let it. And it will never be enough. It reminds me of the *windiigo*, the cannibal figure of the Anishinaabe tradition (an Indigenous group of tribes of the US and Canada). When it appears in stories, the windiigo grows and grows, it's greedy and it can become unstoppable. Academic work can be like that! We need to stop it by focusing on other things as well. An important idea to remember is that your worth is not tied to your productivity. Real confidence comes from knowing that you will be ok even if you don't succeed. Interestingly, when your sense of value isn't tied to academic outcomes, you can actually become better at the work, for you think more freely, learn more, and enjoy it more. Care also extends to the work itself, to the ideas you are struggling to figure out. In moments of doubt or exhaustion, it can help to return to the reasons you started. Why am I even doing this? You might forget temporarily, so it's worth reminding yourself. Finally, care for others. Be generous with your time, your solidarity, your company. Ask people how they are doing, listen to their troubles, celebrate their successes… We are all responsible for creating a culture of generosity and respect, for making the academic world better.

One thing you can do when the task feels too big—and I am sure it often feels too big and overwhelming—is to **cut the big elephant in little pieces**. We cannot take the whole thing all at once. If you try to, you will probably not manage, and this may lead you to disengage or procrastinate. The trick is to pause, slow down, and try to break the problem into smaller parts. You can ask yourself: what is one single thing I can do right now? Not finish the whole chapter, but maybe just outline the next section, or prepare how I will begin tomorrow. Not fix the entire argument, perhaps just write one clear paragraph, one email, one sentence that makes sense…

Be organized. This is a good way to make the journey smoother. Track your time. Keep good notes. Back up your work. Name your files clearly. Save your references. Keep a writing log or a to-do list. These things will save loads of time, and thus free up mental energy. And when it comes to writing, start early, and write often. Don't wait until everything is clear. Clarity comes through writing, it is a way of thinking! An early draft may be rough but it can teach you what you're trying to say. Always remember that writing is an ongoing, evolving process.

Another thing to keep in mind is that, in the PhD process, **everything counts**: what you do deliberately and what you do unconsciously, what you perceive as success and what you interpret as a waste of time. The truth is that progress is not linear. Some days you move ahead, other days you feel lost or stuck. It all adds up, even when it doesn't look like it. One of the myths we soon absorb is that unless we are writing 3,000 words a day, presenting at conferences, or producing "output," we are wasting our time, and this is simply not the case. There's a difference between productivity and purpose. You can be purposeful even when you're not being "productive." You might be taking a long walk or lying on the sofa or having a shower and suddenly something clicks, you make a connection or untangle an idea. This kind of thinking is essential to make progress. In any case, always remember that total rest counts too. Not thinking *at all* counts. Your brain needs pauses to make sense of complexity—it needs silence to integrate. Be careful with screens; they often trick you into thinking that you're resting when you're not. Try real rest and your work will be better for it. And of course, celebrate all achievements, large and small. Some may be apparently small: something nice your supervisor tells you about your work, a good question you asked in a seminar, a paragraph that makes sense after struggling with it for a while… If you kept a joylist to keep track of the small things that go right, you may be surprised how many there are!

Another thing to consider is that learning does not happen in spite of failure but because of failure. As the Muscogee poet Joy Harjo writes in her memoir *Crazy Brave* (2012), "There is no poetry where there are no mistakes." When an idea fails or a chapter collapses, rebuilding can produce something stronger. So, we have to learn how to tolerate, even **embrace failure**. Think about this: a PhD is aimed at turning you from a directed learner into an independent researcher. How do you do that? Well, through practice. And you have to make mistakes before you get it right. The thing about academic life—although not exclusively here, of course—is that others will comment on, even criticize your work, and we don't usually like that. But we have to accept that this is part of being a researcher, and that it is not necessarily personal. Over time, we should learn to be more tolerant of this, by staying confident in our self-worth regardless of the circumstances.

The fact is that you are still a student, and that is great news! It gives you permission to be unfinished, to ask naïve questions, to make mistakes, to hesitate. Do not rush out of that space. On the contrary, I would strongly encourage you to try to **love being a beginner**. You are not expected to know everything, for learning is the point. In general, PhD students feel compelled to constantly appear competent and smart. We must admit that this is a lot of pressure and it can fuel impostor syndrome. Try to remember that you are here to improve. You can try to replace "I should know that" with "I want to know that" and see how many doors this change of focus may open. Also, don't underestimate the power of saying "I don't know." These three words can disarm the room and invite collaboration. To be able to say this openly can be such a relief! It is not a weakness or an evasion of responsibility, but a confident position that facilitates learning and connection. And we all feel that we don't know enough—every single one of us. Especially as a student, you are supposed to feel this way, so let yourself feel this way. It comes with being new and with the humility needed for learning. And then, you will soon move from "I don't know anything" to, "I seem to know a thing or two"… And it feels great. The best scholars I know are lifelong learners. Thinking about why I admire them makes me think that we should try to retain a beginner's curiosity and humility long after we have finished our PhD.

Then, at the end of the day, try to remember that **it's just a PhD!** You should take it seriously, but not *too* seriously. Some pressure can be motivating and necessary, but seeing the PhD as a life-or-death mission can paralyze you. You know what they say: "matters of great concern should be treated lightly and matters of small concern should be treated seriously." Holding the work lightly may help you demythologize it a little bit, so as not to obsess over the gigantic picture. You are more likely to work on it consistently this way. You should tell yourself that the PhD dissertation is not going to be your best work. It will be great, but not your masterpiece. We live in it for so long that it is only natural that we start thinking it is all there is. But it is not, it just is an exercise, marking the beginning of something, not the end.

If you have to remember only one thing from all this, make it this: You are going to need a lot of alone time but do not isolate yourself. **Connect with others**. Attend conferences, seminars, workshops. Network with other researchers in your field. Join a research group or a student association and collaborate with other PhD students. Participate in the AEDEAN Doctoral Seminars and the AEDEAN Conferences. Try to enjoy every minute and make the most of it. You will go back home with invaluable inspiration that will help you go on and get you through the hard times you face along the way.

Thank you for reading, thank you for doing what you do, and I hope that your PhD brings you lasting moments of joy!

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