

Half a World Away

Under stay-at-home orders, Brunswick has developed a new tradition: At day's end, one colleague at a time sends a "Thought for the Day" to all their working-from-home office mates. Funny, sad, inspirational, philosophical—they help us feel connected to one another during a time of separation. We are selecting a few to share with readers. Vedika's was sent June 10.

ON MARCH 7, I BOARDED A FLIGHT TO GO BACK to India for a week to visit my family. Ninety-five days later, I am still here.

I wasn't expecting a long stay. I packed a very small suitcase and even left my portable laptop mouse in New York, in hopes of shutting off from work while I was away. But COVID-19 went from just another virus to a pandemic. India went from operating 100 US flights to 0, in just seven days.

Time has become a strange concept. In an attempt to stay close to my New York work schedule while living nine time zones ahead, my new workday starts at 6:00pm and ends at 3:00am (on the good days). I eat lunch when my parents eat dinner, and I sleep when the sunlight starts to trickle into my window. The biggest struggle has been staying motivated, especially while watching the pandemic unfold in my developing country.

Sixty percent of India's population, an estimated 812 million people, live in extreme poverty, unable to even sustain basic needs such as food and water. Each of them lives on less than \$3.20 a day. India's lockdown has meant that work, transportation, and support stopped for most of the population, making already harsh conditions even worse.

A few days after I settled back into life at home, a young man approached me as I walked my dog, asking me politely, "Do you know how I can get to Agra from here? I am walking there and need directions." He carried his life with him in several bags, shuffled his feet in torn slippers. Agra was 160 miles away from where we stood. It would take him 87 hours of walking continuously to reach his destination. He was just one out of 812 million.

The world's most disadvantaged are suffering in the harshest of ways. Everywhere, communities struggle to survive. I've looked to my work to provide me with purpose. The current social and political climate has shown that it is not only important for corporations to take a stand on social issues, it

What does "work from home" mean when work is New York, but home is India?

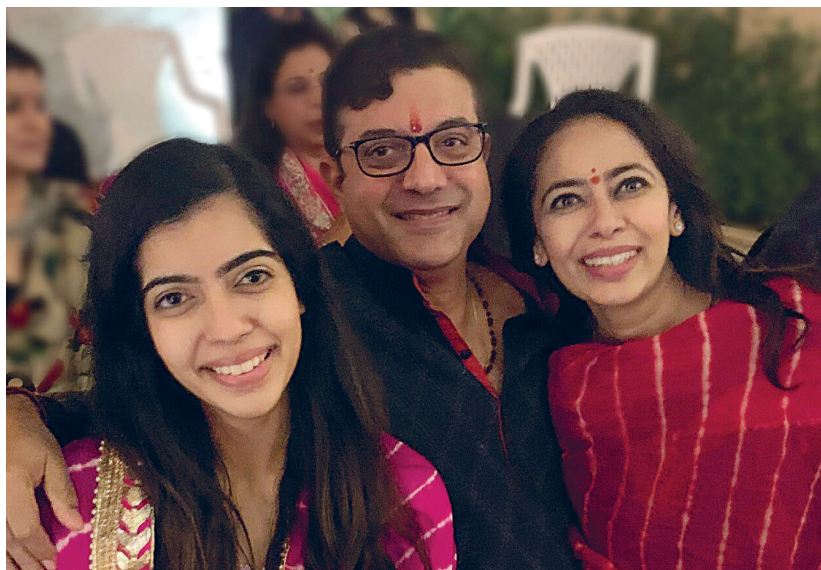
VEDIKA KUMAR, from Brunswick's New York office, shares her pandemic perspective.

is necessary. As advisors, Brunswick influences how companies behave, how they talk about issues, how they can use their resources to change the world, to make it a better place. Holding on to this broader vision has kept me motivated, helped me stay up and stay alert during my odd hours.

The world is simultaneously mourning and fighting—for health, for equality and for new hope. There is a lot of sadness, a lot of frustration and anger. I only hope that everyone has a few moments of joy to hold on to, a few loved ones to turn to, and a vision to look toward to get through this difficult time. Here are some moments of joy that I've held tight:

I was able to prep my father for his first live CNBC interview—while he made an incredibly terrible client, he made a very proud father as he experienced a little snippet of the work that we do.

I couldn't be in New York to join the recent protests, but having a steady paycheck meant that I've been able to contribute to causes I believe in. Connecting my fortunate ability to work to giving back has helped me attach value to my days.



Vedika with her parents at a pre-COVID celebration in India.

My mother visited our local florist two months back and found him struggling to put food on the table for his family. No one was buying flowers. He wanted to shift to selling fruit instead. Moved, my mother did what she could to support him. His new fruit shop seems to be doing well, and he has vowed to repay her kindness by being kind to others he encounters who are struggling to make ends meet.

All this also keeps the words of Japanese Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda in my mind: "Our real strength lies in our capacity for empathy with others and the action we take on their behalf. As long as one has hope, one has strength." ♦