

It Struck Like Lightning

A Delivery Driver Weathers the Pandemic Storm

Hercules Preval

BEFORE YOU READ: The title is a *simile*, and the subtitle is a *metaphor*. What does “It” refer to in the title? How do you know? “Weather” is usually a noun, but here in the subtitle, the writer uses it as a verb. Explain the meaning and try using it yourself in a sentence.

Before the Storm

No one expected the coronavirus pandemic. It struck like lightning, stopping the regular daily lives of almost everyone in the world. To stop the spread of the virus, governments shut down businesses. Many people lost their jobs, and only essential workers could go to work. As a driver for Aramark, I deliver food for the train passengers. I drive the food from the warehouse to the train station, where it is loaded onto trains.

I live with my wife, who is working, and two adult children, who are currently in college. Living in Boston is expensive, and both my wife and I have to contribute to our children’s college tuition. Before Covid-19, I worked a 40-hour week, and I would take overtime whenever possible.

Calculating Overtime

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was passed in 1938. One of its provisions was that workers should get time-and-a-half for any hours they work over 40 in a week. One way to calculate time-and-a-half is to multiply your hourly rate by 1.5. What’s another way to calculate it? Try calculating your hourly and daily rate at time-and-a-half.



This allowed me to make extra money to put in my savings accounts and help my children continue their college educations. At Aramark, I had many co-workers working with me, which made the job easier and faster to do.

During the Storm

During Covid-19, due to social distancing guidelines, there have to be fewer workers in the warehouse. The work is lonely and more difficult. Wearing the mask made it more difficult to breathe. I would be sweating in the mask, and I had to switch masks often. Similarly, we have to wear gloves when handling objects. Even though I wear gloves, I am afraid of touching my face or eyes, so I have to switch gloves constantly. I also have to wash my hands all the time. All these small annoyances cause me to work much slower than before the pandemic.

I am working fewer hours, and I am not earning any overtime. Because I am working less, my boss offered to lay me off and let me collect unemployment benefits, but I decided not to take the unemployment. If I stopped working, it would be

my first time being unemployed. I was unfamiliar with unemployment services, and I thought that they would be unreliable. I assumed that the unemployment benefits would be less than my full-time wage.

My wife also works at Aramark, but in a different position. During the pandemic, she was also not able to get overtime. With less money every month, my wife and I have to be more thoughtful about our household budget. Our priority is to pay our bills and send money to our families in Haiti. We don't have anything left over for our savings account, which we keep for emergencies.

The Sun Is Coming Out

When the pandemic is over, my life will return to how it was before. My wife will be returning to work full-time and I will be able to work more overtime. I don't know if I will have to return to face-to-face classes at the Jewish Vocational Services, but I would prefer to continue having classes online because it is just more convenient. Lightning struck and a storm came. My family and I have weathered Covid-19 and the sun is coming out.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Using the metaphor of the storm, describe Hercules's life before, during, and after the pandemic.
2. Why did Hercules turn down unemployment? If you were to explain to him about how unemployment works, what would you say? (If you don't know, look it up.)
3. Describe your experience (or the experience of someone you know) on unemployment during the pandemic or at any time. What was it like applying for it? What did you have to do to keep it going? Is it a worthwhile benefit?
4. Read the box on the previous page. Research the FLSA. What was the historical context for the passage of this law? Who fought for it? How did they win it?



Hercules Preval is a student at Jewish Vocational Services in Boston, MA. He immigrated to the United States in 2009 and has been living in Boston since with his family. He attends school while working full time to learn English in order to get a better job.

Consider a Career in Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics (TDL)

For another perspective, read the article by a warehouse worker on p. 20.

Find out more about this career pathway. Read "Getting Ahead in Transportation" (pp. 46-48) by Sandy Goodman in [Issue #43](#) of *The Change Agent*.

Look at this [CareerKit](#), especially the section on Transportation and Warehousing, developed by Ellen Baxt at CUNY for HSE and ESL students.

