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History 129A

My name is Emily Emard, and I am currently a sophomore at UCLA double majoring in History and Gender Studies. Before the global pandemic COVID-19 hit, I was your average Bruin/college student – I lived on campus, had a job, and studied hard so I could hang out with my friends and do as many fun things in L.A. as humanly possible. I enjoyed studying in coffee-shops searching for the best iced-coffee to get my friends and I through finals, we went to Santa Monica or Malibu as often as we could, and I could be seen frequently sprinting down BruinWalk to get to my lecture hall of 300 on time so I wouldn't have that many people staring at me strolling in late. I was independent, self-sufficient, and full of hope that I was going to use my education to change the world. Now, I still have hope that I will use my education to change the world, but the world I will be changing looks much different. I am no longer living on-campus or independent, but rather, living at home helping take care of my family – grocery shopping (stocking up on toilet paper and masks), checking in on my grandma and our elderly neighbors, and helping my sisters navigate their schoolwork. My friends have all moved back home as well, and the possibility of us hanging out physically in a group of any size seems unrealistic for the coming year(s). Most beaches are closed indefinitely to avoid overcrowding, and I can no longer go study at my favorite coffee-shops, but have had to settle for wearing a mask and gloves while going through the Starbucks drive-thru instead. My exercise routine of running down BruinWalk to get to a lecture hall of 300 people feels like a dream I can only hope to get back eventually, as now I sprint down the hall from the kitchen to my room so I don't miss

logging on to my Zoom lecture for the day. My life completely flipped Finals week of Winter Quarter 2020, and as I write this, it is really hard for me to remember what life was like then, even though it was less than 3 months ago.

One thing that has remained constant with me throughout my college career, despite the dramatic turn it took because of COVID-19, is my passion for education and love for history. History isn't just a book, memorization of dates, or something that no longer exists. History is about people – studying complex human relationships that contribute to the actions of people, and exchange of ideas that have literally changed the course of our world, so we can continue to learn, grow, and develop. History is about reaching beyond, and understanding people so you can in turn be understood. History is about empathy, and I love that. Especially now more than ever, I am extremely grateful to be the student of such an awe-inspiring discipline that encourages people to lean into the uncomfortable and listen to understand.

I have been reflecting, and have found it hard to wrap my head around the fact that I am living through such an important and globally life-altering historical event. I often think about those in history who have lived through life-altering events before COVID-19 (and there have been SO many) and how I never really considered the gravity and hardships of their situation until I was forced into a life-altering situation myself. How did the Native Americans feel meeting the Europeans for the first time in the “New World?” How did they manage to cope with the creation of a “New World” that brought upon life-altering consequences that they didn't even ask to be a part of? How did our country recover from the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918? Did their lives return to normal after, or was the “normal” that they knew drastically different? The list of questions I have about events like these as a historian is absolutely endless, but the question I have as a human is just: how? How do we cope as human beings with living through a

time in history that is so crucial to the development of our world that I'm unable to even find a word to do its significance justice?

Just as I am struggling to find the words that have the ability to describe the historical impact that COVID-19 will undoubtedly have and is currently having on our world, I am also struggling to deal with this impact and new normal that COVID-19 has suddenly thrust upon me. Most of all, I am struggling with the lack of human connection that has resulted from COVID-19, both as a student, and as an adult that will soon be inheriting this world and the new "normal" that comes with it.

As a student (and hopeful future educator), the new normal of human isolation and virtual education has really taken its toll on my ability and capacity to learn. The reason I love education is because it consists of two things: learning and human connection. In my mind, the two are inseparable. I believe you can't learn without human connection, and you can't connect to a person without learning. The connections I make in class (in-person) hold me accountable to learning, and the learning I do allows me to be held accountable by those I make connections with. This relationship between learning and human connection is not just an essential framework of studying history, but can be applied to studying the impact of coronavirus, and to life in general. I love learning an indescribable amount. It fills my heart and my brain with joy, mainly because of its connection to people. But recently, since online learning, I have really been struggling to motivate myself to learn because there's not really a reason in my brain to anymore, since it won't result in human connection. Learning just feels like a chore now, and I don't learn because I want to learn, I learn to pass and then forget. It's hard to stare at a screen all day while being in an environment less than ideal for the academic rigor that UCLA expects from its students. An endless amount of Zoom calls quickly became draining, trying to focus on school

work became infinitely harder, and balancing the stress of being a full-time student, maintaining a part-time job, and living at home and through a global pandemic is indescribably exhausting. Most of the time, it's hard to remember what day it is and what Zoom calls I have to attend, let alone try to work up the energy to type a midterm paper worth half of my grade and care about what my grade will be at the end of it.

As an adult about to inherit a COVID-19 filled world, I have come to recognize the lack of human connection affects much *much* more than just my grades. I am deeply afraid of what a post-COVID United States and world looks like where we continue to dismiss the power and importance of our shared human connection. The failure of the United States government to recognize this has led us down an unprecedented political path – one full of extremely hateful and harmful rhetoric, extreme divisiveness, and ideological enemies that thrive and spread on hate and fear. The pandemic has only exacerbated this, bringing the spotlight to issues and inequalities that are causing divides to deepen even further and heightening political, racial, social, and economic tension in this country to an extent I have never seen, encountered, or dealt with before and that has never been seen before historically. In the midst of all of the chaos, globally but especially in the U.S., at a time when our politics, our country, and most importantly, our people, need it most, we have failed to recognize the one thing that unites us: our humanity. We need to recognize the importance of human connection now more than ever so we can overcome this pandemic, which will not end without some form of collective action. And to start down the road of the long healing process we will need to recover from COVID-19 and adjust to our new normal, we need to unite under our humanity to ensure that people are taken care of, and so we can hopefully return to living freely and without fear. I am struggling to envision a post-COVID world where dehumanization and hate persists. Humanity is quite

literally on the line, and I refuse to believe it will end like this. I can only hope for my sake and for the sake of the world, that this does not become my reality, our reality. I want to leave this world a better place than I found it, but I fear that the world I'm coming into may be too far gone.

On the other hand, when I feel as though sometimes the weight of the world is becoming too much for me to bear on my own, I am reminded of our shared human connection and the power of humanity in little ways. I am finding new ways to connect with people – calling those I've always said I've never had the time to, connecting over social media and video calls, reading more books, and reflecting on the meaningful relationships in my life. I am finding myself much more appreciative of random acts of kindness, something as small as paying for a coffee in the drive-thru or a text asking me how I'm doing, and I am trying to go out of my way to engage in them more. I am constantly in awe of our ability as humans to work around COVID-19 to make cancelled graduations, birthdays, or even holiday celebrations so special and meaningful. I am thankful that people in my life are finding innovative and creative ways to connect with me and with others, ensuring a safe physical distance, but still fostering the same love, relationship, and connection. I have more time to live in and value the present moment, and the world of nature that I often ignored due to all of my responsibilities. I still have the opportunity to be a UCLA student, and receive my education. I still have the opportunity to change the world, it just might look a little different than what I thought 2 months ago. And I am incredibly grateful to still be a student of history – it is a subject full of hope, positivity, and inspiration. It always reminds me of the possibility of change and the endless compassion that people are capable of. I take great comfort in history, especially in an unprecedented time like now, because the good always has a way of prevailing.

It is increasingly becoming more and more apparent to me that things will not be the same after this. After all, one thing is a constant throughout history – world transformations lead to social change (among many other things). I am excited at the prospect being able to tell people about this one day, sharing experiences and memories about what happened, how the world responded, and who stepped up and rose to the occasion. However, I am also acutely aware that the change that comes out of this depends on how we choose to respond, the collective action we choose to take. This pandemic has exposed the extreme inequalities that always existed while stripping us of our ability to hide them any longer. It has brought to the forefront those we have left most vulnerable, and if we chose to deny our shared humanity for any longer, if we cannot tackle this pandemic and our inequalities together, if we decide to forget about them again, history will repeat itself. It is up to us to decide how things will run after this and whether the direction we take be negative or positive. Having the privilege of being a part of the next generation, and knowing my friends, peers, colleagues, and those who will join me in inheriting a post-pandemic world, I have hope it will be the latter.