

Covid-19 Reflection Essay

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On May 7, 2020, my father lost his best friend. His name was Gabriel Sandoval, an honest and good man. He loved playing cards, riding horses, and sharing a good meal with his beloved friends and family. Weekend after weekend my father would take my family and I to his ranch, where they developed a camaraderie like no other. They were *compadres*. Sandoval had been fighting against cancer for a year and a half. He did not die because of Covid-19, however, because of social distancing, he had to endure his last weeks alone. My father was not able to say goodbye to his best friend. According to Sandoval's wife, Mercedes Sandoval, Gabriel spent his final weeks in silence, refusing to speak to anyone. As if he lost hope. Not understanding why his relatives and friends were not able to visit him and give him the support and hope that he needed to keep fighting.

His family had no intention or plan for cremation, but because of the pandemic, they were left with no choice. It has been over ten days since his passing, and still his wife and three daughters have yet to get hold of his ashes. Like most things these days, the remains of Don Gabriel Sandoval will be given to his family in a package and through a delivery service. In addition the religious services that accompany the pious have been suspended. The traditional mass was not possible, and the *novenario* (traditional nine days of prayer after the death of a member of the Catholic Church) were conducted through Facebook live.

I chose to begin my reflection on Covid-19 and its impact, with the case of my family's dear friend because it constitutes the changes that most impacted my family but also the nature of the world that will transpire. I believe that we are advancing towards a world dominated by technological innovations that will reorganize the nature of human interaction. This is evident in the transformation into remote learning, labor, and social interchange through social media, phone calls and online gaming.

Personally, Covid-19 has affected my family and I only slightly. At the end of Winter quarter I had secured an on-campus job as a Community Service Officer and was about to embark on my training with some of my closest friends. Our plans were beginning to fall into place. We fulfilled our first objective in attaining our employment, and so in the following quarter (Spring 2020) we were all to get an apartment together, and become members of one UCLA's Greek fraternities. Spring 2020 was also the quarter in which most of us would turn 21 years old. However, Covid-19 struck towards finals-week of Winter quarter. As a result, my friends and I had to postpone our employment, and transition to remote instruction. I also had to leave my apartment in Westwood, without being able to renegotiate my contract, or find someone to take on my lease. I am currently stuck with a monthly bill for a place I no longer live in. The financial concerns have been stressful but my family and I are getting by.

My father is a self-employed gardener, and our family's sole-provider of income. Whether his employment is "essential" or "nonessential" has not mattered since he works alone with very minimal interaction with others. Thus, my family has evaded the pressing financial anxieties that sweep across the nation. Our more considerable uneasiness regards our inability to physically contact our loved ones. My parents express agitation towards the way we can be so

close through online interaction yet so far physically. How something we can neither see nor touch keeps us away from visiting our elderly, from going to mass, or from saying our farewells to a dear friend like Sandoval. They lament the inability to fulfill a dying man's wishes to be buried whole, to be visited, and to be sent away in a church filled with his loved ones.

The Los Angeles community is evidently experiencing strange times. Clearly, something is not right if there are no traffic jams on LA's freeways. However, there is very little particular to Los Angeles, in comparison to other large cities in the United States. It appears as if the entire country is enduring the quarantine in a similar fashion. All disputing whether society should remain closed or open to the public. Almost everyone actively participates on social media, expressing how they miss sports, concerts, travel, and other forms of large group interaction. Whether these forms of public exchange will ever be the same is a mystery open to speculation.

Before I speculate into our potential future, I would like to place Covid-19 in a historical context. Throughout history there have been very few cases of diseases that have the same global/ large scale implications as our current pandemic. The most relative case is the 14th century Bubonic Plague, also known as the Black Death. The Black Death underwent rapid dissemination, and resulted in the extensive reduction Euroasian populations. Additionally, the Bubonic Plague debilitated commercial cities and devastated various Eurasian economies, such as Genoa, Italy, which were prospering prior to the spread of the plague. The Black Death originated in the Mongul Empire and spread across Eurasia through the trade networks that connected Asia to Europe. According to Robert Tignor, in his textbook *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, "the channels of exchange - the land trails and sea lanes of human voyagers - became accidental conduits for deadly microbes." (Tignor et al, 411-412). Already, one is able to note

multiple similarities between the Black Death and Covid-19. For instance, both viruses had sweeping effects on the intercontinental economy. Also, the transmission of these plagues reached various nations as a result of globalization. In both cases, contagion was a significant concern and fear that prompted social-distancing.

As a result of the Black Death, Euroasia lost approximately one-third of its population. In his work *Spain's Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474*, professor Teo Ruiz states that “the population levels existing in Spain before the Black Death were not restored until the end of the fifteenth century” (46). According to Ruiz, more than one-fifth of all villages were left deserted in Northern Castile. Nonetheless, Spain and Euroasia survived and emerged with a sense of novelty. As populations finally recovered towards the end of the fifteenth century, Europe experienced the rebirth known as the Renaissance. New forms of social stratification, art, and expression swept across the world. In other words, those that survived the Black Death had to decide what they considered worthy of restoration. As a result there was a reassessment of the values of the Church, science, and kingship. For instance, there was a revival of ancient Greek and Roman models of governance and education.

From this historical occurrence we can anticipate that we too will overcome the challenges we face today and also reorganize the way we as humans interface. Undeniably, Covid-19 has not been as severe as the Black Death because of modern medicine, and an improved understanding of sanitation and the nature of viruses. However, if we disregard the obvious differences between the fourteenth century and modern times, there are clear similarities in the nature of pandemics and the resulting social implications. As I previously mentioned, historical precedents like the Black Death, show that it is ideal that after a catastrophic event

such as a pandemic, one can anticipate a sort of reassessment of society that results in new systems and a restructured world order. We can expect the modern version of this to play out in relation to the positive effects resulting from changes in human behavior in response to Covid-19. Ever since public interaction was prohibited, there have been various news broadcasts stating that pollution, crime, car accidents, among other things, have declined. Ideally, one must expect that when the pandemic is resolved, as a society we will try to maintain the low levels of pollution and crime, as we simultaneously reassess our sanitation, dietary, and health related practices. But at what cost is society reordering itself?

I believe that those who will be most affected by Covid-19 are those who are too young to understand the nature of the pandemic or its results. I am the uncle of 4 children, all under the age of 8. I notice that they neither question the nature of their extensive interaction with technological devices, nor are they able to compare their online experience with the experience of going out to play with the kids from the neighborhood. As a result of the current pandemic, society rebukes the outdoor activities that defined my childhood, and the childhood of the generations before me. In these times the kids are no longer playing tag outside, playing sports, finding insects together, or playing together on the swings and monkey-bars. Instead they are developing an addiction to the dopamine release that occurs when they win a match on Fortnite or other video games. I have seen the tantrums when they are told to go play outside instead of online. I have seen my nephews watch Youtube videos of children playing with toys instead of playing with toys themselves. And my nephews are not alone. These “youtubers” have millions of views from children all interfacing in the same way. Kids who are approximately 5-7 do not know a world without technology.

But Covid-19, has forced adults and children alike to interact with artificial intelligence (AI) frequently. People of all ages are working, going to school, playing games, and creating social media identities all through AI. During the current quarantine, I've seen my nephew, who is in 2nd grade, transition from remote learning, to taking a break by playing on his PS4, then watching youtube as he eats lunch, return to his zoom class, only to play some more video games later and watch a movie to go to sleep. But many adults are also guilty of this. When we wake up, almost everyone immediately checks their phones. When we feel sad we tweet about it, see something we like, we might post a picture of it. When we need to deposit a check we can take a picture of it, or why not switch to direct deposit and check for the transaction through our phones. If we need to pay someone, we can send them money through various apps now: zelle, venmo, cashapp, and more. For various years now, these technological developments have been replacing the physical forms of communication and interaction that defined civilization since antiquity. Artificial Intelligence is taking over and I believe Covid-19 has significantly enhanced the way humans are interacting with each other..

At the start of the first lecture in Spring 2018, Teo Ruiz told his students he had recently returned from his travels in Tokyo and other parts of Asia. He said to his students that he saw the future in Asia, and that as a human race "we are toast" (Ruiz, lecture 04/02/2018). Although he never explicitly said what he saw, ultimately I believe he was referring to the artificial intelligence and technological advancements in places like Tokyo. In conclusion, I believe that the greatest repercussion related to Covid-19 is the suspension of what makes us human. The authoritative demand from our local, state and federal governments, instructing society to stay

home has increased our dependency on AI. As a result, I believe this dependency will steadily increase in the future.