

A Reflection on COVID-19

My name is Jessica Diaz and I am a third year neuroscience major and history minor.

Throughout history, the human race has been faced with many challenges including the outbreak and spread of disease. In the context of this class alone, we have learned of how people like Cortes and his men brought diseases such as smallpox them on their explorations¹. History has taught us that epidemics have the power to cut populations and even end civilizations. As of recently we can now add COVID-19, commonly known as the corona virus, to the list of diseases which have caused such havoc in the world. While this pandemic is a tragedy, I believe there is a hidden beauty in what it can teach us about our lives and the society we live in. Through my own experience with the corona virus I have come to some realizations about myself and the world I live in. These conclusions were no epiphany, nor did they come to me in a dream, but instead they are ideas that have gained a certain level of truth through my firsthand experience with COVID-19. In order to understand the conclusions, I have come to bout myself and society through COVID-19, I would first like to tell you how the pandemic has affected me personally.

My life before COVID was pretty typical of any college student trying to get into medical school. Most of my time was spent in class, studying for class, performing wet lab research on campus, or volunteering in a hospital. My life revolved around doing things to prepare me for life as a medical student. When COVID hit, my world came to a jolting stop. Suddenly my “on the go” lifestyle turned into having nowhere to go. My classes went online, volunteers were not permitted in hospitals, and labs were shut down. At first, I felt a bit of relief , however that relief quickly faded as the reality of the situation settled in.

In the beginning, online classes and remote seemed like a great thing, but I quickly realized that my busy schedule kept me on track and doing things in a timely manner. Before if I

¹ “Chapter 11: Siege of Tenochtitlan”, Primary source. 124.

only had a certain amount of time to do something, I got it done in that time, but suddenly I had all day to do things, so it was taking me all day to do them. This was quite a learning curve for me and many students like me to deal with when adjusting to remote learning and is a learning curve to this day I am still navigating. Another challenge was and still is finding a space where I can focus and do my studies. I used to study a lot in libraries because they provided a quiet environment for learning, but with those unavailable and not being allowed to leave our apartments I am struggling to find the headspace to complete my work.

Pulling volunteers from hospitals was a good call on the part of the hospitals as to not put students in unnecessary danger, however the possibility of not being able to return to volunteering for a while is worrisome. Volunteering hours and clinical experience is vital to evaluation of medical school applicants and without it, students like me may be at a disadvantage when applying. While schools may be understanding of the situation, that exposure to the hospital environment is an advantage to anyone pursuing a career in medicine. It also puts more pressure on students like me to have a high GPAs and MCAT scores in order to make up for the deficit in clinical experience. This is added stress on top of the already stressful process of applying to medical school that students like me do not need at this time for the sake of our mental health.

My lab work is very precious to me not only because it adds to my professional skills and resume, but also because it helps me pay for my college experience. As someone who comes from a low-income household my family cannot afford to help me pay for my college experience. Due to COVID-19 making everything remote and shutting down research laboratories on campus, it was up in the air whether I would be getting paid for remote research. I felt a panic over how I was going to pay for college. While there are sources of loans and

financial relief, I had worked so hard to be financially stable that it would set me back having to consider other alternatives, especially when thinking about paying for medical school or graduate school in the near future without the help of my family.

My schooling, volunteering, and lab work are only three areas of my life that COVID-19 has majorly affected. I could go on for days about the other more minor annoyances it has caused, but rather than do that I would like to take this time to count my blessings. Through the pandemic, my father has been able to keep his job and maintain his health in order to provide for my brother who lives at home and is still dependent on him. I am very thankful that my grandparents remain in good health, as the elderly are at the highest risk along with immunocompromised individuals for catching the virus and even dying from it. I also recently received notice that I could remain getting paid for remote research, although unfortunately I will have to take a pay cut. While it will be difficult to find a remote project for me, since mine heavily relied on experiments being done in a lab setting, I am excited to show some adaptability and willingness to learn new skills. I am also thankful that during the resulting quarantine from COVID-19, I have been able to stay healthy and do some self-reflection as well as reflection on the society I live in.

The COVID-19 induced quarantine has allowed me to do some self-reflection on many things including what is really essential to me and how those things have shaped my identity. As I mentioned before, I had very little leisurely time to spend with friends and family, both of which are important for me. In quarantine I still remain busy doing online classes, remote research, and zoom meetings, but in my free time I find myself missing friends and family more than usual. This surprised me, because even before quarantine I didn't get to see them much so in that aspect nothing had changed, the only thing is that before I had the option to be with them

and now I didn't. After contemplating why I felt sadder about this now than ever, I remembered how I used to pride myself on being "miss independent". I am now realizing that this was just something I told myself to make myself feel better about being too busy for others. The truth is that I have always had that a desire to be more social and connected with those I love, but my lifestyle prohibited it. Now that my lifestyle was stripped away from me, part of my identity as premed student has been taken with it. I realize the hole that I'm feeling now has always been there. I am now on a quest to change my identity and not have it revolve around a lifestyle and be more honest with myself about my feelings.

COVID-19 has not only allowed me to reflect on myself, but also ponder the state of the world around me. In my contemplations one thing that my mind kept circling back to is an "Ode On The Death Of His Father" written by Jorge Manrique. While this poem is about the death of the poet's father, its nuanced messages can also apply to the present day.

The first thing I would like to highlight is the way that Manrique discusses the sneakiness of death and how fragile life is. He writes, "How soon this life is past and gone, And death comes softly stealing on,- how silently!"². There is an obvious connection to the pandemic which has caused countless deaths. However, I would like to extend the fragility of life to the fragility of a lifestyle as well. Many people had a very comfortable way of living that in a sense "died" due to the corona virus. This took different forms for different people. Speaking from my own experiences my lifestyle was completely turned upside down in the ways I describes earlier. For others this "death" took other forms: suddenly becoming ill with corona virus, becoming

² *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry: An Anthology in English Verse with Original Texts, from the XIth Century to the Generation of 1898*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1955. 49.

unemployed due to business closures, becoming separated from your loved ones due to quarantine, or working many more hours due to the essential nature of a job. These are all changes that happened what seems like overnight due to the pandemic.

Another theme from the poem which reminds me of the current state of society is his comment on how we are all equal in death. In his words, “There all equal side by side, The poor man and the son of pride Lie calm and still”³. In times like these we are reminded that regardless social constructs such as class, race, and gender, we are all still humans and we are all capable to death. People all over the world from different walks of life have been getting diagnosed with corona. It is a good wakeup call that no matter how much money and power you do or do not have, in death we are all equal, so in life we should still treat one another with respect.

It seems that every time I read the news, there is another article on how our administration is handling the virus, and it leaves me wondering what future generations will think of our response to COVID-19. In other words, I began to think about what legacy we are leaving behind for future generations to look back on and critique as we critique in events in history classes today. Legacy is a topic that Manrique also touches on when he speaks of Rome’s former glory and how it has gone down in history⁴. In his poem, he uses Rome as a vehicle to say that all great things come to an end, but that what they leave behind lasts forever. While I am not suggesting this is the end of our society, I concluded that even though our administration should not make decisions based on trying to make ourselves look good for future historians, I believe the COVID-19 pandemic narrative is history in the making, and that as a leading nation, the United States plays a big role in it.

³ *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry: An Anthology in English Verse with Original Texts, from the XIth Century to the Generation of 1898*, 51

⁴ *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry: An Anthology in English Verse with Original Texts, from the XIth Century to the Generation of 1898*, 57

The last reflection on society I wanted to discuss was how on a personal level we create a facade of control over our lives and as a society we put on a facade of order. In his poem, Manrique discusses the façade of power rulers put on through things like festivals. In fact he describes such events as nothing “but a pageant scene”⁵. I have become more aware of the “pageant scene” that I put on for myself as well as the one society puts on for us. On an individual level I like to pretend I have control over what happens to me and take measures to make sure what I want to happen happens. I do this by maintaining a busy schedule of activities that I believe in some way will help me get into medical school. With my daily planner in hand, I felt like I was in control of my life. How quickly I realized that wasn’t true when the pandemic hit and flipped my world upside down in the ways described before. In the broader scheme of things, the fact that our fabric of society was so easily disrupted by a virus also shows how the order we live with isn’t as strong as we would have wanted to believe, and we are living through the consequence of that.

Beyond the united states, and looking at the global scale, the COVID-19 virus has had vast social, political, and economic consequences. Unemployment has skyrocketed, people and businesses are losing money, governments are having to distribute relief funds, and the patience of the collective are being tested with all the restrictions put in place. As a global community, if we want to come out of this pandemic on top, then we need to take the lessons history has to tell and apply them. We need to take control of this pandemic as if we were Isabella and Ferdinand taking control of the nobility, and stop creating the “other” out of the people who the virus originated from like Columbus created the other of the indigenous people, and ban together as a human race in order to beat this virus.

⁵ *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry: An Anthology in English Verse with Original Texts, from the XIth Century to the Generation of 1898*, 59.

Bibliography

“Chapter 11: Siege of Tenochtitlan”. Primary Source.

“*Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry: An Anthology in English Verse with Original Texts, from the XIth Century to the Generation of 1898*”. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1955.