

A brief introductory note: My name is Joshua Grossman and at the time of the writing of this article I am a third-year History major and Mathematics minor at UCLA. For context, I spent the first two years of my education at UCLA as an engineering student, before realizing that I wasn't pursuing a subject I enjoyed and switched to history. I hope that the experiences I've shared in this essay, some of them quite personal, help people in the future to understand the thoughts and feelings of people living in this pandemic, as at the time of writing I do not have the benefit of hindsight to put my mind at ease as to how the situation resolves.

An Reflection on Pandemic in the 21st Century

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The ongoing crisis of COVID-19 is surely one which will have long term complications and will remain in popular cultural memory for years to come. We have seen the transformative power that disease still holds over our society despite all the advances of medicine and science which we have accomplished. The virus has drastically impacted our society on every level imaginable, from the broad political and economic effects which surely will bleed into the approaching election cycle, to the social and cultural effects which impact each of us daily on an intimate and personal level. In my studies I am reminded that in spite of the 500 some years which separate us from the Native Americans' first encounter with Europeans, diseases retain the same ability to transform society that they held for indigenous peoples. We now work to avoid facing the same devastation that they did, even as members of our own society neglect the past and call for an end to measures which experts insist are the only way to limit the devastation.

I was on UCLA's campus when the coronavirus entered the public consciousness, and the initial attitudes towards the disease which I witnessed in myself and amongst my peers were a mixture of fear, frustration, and dismissal. I am fortunate to live in California, where many of the local and state officials took the threat of the disease seriously from its onset. Unfortunately, humans are often shortsighted, and when the first preventative measures were put in place, the only tangible casualties young adults in my age cohort could see were those of the experiences which we would miss out on as concerts, sporting events, festivals, and other activities were preemptively cancelled in an effort to control the spread of the disease. One of the unfortunate side effects of preventative measures is that if they are effective, there will always be those who doubt that they were ever necessary in the first place. In those early days, that sentiment abounded amongst much of the population. Initially the disease appeared to only hold severe consequences for the elderly and those with preexisting health conditions. Most people will

empathize with their neighbor when they are sick or hurt, but when one is asked to make sacrifices and temporarily relinquish some of their personal freedoms that empathy dissipates.

While I attend school at UCLA in Los Angeles, my parents live up in the San Francisco Bay area. At the onset of the pandemic there were shortages of non-perishables and essentials such as toilet paper and rubbing alcohol as hoarders and profiteers bought up entire stocks of these items, either to ensure they would not be vulnerable to shortages, or out of a desire to profit off of the crisis. My parents, however, had a modest supply of food and essentials they had slowly built up over the course of the month before the coronavirus was national news, as my father is a doctor with years of medical experience who acknowledged the severity of the virus long before the government did. Since I did not have a stock of supplies and stores were facing temporary shortages across the country, I decided to move back in with my parents temporarily, with the belief that I would be returning to school shortly. However, at the time I am writing this, I have been here for two months, rather than the three weeks I had initially planned on.

The virus very soon became omnipresent in my life, inescapable even in my own home. Every news network reports on little that does not directly relate to the ongoing crisis. Both sides of the political spectrum lambast each other on social media, as the left criticizes the right for failing to follow safety measures, and the right accuses the left of infringing on their personal liberties. All major social media sites and apps have prominently featured tabs and banners with information on how to stay safe during this pandemic. Furthermore, during the first few weeks of the stay at home order, I developed a persistent cough and some other mild symptoms which made me fear that I had contracted COVID-19 and inadvertently exposed my family to it. I experienced some aspects of my county's medical response firsthand. To limit the opportunity for exposure, my appointments with my primary care physician were on the phone, and he

directed me to a drive-by testing clinic where doctors and nurses wore masks and suits that made them appear ready for a spacewalk. I was tested for the flu and for coronavirus, and after more than a week of anxiously awaiting my results I was somewhat relieved to find that I had tested negative for COVID-19, and positive for Influenza B. However, until my symptoms began to diminish, I was unable to fully rest at ease, as my doctor informed me that the test had as much as a 25% chance of returning a negative result even if I had COVID-19.

One way in which I and many others were deeply affected by the virus was the way in which emotional and personal ties so quickly and unceremoniously severed once the stay at home orders went in place. When I left the UCLA campus, I said goodbye to my girlfriend, believing that it would be no more than a few weeks until we would be back together under at least semi-normal circumstances. The only in-person contact I have had with her in the months since was when she and her parents drove 12 hours roundtrip from her home in Southern California to spend 20 minutes with me on my 21st birthday. Her visit came as a complete surprise to me, and the emotions which I experienced cannot be understood under normal circumstances. Out of respect for her father, who is a first-responder and healthcare worker, and due to the fact that I was still dealing with the symptoms of influenza, we maintained social distancing standards, remaining 6 feet apart and wearing face masks for the duration of her visit. As any who has endured a long-distance relationship with a loved one can attest, the joy one feels when they see their significant other in the flesh after a lengthy separation is unparalleled. But that joy was cut with sadness, as I could not truly be with her. She was so close, and yet I could not embrace her, nor so much as hold her hand for a moment. Her presence for those short minutes was the greatest birthday gift I could have asked for, and yet when she left, I broke down into tears. I have never before experienced such a mixture of joy and sadness, being so close to

someone I hold so dearly, and yet being unable to be truly with them. The memory of that moment will surely remain with me long after this crisis has been overcome.

The pain the disease causes extends throughout my family as well. My aunt is a charge nurse in the burn unit of a large Minneapolis hospital. As cases grow in her area, and as more and more of her hospital (now as much as 33%) has been converted to deal with COVID, she is threatened with the possibility of being called into the COVID unit. Being transferred would mean she would have to isolate herself from her family, not seeing her husband or young children for an indefinite length of time to protect them from exposure. She has seen firsthand how her hospital struggles to deal with the number of cases they have now, let alone the amount they would see if social distancing measures were to be lifted. She expresses frustration in coming home after a long shift, having seen the toll the virus takes on patients and healthcare workers alike, only to see on the news that there are large groups of people gathered at her state's capitol in direct defiance and protest of stay at home orders. These people utterly neglect common-sense protocol to mitigate transmission of the disease, and endanger not only their lives, but the lives of those around them, and the lives of healthcare professionals who stand a risk of contracting a severe case of the disease when exposed to a large amount of the virus.

One might hope that such a tragic event could bring us together, but I fear that so far it has only served to exasperate the divisions which already exist. From the onset of the disease, right-wing pundits decried it as overblown, and an attempt by democrats to overreach the bounds of their authority. While I recognize the legitimacy of concerns over government authority, we do live in an era where technology has granted many governments throughout the world an increased capacity for coercion, medical experts insist that mitigating social contact and wearing masks is the only way to limit the spread of the disease until there is an effective vaccine. The

analogy which comes to mind for me is that of the air-raids on Britain during World War II. Under normal circumstances, every human should have the right to light a lamp in the window of their own home. But when planes filled with terrible bombs are overhead searching for a light source to give them a target, the expression of this right puts everyone at risk. I believe it is within the bounds of government authority to implement temporary restrictions in the face of an extraordinary threat. Even so there are those who call for the country to be immediately reopened, even as the confirmed death toll approaches 90,000 in the United States alone despite most of the country being largely shut down. As I scroll through social media, it becomes apparent to me that many of the friends and family members who I thought to be compassionate and kind people refuse to prioritize the health, safety, and lives of those around them when it interferes with their own goals and agenda.

Though terrible as this pandemic is, my class on the history of Spain has given me an opportunity to reflect and be thankful for what I do have. I am glad to be in a time where we do have medical experts, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci, who have an understanding of the mechanisms behind the virus, and who can provide guidelines as to how we can keep ourselves and others safe. This coronavirus is completely novel to us, meaning that the global human population has little to no built-up immunity, and we are all susceptible to contracting the disease. This situation is reminiscent of that of the native peoples of the Americas, who had no built-up immunity to the diseases of the Castilian explorers and conquerors.¹ Without the medical knowledge of scientists and experts, we might find ourselves in a similar situation, wherein much of the population might face death, or the loss of family members. I am also thankful for the technology which enables me to continue to get my education from my university professors, even as we are unable

¹Ruiz, Lecture 04/25/2018.

to meet in person. While for me personally, the experience of viewing a lecture through a video screen can never compare to an in-class experience, I am grateful for the efforts my professors have made to give me the best resources possible to continue my education. Finally, I am glad that despite the distance from my friends and loved ones, I have ready access to technology which enables me to have live video conversations with them every day. While no substitute for real human contact, it is of huge help to my mental health, and gives me strength to persevere until the day the virus is defeated.

In the end, I know we will defeat this disease, as humanity has with many others which have threatened our species throughout time. I am more than willing to endure the difficulty of spending some months in isolation if it means that I am contributing to the greater effort to stop the spread of the disease and save untold lives. This disease has exasperated many of the inequalities which still exist in our society, and I hope we carry that information into the future. I hope that Americans use this as an opportunity to scrutinize our country's leadership, and take the lessons learned from this pandemic with them to the polls in November (although at this point it is still likely many will have to vote from home). This disease serves as a demonstration of the idea that as long as there are some among us at risk, we are all at risk, and I hope that as a result we reform our healthcare system to cater to all Americans, regardless of income status. As for the present, I hope that we as a people have the strength to persevere despite the difficulty and exhaustion which comes with this "new normal" of social isolation, and that we avoid prematurely ending quarantine only to trigger further outbreaks, causing unnecessary death and misery.