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Life During the Coronavirus Pandemic

We tend to look back at history from a detached perspective and never truly believing that horrific events of the past can one day manifest themselves in the present. The world has seen countless fatal pandemics, yet the current coronavirus outbreak has completely destabilized the world and created chaos. My life during the pandemic has certainly changed, but so has my mindset. Throughout the madness around me, I grew more thankful for my family and for the simple moments I share with them. I have learned to observe the world in a new lens while continually questioning how our actions during this pandemic will shape life afterward.

I must admit, when I first heard of the coronavirus in January, I was not scared at all. I thought, like most of the world at the time, that this will just blow over. Similar to most Americans, I thought that nothing would ever make its way into our country, and no matter what, we would always be safe. This tendency to feel invincible is a product of our failure to look to the past and examine the harsh realities our ancestors once faced. Of course, everything is easier to discuss in hindsight, but that should not excuse the dismissal of the past.

I initially felt the impact of the pandemic in March when I chose to move out early from my dorm at UCLA and made my way home to southern Orange County. I knew that leaving was the safest option, but as a first-year transfer student, I was devastated that my first year on the beautiful campus was cut short. Also, as a first-generation student, I had worked so hard during

community college and endured too many personal struggles to have my first major accomplishment completely upended. I instantly felt a wave of regret for not taking every opportunity that came my way during my few months living on campus. As I packed my bags, I remembered every Westwood trip I missed out on because I was too stressed writing research papers or every club meeting and activity I could not manage to attend due to my work schedule.

The second night home, regret became the least of my concerns. I struggled to sleep as body aches, a dry cough, and a high fever completely afflicted my body. Once I recognized this pain was unlike anything I had experienced before, I realized that I could possibly have COVID-19. I was terrified not only for my life but also for possibly spreading it to my family and friends since countless reports have asserted that carriers of the virus can be asymptomatic for weeks. This stress made me feel weaker and with deadlines creeping up and finals in the coming weeks, everything seemed to keep getting worse. I managed to get to a doctor's office with the help of my aunt, but I was denied testing because I did not meet the CDC's strict requirements even though I was showing severe symptoms. This rejection devastated me because I was not only unable to get any information on what was happening to my body, but I remained fearful that I could have transmitted the virus to my loved ones. Since my grandparents live with me and are classified as vulnerable to the virus, I grew especially paranoid about the possibility that my sickness could have spread to them.

After about two weeks, things began to take a turn for the better. I fully recovered and thankfully no one around me has shown any symptoms of the horrific virus. I still do not know for certain whether or not I had the virus. Since people have described exhibiting similar symptoms while also recovering after two weeks, I remain suspicious. Looking back, I realize

how lucky I am to have a supportive family around me that nursed me back to health and how privileged I am to be able to have insurance and afford my copays. My experience, however, is not reflective of the millions of Americans who are uninsured and the many minorities who are disproportionately affected by our failing healthcare system.¹ After my experience, I have grown more thankful every day for my good health and my ability to access proper resources when needed.

Ever since the California state government enacted the stay-at-home order in March, I have been quarantined at home with my family while attending online classes. Online classes conducted over *Zoom* video chats have certainly been an interesting change. At the beginning of the quarter, I struggled to be productive while being at home. It can be pretty distracting to take notes or attend live classes while the television's volume is at its maximum or when my grandmother shouts for my hearing-impaired grandfather. Exams conducted on video proctored applications have also been a huge obstacle because I can never seem to find an empty room to take my tests. My family members always attempt to start a conversation with me in Arabic while I take a timed exam and with the camera monitoring my every move, their innocent action can be easily misconstrued as cheating. The language barrier has been a challenge as I have tried explaining to them the new format of schooling, but it has been a difficult concept to grasp. I love them either way and I am sure with more time, they will adjust to this new style of virtual education.

I have also been unable to work during the quarantine as my employer did not provide any remote working alternatives. This, unfortunately, means I no longer have a steady flow of

¹ Jennifer Tolbert et al., "Key Facts about the Uninsured Population," The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, May 14, 2020, <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/issue-brief/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population/>

income. I was disappointed in this treatment because it seemed as though that my coworkers and I were easily disposable. I understand the stress that employers are currently under, but this does not excuse their disregard for workers' livelihoods. While I am fortunate enough to have a healthy savings account, I am fearful of my unemployment's consequences in the future. A savings account can only last so long and as a young student hoping to attend law school soon, I need a financial safety net to assist me during those stressful three years. This financial stress serves as an ominous warning of the long-term consequences of the virus.

Another drawback has been the restrictions imposed on my family's and my ability to practice Ramadan normally. It is very common to have family friends visit our home and enjoy *iftar* together, but the pandemic has required us to practice on our own. However, I must say it is refreshing to see all my family members at home having dinner together every night at sundown. With everyone leading such busy lives, it was rare that we all were able to have a meal together prior to the quarantine. We have always been close, but being around each other consistently and for so long, brought us up to date on all the details of each others' lives. We used the quarantine as an opportunity to connect with one another which has made life much less stressful during this chaotic time.

I am overwhelmingly thankful for the healthy environment I live in. The stability inside my home has allowed me to observe the chaos outside from a whole new perspective. As a political science major, I have studied the functions of political institutions and how they affect our lives. During this quarantine, I have been fixated on the government's response and trying to understand how institutions are controlling the severity of the outbreak. The structures and organizations that I had once studied in theory, are now playing out live as state governments

attempt to mitigate the consequences of panic buying and the shortage of personal protective equipment.

While the political fanatic in me is captivated by the politics at play, another part of me is drawn to observing history in an attempt to understand the world around me today. Pandemics of the past, such as smallpox and the bubonic plague, offer context into the response we see today regarding the coronavirus. The heart-wrenching stories I read about the racist outbursts and assaults towards Asian Americans remind me of the horrific reality endured by minorities throughout history. My history professor, Teofilo Ruiz, has discussed countless times the inhumane treatment of Jews as scapegoats for society's problems.² If we take a look back to the outbreak of the bubonic plague on the Iberian Peninsula, we see a similar trend of racism as Jews were attacked for their alleged complicity in the pandemic.³ It appears as though that in times of chaos, humans initially react by blaming the "others" of society. Whether it was Jews or Asian Americans, minorities are consistently and unfairly condemned for the world's issues.

I have always been told that while history does not repeat itself, it certainly does echo. We must, therefore, learn from these echoes. How do we build a society based on respect and not hate? What actions can we take today to create a better tomorrow? While we as average citizens do not have the cure for the virus, we still hold power over our behaviors under pressure. We can choose compassion and to help our neighbors instead of frantically buying all the toilet paper and masks. At the end of the day, this virus does not care about our race, gender, or religion; its only aim is to destroy us. Why should we do its work?

²Teofilo F. Ruiz, lecture April 18, 2018.

³Teofilo F. Ruiz, *Spanish Society, 1348-1700*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 19.