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Second Term Paper: COVID-19 Reflection

Impact and causality have always been interesting concepts to measure and trace, to correlate to our lives today. In large part this is due to the notion that at the heart of any change, there's always something intangible, and it's difficult to identify. There's no denying that the novel coronavirus has forever altered the course of history, just as every other pandemic has in the past and will in the future, but beyond the larger context of how they reshape society and the economy, there's a significant personal element to it all.

Every day that I turn on the news—desperately hoping for a positive development or at the very least, a drop in the death toll—I realize how much this virus has transformed discussions on life and mortality. I do not believe myself to be naive, I know that death is one of the few guarantees we have, but it's devastating to hear about the loss of life, especially as a statistic. I realize that when there is such heavy loss, it is easier to speak in terms of data rather than to dwell on what cannot change, but it also severs our compassion for one another. The dead are relegated to serve no more a purpose than their addition to the toll and hopefully, to persuade people to listen to the stay-at-home orders all around the nation. I know that it isn't possible to cover each person's life, but at the same time, it seems inhumane not to. What truly is outrageous though, is to dishonor their lives by violating lockdown orders and protesting because of trivial

reasons—there are worse things in life than not being able to get a haircut, and there are plenty of people currently experiencing them.

Reflection seems like a natural occurrence for humanity during any trying time, but the stillness and silence of our current state yields it tenfold. My mind can't help but think about those without the resources to survive months without work. There's nothing quite like a pandemic, it's sad to say, to shine a light on the enormous inequity that plagues not only our country, but the world. My sisters and I are fortunate enough to have a roof over our heads and a fully stocked fridge, to have access to an education, to have our parents in good health and able to get unemployment even though they can't work right now. However, I know that is certainly not the case for everyone, and saying that it isn't okay is the understatement of the millennium. Schools expect children to learn from home even though a lot of families don't have access to technology, the government expects people to stay indoors even though a lot of families can't apply for unemployment or any of the other aid because they are not citizens, the country expects to recuperate even though not everyone has equal access to healthcare and the list seems never-ending.

Every day it becomes increasingly clear that those most vulnerable to the disease aren't just the ones with preexisting conditions; they are those who can't afford to stop working, thereby increasing their exposure and chance of being infected. I understand the economic burden of aid packets and the difficulty in getting them passed because of the increase to deficit spending in our nation, but the economy also won't recover if we have food shortages or if the workforce and production drastically decrease because we jumped the gun and opened businesses back up before it was safe. Taking care of people, even if it poses a short-term loss,

should always come before potential monetary gain. Although idealistic, especially given the fact that we are a capitalist country, it's necessary. Essential workers, with the exception of those in the medical field or in emergency services, are getting paid the least while risking the most. It seems the least we can do is help tide them over during this pandemic even if it increases our deficit. However, I do have to stipulate that generally we are more fortunate here than in some other countries simply because of the aid packages offered. We have extended family in Mexico, and they tell us how they have to keep working because there is no government aid, meanwhile the peso keeps depreciating. We send money when we can, but it's not enough. They don't get the luxury of reducing their exposure, and while there is fear because of the pandemic, the fear for their basic survival outweighs the former. I can't fathom having to decide between the risk of getting sick to work or the risk of not having the means to pay for the necessities because of my privilege. It is abhorrent that anyone should have to, but it also encapsulates how drastic the disparity is and how imperative it is that we rectify socioeconomic inequity.

On an even more personal note, my family has been rocked emotionally because of the virus. My grandmother is 76 and suffers from dementia, and she has been in a nursing home for the last few years. We were in the car, having just returned from a grocery store trip, when my mom received a call that she had been taken to the hospital and had tested positive for the virus. I couldn't hear the call, so I looked to my mom's facial reactions to gauge the news. The next thing I knew my mother had erupted into tears while still on the phone, and I assumed the worst. As violent sobs wracked through my mom, I grabbed the phone because she could no longer speak. The doctor was on the line asking if everything was okay. I calmed down and inquired about the state of my grandmother. She was stable, and while he could make no assurances

because of the fluctuating nature of the virus, he had high hopes. I thanked him, and tried to explain to my mom that my grandmother was okay and this wasn't a death sentence. She couldn't hear anything beyond the fact that my grandma had the virus, and in the moment, it broke her, and that broke me.

There's something fundamentally shell-shocking at seeing such raw emotion take over a person, especially when that person is your characteristically level-headed mom who has been a pillar of stability your entire life. When I picked up the phone, expecting the worst, I felt so incredibly linked to my mother—our fates tied by this one conversation. An overwhelming feeling of calm settled in place of my anxiety, not because I was by any means more rational, but because in that instant, I felt I had to be strong for the woman who had been nothing but for the duration of my life. Even as I write this, emotion swarms me because while I would love to say that my grandmother is back in good health, she was taken to the hospital again on May 13th. I pray every night that she gets better, and I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't. I've lost loved ones before, but at 19, my chest has never ached as much as it does now. Hearing the rhetoric that people are slated to die or that the older generations have already lived their lives does nothing to extinguish the hurt and everything to intensify my outrage. Who are we to decide whose life has more value, to deem someone else's inconsequential? While society may not place an inherent worth on the life of a 76 year old woman with dementia, my family and I believe her to be indispensable.

If I could boil down the impact the virus has had on my own life in one word, it would be perspective. In the beginning I was sad at the thought that I would not get to enjoy sushi dates with friends, that the end of my sophomore year would be anticlimactic and that I would have to

spend months inside my house. I quickly realized that even in the midst of this crisis, I am extremely fortunate. People dying has a way of making you reassess what is truly important in your life. For instance, as much as I like going out with my friends, I love my family infinitely, and getting to spend time with them when so many individuals are losing their loved ones is a blessing. No matter how many times my sisters barge into my room singing “Into the Unknown” from *Frozen II* while I write papers for class—it’s happened twice during this very one—my annoyance subdues drastically when framed within the context of what is happening in the world. I also try to take each day in stride and do activities that give me joy. I recently made pizza for the first time, and although a little charred, it was a product of dissipated anxieties and abundant hope. Furthermore, even though my education has been altered, I’m grateful for the distraction that it is, and the opportunity to study history while it is being made.

As a history student, I know that this isn’t the first time that a pandemic has caused a severe loss of life, and I am certain that it won’t be the last. There are significant parallels between what I’ve learned to the ongoing crisis. Similar to the way syphilis outbreaks plagued areas of Europe and smallpox wiped out indigeneous populations in the Americas,¹ the novel coronavirus has been unyielding. While we are still learning about the virus, there is so much that is unknown, and our lack of knowledge on how to fully treat it is what helps keep the death toll high. The natives of New Spain weren’t familiar with smallpox and thought cold water would help heal them, but it was ineffective, rendering them unable to fight the disease.² Moreover, the greatest tool in the Spanish’s arsenal during the conquest of the Americas were the epidemics; infection killed more of the natives than they could possibly have done themselves,

¹ Ruiz, Teofilo F. Lecture 9, 2020.

² Castillo Bernal Díaz del, J. M. Cohen, and Betty Radice, *The Conquest of New Spain* (London: Clays Ltd./Penguin, 1963), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32474/32474-h/32474-h.htm>, p. 332).

vastly facilitating their subjugation of the indigenous occupants and their dominion over the environment's resources to prop up their own economy.³ While we aren't under the same threats, the native's struggle sheds light on how devastating a virus can be to personal, economic and political autonomy. In trying to fight the unknown, our focus shifts to survival and the immediate enemy becomes the disease, rendering our decisions as byproducts of our will to endure.

Moving forward, I hope that the country remains on lockdown until the emergence of herd immunity (assuming it is sustainable) or a vaccine/cure. However, I know that is highly improbable, especially seeing as though a lot of states have started to ease certain restrictions and open businesses back up, and there hasn't been much news in regards to the latter. I suspect that there will be additional waves of new cases as soon as stay-at-home orders are vacated. While I feel cynical saying this, I believe our nation is entering a dark period—one where the economy will likely worsen and fall into a depression, socioeconomic inequity will only be exacerbated and the death toll will reach staggering heights—if no remedy can be created. I worry that voter turnout will be affected negatively, and the incumbent president will remain in office, all but guaranteeing the protraction of inadequate government response in this crisis. I can only speculate as to what might be, but I will say that if we were to make it out of this pandemic with a cure, I fervently believe people would be more appreciative of the world around them. I know I'd hug everyone I haven't been able to see in person, I know I'd jump at the chance to take new opportunities, I hope I wouldn't take for granted the people in my life or the privileges that I have, and I pray that I'd never have to feel this overwhelming sense of helplessness again in my lifetime.

³ Ruiz, Teofilo F. Lecture 9, 2020.