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My Outlook on How COVID-19 Reimagined My World

For a long time, I was trying to encapsulate the impact of COVID-19 into a short statement, so I could reflect upon it later in my life, except I have realized that there is no true blanket statement that really encompasses everything I've felt. My own personal experiences have been filled with a whirlwind of emotions and once-in-a-lifetime sights. I drove on the 405 during rush hour, without encountering traffic once, saw carts full of supermarket orders being wheeled away by independently contracted workers, and even was told off by a homeless man that my boyfriend and I were "spreading the virus", even as we had masks on and he didn't. I experienced fear, anger, anxiety, boredom, uncertainty, and a whole array of other emotions, as they constantly alternated through my mind, day and night. The worst part about this whole pandemic was that an outcome could not be guaranteed, as we were truly in uncharted water. I think, as humans, we often tend to seek comfort in concrete knowledge, and what this pandemic showed was that we could only control things up to a certain degree. When LA County's safer-at-home orders were extended past those initial two weeks, I knew that this modified way of life was just simply how it was going to be from now on: a new normal.

Seeing my final year of college disintegrate in the blink of an eye has been quite an overwhelming experience. Not only did the quality of my education cheapen by going completely online, I also felt cheated as a transfer student who had already entered UCLA on

limited time. As Americans, we are often so narrow focused in advancing our education, careers and managing our expenditures that we often neglect time with the people who are important in our lives. I am one of those people guilty of this, as I really went into overdrive the months leading up to the pandemic. I told myself that in my last year of college, I would try to be more active in campus organizations, while also working towards adding a second major to my course load. When UCLA went online, I was taking four classes and three discussions, all funneled into two days of the week: Tuesday and Thursday. On these days, I would be on campus from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. and to overload my plate even more, I also began an unpaid internship two months prior to everything shutting down, where I would be at the office on Mondays and Wednesdays. Because it was health services related, it was immediately put on hold indefinitely. COVID-19 pretty much forced me to slow down my pace, and re-evaluate how much I actually had overloaded my plate. While it wasn't fun, it did allow me the opportunity to take a break for once and learn how to enjoy my own company again.

In the beginning stages of the stay-at-home orders, I was filled with equal parts of anger and sadness, as I thought about how my spring quarter and post-graduation plans were not going to come to fruition. The plans I had to attend Coachella for my first and only time ever, to travel to South Korea in the fall, to finish my unpaid internship, and sit with my best friends at commencement remain as daydreams for now. For my mother and oldest brother, who work together, they had to cancel important business trips scheduled in April. For my second oldest brother, he has to delay the physical transition from transferring out of community college to CSUN in the fall. For my cousin, the reality set in when she mentioned back in early March how her wedding in May was most likely going to be postponed until next year. But despite all of the

curveballs thrown at me over the past nine weeks, I was also to recapture some lost time with my family, after a much needed readjustment period. I was able to use my break to Facetime friends from high school friends, who I am close with but haven't seen in a long time. We were able to catch up through calls that lasted over five hours sometimes. We even watched movies and did Youtube workouts together this way.

What COVID-19 gifted to us all were unintended consequences that no one had asked for. Much of the struggle I found was how hard it is to wrap your mind around the idea of seeing such significant events unable to operate, even as I deeply understood the importance of public safety and wanting to do my part in slowing the curve in Los Angeles. This is because major milestones and social gatherings were simply expected norms of our daily lives — things that we looked forward to, our temporary form of escaping rough times and hardships. Events held as much symbolic power now as they did in the 15th and 16th century, when Spanish kings and queens who came into power would host extravagant festivals to announce the arrival of their ruling era. Rituals are thought of as being reiterated forms of behavior, repeated generation after generation, until they become symbolic itself (Ruiz, lecture April 8th). Whether it be the rite of passage, or the transition into a new chapter in life, these events served as markers of life.

I even remember when the reality of COVID-19's infectious nature began to be apparent to me, when I sent a link about the first outbreaks that occurred in Germany, specifically Munich, to my family group chat. I was scared for my mom, since she was on a business trip in Berlin at the time, coupled with the fact that xenophobic, anti-Chinese sentiment was becoming more widely disseminated globally. As someone of Chinese descent, I felt a lot of anxiety over the safety of my own family, as we were facing a life threatening respiratory virus and the fact that

we could be targeted at any moment. We lived in a predominantly white, conservative neighborhood, so there the potential for xenophobic incidents made me prone to more paranoia whenever I was in public. It's an unsettling feeling when the meaning of my mom's "be safe" message, when I head out the door, shifts from a "be safe because you are a girl" to a "be safe because you are Asian". It's important to recognize how the labeling of Chinese people and Asians overall, in this pandemic, have quickly projected them into the spotlight as being the "others" yet again. Much like how the Spanish utilized the Inquisition as a way of asserting their beliefs onto those who did not conform to their religious affiliations, those on the far right of the political spectrum were framing Chinese people as being dirty, backwards in culture, and cannibals who only derived their pleasure off of eating exotic animals, such as bats and pangolins.

When I saw the amount of hatred that was being directed onto Chinese people, I was reminded about the inherent nature of how dominant groups have always been the ones in charge of framing who exactly the "others" are going to be. "To label them as cannibals is to label them as being something wrong" (Ruiz, lecture April 22nd). The goal of the Inquisition was based on religious affiliation and cultural beliefs, the goal of xenophobic Americans is to publically shame and verbally attack — in some instances, even physically attack — Asians and Asian Americans over the belief that they were the ones who brought COVID-19 into the United States. Even when there is significant data that points that the spread of COVID-19 throughout the United States was more likely attributed to affluent travelers who returned from vacationing in Europe. I find it interesting that the transmission of highly infectious diseases to the Americas parallel the same modes of transmission as when Smallpox ravaged the population of the indigenous people,

and when the H1N1 pandemic ravaged the U.S. in 1918 — via travelers from Europe. While the origins of this specific coronavirus did emerge from Wuhan, I do not believe that warrants a basis where anti-Chinese sentiment and xenophobic statements should be publically lauded in any fashion. I also believe that we can do better than to allow our personal, biased opinions shroud scientifically and medically proven data. I am just thankful that neither I nor my family or any friends have had to face any seriously incriminating incidents.

Although I don't want to discount the emotions that I felt as seeing the things that I looked forward to this year be cancelled one by one, I cannot complain too much about my current position in life. I am already more than thankful that my family is in a relatively comfortable position, something that many other students do not have the privilege of going home to. I feel as if I am to see two sides of perspective, being someone who is Chinese and is the current face of "otherness", but where I am also shielded from so much of that targeted hate. This is because I was able to return home to Palos Verdes Estates, an affluent, coastal bedroom community located in the southernmost part of Los Angeles County. And because it is only a forty five minute drive away from Westwood, I didn't even have to consider the thought of flying or using public transport to get home — I had my own car. I cannot even imagine the fear that my old roommate had when she took a flight back home to Sacramento, as I dropped her off at LAX shortly before spring break. Moreso, because my mom kept in constant contact with her friends in China, through WeChat, she knew in the early months of the virus that this was something that was to be taken seriously. By the time I was home, she was already stocked up on just enough food and toilet paper to sustain my family during the initial stay at home orders. No one in my family had any pre-existing conditions, a compromised immune system, or was in the

susceptible age range. I even had the freedom to go back and forth between my apartment and my home if I wanted to, knowing that my roommates had no intentions of returning to live in Westwood again, leaving our apartment empty.

For as bleak as I made several of my experiences and thoughts on COVID-19 sound, I do believe that there is a silver lining to this whole pandemic. Communities and nations around the world will soon return to the vigor and livelihood that they once held, before all of this unfolded, in the near future. History has taught us that society never fails to rebuild itself, and I firmly believe that life might return to normal as soon as next year. The swiftness of how fast we all confined ourselves to our homes showed how quickly we can adapt to drastic disruptions to our daily routines. It was actually refreshing to see how people all over the world have maintained some senses of normalcy in their “work from home” lives, while others found inventive ways to still socialize — as in the case of Italians clinking their wine glasses, attached to long sticks, from across the street. Another thing that this pandemic allowed us to review was how each country's government chose to respond to the needs of their citizens. It is interesting to see the polarity between how the current administration in the U.S. has handled getting proper testing and PPE for hospitals, as opposed to places such as Hong Kong, Germany, and South Korea have handled it. While I do think that we will be using masks in public for many months ahead, I do not think it should be as vilified as it has been already. We could learn something from Asia, where mask wearing is a sign of mutual respect towards one another. I can only hope that the Americans who currently believe their rights to the beach are being “infringed upon” will come to their senses and heed the advice of medical experts, should an infectious outbreak of this size happen again.