

A Sign of the Times: Living Through the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Senior at UCLA

I have anxiety, which means that catastrophizing anything and everything (but mainly nothing) is right at the top of my weekly activities. When the news of coronavirus broke in early January, I panicked and imagined the toll it could have on the United States. I tried to calm myself by thinking about how *far* away it was, and how *unlikely* it would be that anything like that could reach the United States. Then it got to the United States. I recall when only two cases were confirmed in L.A. That number has kept on growing.

As coronavirus cases and panic burgeoned, so did my pessimism for the future. My mom has asthma and allergies and is considered an essential worker, so I began worrying that I would lose her. I expressed to those around me how I feared campus closure, remote learning, and graduation being cancelled. Everyone assured me that I was overthinking everything and that nothing would happen. To my dismay, all of the worst-case scenarios that my anxious little mind dreamt up became a reality. The ability to say “I told you so” has never felt so awful.

Truly, this pandemic has been a series of worst-case scenarios. Never in my life have I wanted good news more than I do now. I forced myself to stop checking the news because the barrage of discouraging statistics, grim forecasts, and fear-mongering articles were beginning to take a serious toll on my mental and physical health. Most days, it truly feels as if there is no end to this. Whenever I do check the news, all I see are articles about how the death toll is continually climbing in the United States, how our lives will never, ever go back to the way they were before, and how much longer we will be in this (perhaps forever, some say). I am deeply envious of the other countries who have been able to control the coronavirus. With our inept leadership, broken systems, and entitled citizens, the United States will continue to falter in its response to this virus. And that will never cease to be frustrating.

What is more frustrating is seeing people protest closures and orders to wear gloves and masks, stating that it infringes on their freedom. I have witnessed my neighbors blatantly scoff and ignore quarantine measures by throwing large parties weekly. My next-door neighbor actually contracted coronavirus, gave it to his wife and son, and then ended up in the hospital, on a ventilator, and fighting for his life. They had a massive gathering last weekend. We are supposed to all be in this together, which is comforting but also maddening. We feel solidarity at the same time we feel our blood boil as we watch others blatantly disregard the rules, not to mention the impact that all of this has had on our healthcare workers. I work with the People-Animal Connection (PAC) at UCLA Health, which is a therapy animal organization that deploys therapy dogs in Ronald Reagan Hospital. Ever since quarantine began, I have been in charge of creating virtual comfort video and photo projects to help our healthcare workers through this tough time. The amount of thank-you messages we have received from healthcare workers on the front lines is staggering. They are hurting, and it is *our* duty to help them by following the rules. This is not politics; it is human life.

During his last office hours at the end of Winter quarter, Sam Keeley told me to capture my feelings and experiences during this pandemic because they would become primary sources for historians in the future. When reflecting upon this, it has made me realize how, up until now, the past has seemed like it is just the past. Its lessons and tragedies are bound up in books and are not things of the present. Prior to entering this pandemic, I believed, without a shadow of a doubt, that the bad things I learned about on the glossy pages of history books would not happen in my lifetime. Rather, they were trapped in the past where they were safe as a didactic memory instead of a deafening reality. Or perhaps, as I sometimes considered, bad things would occur in the

future for later generations to clean up. Bad things did not happen in the present. For the first time, I felt as though I could empathize, rather than sympathize, with those in the past.

This came to me first during Stephen Aron’s History 153 class when he put up slide after slide of the destruction that European illnesses brought upon Indian populations in America. He stated that we could now understand a fraction of what Indians experienced after the colonization of their lands. It hit me again as we learned about the illnesses engendered in the Americas from Spanish explorers in History 129A. As I read about the plague that struck Tenochtitlan, I cried.¹ I felt sorrow as I listened to Professor Ruiz describe how smallpox and numerous other infectious diseases ravaged Indian communities.² I now have a deeper understanding of what the loss of thousands of lives means to a nation and to the world. Just as the destruction of Indian populations are tallied in History textbooks, the deaths associated with the coronavirus will be recounted. The economic downturn we are now experiencing also demonstrates how incredibly lasting and catastrophic pandemics can be. However, as much as we say we will not forget, I fear that people will downplay the virus’s impact. One day, students will read about this pandemic with the same distance I maintained as I learned about the plagues that swept Indian populations. It pains me how easily history can become desensitized or ignored.

The virus has certainly left its mark on my life. It has taken away the end of my senior year, my graduation, my ability to find a job, the closeness of my friends, and my independence. Life milestones have been erased from the timeline of many lives, including my own.

Recounting the impact that coronavirus has had on my life is not possible without first explaining how incredibly important UCLA is to me. UCLA has been my whole life for the past

¹ See “The Siege of Tenochtitlan,” in *History 129A Course Reader*, edited by Teofilo F. Ruiz (Los Angeles: University of California, 2020), 92-93.

² See Teofilo F. Ruiz, Lecture 4/22 and Lecture 4/27.

four years. While my heart remains at home, I cannot deny that a large part of my soul resides at UCLA. I have met some of my best friends in the whole world there. The job I love is at UCLA. I work as the peer counselor of the History department, and my supervisors, Indira and Khris, are like my work mom and work brother to me. I feel closer to Khris and Indira than I feel to my own extended family members. The History department is my home away from home. Every time I exit the elevator onto the sixth floor, I cannot help but smile and get excited for my shift. The staff, faculty, and students there have brought me unbridled amounts of joy and laughter for three years. I also work with PAC, the position that has led me to my passion of working in healthcare administration and with therapy dogs. I also serve as a research assistant to both a graduate student in the Psychology department and in the History department. I am a History and Psychology double-major.

I was at work when it was announced that UCLA would be going remote until April 10th. The department descended into chaos as the staff held an emergency meeting. I covered the front office as professors ran in to ask what they were supposed to do. I just shrugged and continued to ruminate. I did not get to say goodbye to anyone in the department because I had to run to my History Writing Center appointment. Some of my belongings still remain in my office. I had no idea that day signaled the end of an era and a series of lasts of my college career.

I will never forget the last student I counseled in-person. She was a hopeful History minor who was majoring in biology. I have a record of her student ID number but not her name. She was very kind. My last time in the hospital was spent in the PAC storage unit organizing our volunteer uniforms so that we could order more. I still have the unfinished list of items on my phone. I had shoved everything back onto the shelf because I thought I would have time to fix it later. My friends and I actually went out the Friday before campus closed. The club was emptier

than we had ever seen it. I guess everyone got the memo except for us. My friend Matt took a picture of me caressing my Purell while the lights flashed behind me. I did not know that would be the last time I would be with my friends as a senior at UCLA.

I miss so many things. I miss going out with my friends and being twenty-one. I miss rounding the corner in the History front office, locking eyes with Khris, and doing that stupid little wave we do to each other. Miss having random pick-me-up sessions with Indira. Counseling students. Going down to the fifth floor and seeing Professor McClendon and all the other faculty. Walking into the hospital, excited to volunteer for the best organization on campus. Seeing my furry PAC babies. The freedom of living in Westwood and away from home. I miss having hope for the future. Prior to all of this, I was gearing up to begin a career in healthcare administration. After a few years of working full time, I intended to earn my master's in healthcare administration. I planned to own my own apartment, finally be fully independent, and support my mom. Now, I will be moving home and will have to take any job I can. It has been challenging having to delay my life, especially when I was enjoying my life so immensely and I was brimming with excitement for the future. However, I am trying my best to learn to be excited for our new future.

I fully recognize that my losses are minimal in comparison to others'. I have my health, a roof over my head, food on the table, and my mom is still able to work. However, this does not invalidate the hurt I am feeling, nor does it mean that I am not allowed to mourn the loss of my previous life and feel worry for the future. Every day I stress about my mom's health as she works out in the field with a compromised immune system. The loss of my dog in the eighth week of quarantine has been incredibly hard. The pain that weighs on me most heavily is the fact that many of us were not given the opportunity to say goodbye to our friends, our campus, or our

senior year. It stings to have four years of hard work recognized through an online commencement ceremony. It does hurt to have spent tens of thousands of dollars on an education that means little in the current job market. It is hard to not feel down when the blood, sweat, and tears I have put into my job and volunteering mean nothing to an employer who cannot hire me. I have applied to over forty jobs and already fifteen have been cancelled due to the coronavirus. I do not think a single human has seen any of my applications. The economic downturn caused by the coronavirus is already proving to be staggering, and the Class of 2020 will have to brave that storm. Experiencing this economic collapse has granted me a deeper understanding of the consequences of past pandemics: pandemics reach far beyond death and disrupt everyone's lives. I maintain hope that the Class of 2020 will be the harbingers of change and a better future.

As for what the future holds, I am trying my best to not think of it. Every news story spells doom for the future, but I am hopeful that we will one day claw ourselves out of this. It might not happen this year, but I pray that it happens soon for all our sakes. I hope that nurses and other front-line workers will finally get the recognition that they deserve. I hope that the citizens of the world can learn from this experience and begin to treat each other with more kindness. I hope to one day see better, more progressive leadership in the White House that fights for universal healthcare, equality, and the betterment of all U.S. citizens. If this pandemic has shown anything, it has shown us that we need to take better care of our world, ourselves, and others. But most of all, I hope the pain that COVID-19 has ravaged upon the world is not soon forgotten. I think we must be careful to not let time heal all wounds so that we continue to learn from and feel the past. It is not time for us to return to our past normal. Rather, we must use this opportunity to build a new normal that is kinder and more caring. We are all in this together. I cannot wait to see the world on the other side. I hope it is pretty.

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