

Personal Reflection on COVID-19

Introductory note: My name is Grace Skalinder, I am a second year history major at UCLA.

As I write this, it is mid-May of 2020. Three months ago, I was living in Los Angeles, going to school and planning on an internship with the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. in the summer. The novel coronavirus was a fascination, a distant worry, something you heard about in the news as a concern for China or Italy. We should brace for it, the health department warned. It would pass over us like a seasonal flu and be gone in about a week. During that week, we should expect to stay inside and wash our hands frequently.

I remember that week vividly. It was dark and rainy in Los Angeles. Our school administration emailed us to say that our spring break would be extended by two weeks, just to prevent anything from spreading in the lecture halls. Reactions ranged from anger at unnecessary disruption of classes to cheer that vacation would be longer. I went grocery shopping with a friend who was more worried than most - she suffers from lupus, and seasonal flus are a burden to her as part of the immunocompromised population. She stocked up on soap at Costco, and a disgruntled older woman in line accused her of being a doomsday prepper. I was baffled by the hostility. Doomsday or not, everyone should use soap.

Doomsday or not, precautions seemed to be more and more of a way of life. The week before finals, in person classes were cancelled and finals shifted to be online. My roommate's parents deemed it too dangerous for the two of us to fly home to Northern California for spring break, and decided to make the six hour drive down to collect us instead. Two hours before their arrival, as I finished taking my Italian final online and began to pack my suitcase, we got an email. Spring quarter in its entirety was being moved online. We were to pack our things, and go

home if possible. Suddenly, packing a suitcase became packing our entire lives as my roommate and I had two hours to get everything together before her parents arrived. I remember that nightmarish evening, shoving everything we owned into trash bags and fleeing Los Angeles in her parent's Toyota Highlander like we were fleeing the apocalypse. I remember holding my roommate tight in the driveway of my parent's house in California's Central Valley, crying softly, realizing with some desperation that I didn't know when I would see her again.

Life took on new shades, back home. My father falls into the essential worker category, so he still had to go to work even as Governor Newsom's shelter in place order sent the state into lockdown. My mother, working from home now, is more scared for him than he is for himself. He's a type one diabetic, which puts him in the at-risk category for the coronavirus. She says there is really nothing we can do but pray. Daily life has entered a new regime of cleanliness. My mother sprays everything with disinfectant before it enters the house. She wears a mask and gloves to the grocery store. As for me, I haven't left the house for weeks on end.

Everything else has moved to Zoom. Classes, hangouts, graduations, birthdays. For a friend's birthday, we all get on Zoom to surprise him, and in lieu of a card we make a powerpoint and everyone writes a message on a slide. One of my cousins graduates, and our entire extended family congregates on Zoom to celebrate. I spend almost as much time troubleshooting the app for older relatives as I do answering questions like "do you know when you can go back to LA?" or "are you tired of being at home?" The new buzzwords seem to be 'simulating normalcy.' As a society, we are desperately trying to replicate the institutions that kept us together and sane for decades. We are trying to connect. We are trying to carry on. We are trying.

Some people, it would seem, are tired of trying. If you had asked me six months ago, I wouldn't have thought a virus could be politicized. It's a virus - people get it, they get sick, and they die. What is there to be politicized? Much, it would seem. On that same Zoom call for my cousin's graduation, my relatives in Arkansas boast about how everything is operational, about how they went to church on Sunday and they went to Chili's for dinner last night. My relatives in South Dakota groan. It's not fair, they say. Their parks are closed, their churches remain empty. They wish their governor would just hurry up and get things back to normal. This holds a particular brand of irony for me, as my father and his family are Oglala Lakota. The history of pandemics in relation to indigenous populations is a grim one. When the Spanish sieged Tenochtitlan, they spread a plague into the city that devastated the Aztec population. And it's strange, wondering if what we feel right now is even comparable to the terror they must have felt thousands of years ago. If the journey of mankind is just a long, bitter search to redefine normal in the wake of tragedy.

Normal. I went to the grocery store for the first time in months the other day. I wore a mask that made it hard to breathe, so my vision dimmed and I couldn't read the signs telling me what kind of food was down each aisle. There was a woman standing in the self-checkout line, maskless, ranting about how it's her right as an American. I went home, and I read an article with projections about what a world post-COVID will look like. There were simulations of people waiting for a subway, standing on markers six feet apart. An article in our school newspaper says they have information that indicates our fall quarter will be online too. And I start to wonder if it matters whether or not it's your right as an American to go to the grocery

store without wearing a mask. Normal, it would seem, is unattainable if you continue to define it by what it once was.

At dinner with my parents, I comment on the revelation that if things were normal, if I was still at school in Los Angeles and I still had my internship in D.C., I would have spent about three weeks of 2020 at home. Now, I'm here for nine months. I call my friend, the one who is immunocompromised. She is supposed to take a job in Maryland in July. She's afraid - afraid to get on a plane, afraid to move in with a roommate she's never met before, afraid to take public transportation to work. If I caught the coronavirus, I would likely recover. I'm nineteen, able-bodied, and lack preexisting health conditions. If my friend caught it, she would likely die.

Huntington Beach is trending on Twitter. They are rallying in the streets, because they want their city to reopen now. There are men with guns on the steps of the capitol building in Lansing, Michigan.

I wonder if any of them believe they would die if they got sick. Or if they are immortal, invincible, gods walking among us. I think one of the most remarkable things about mankind is our ability to adapt, to settle, to take an extraordinary situation and make it feel ordinary. I think one of the most unremarkable things about mankind is how easy it is for us to forget that there are other people walking alongside us, too.

Everything, it seems, is in flux. Even my dreams are in flux. I don't know what my life will look like in six months, let alone six years. I want to move to Japan and teach English, I want to go to Rome with my best friend, I want to get married and have four children and live in a house with a tomato garden in the backyard. I wonder if my children will watch me put on a

mask when I go to the grocery store. I wonder if in six years it will even be practical for me to have children at all.

I think that people have been asking the same questions for thousands of years. In Jorge Manrique's fifteenth century poem, *Ode on the Death of His Father*, he writes "Onward its course the present keeps, onward the constant current sweeps, till life is done; and we did judge of time alright, the past and future in their flight would be as one." The entire poem is a reflection on life in the context of death, and it feels as applicable to the COVID pandemic as it does to the wars of fifteenth century Spain. It's somewhat discouraging to wonder if we've made so little progress in making sense of the world, but it's also somewhat comforting. Perhaps there are some questions that are never meant to be really answered. Perhaps all we can do is walk alongside each other and try.