

A Reflection on COVID-19

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Since the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump in January 2017, the phrase “none of this is normal” has been echoed by his critics to not only remind everyone that many of the actions and attitudes of him, his administration, and his supporters are paradoxically antiquated and unprecedented, but to also to provide a source of comfort and reassurance that there will be a return to normalcy after his presidency. However, the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has made it very clear that we will never return to the “normal” we once knew. The time will come again when we can hug our loved ones, attend a concert or sporting event, go to work, or simply be around strangers without the fear and anxiety of contracting and spreading a life-threatening illness—but that time is not now. During these times of social distancing and self-isolation, we have been granted a unique kind of cultural reset, and it is our responsibility to decide, individually and collectively, what our new normal will look like.

Towards the end of last year, I felt compelled to reflect on the previous decade and consider what I wanted to change or improve in my life in the forthcoming decade. Graduating from UCLA and beginning a career were two of the most obvious and immediate goals I had but thinking about the latter made me feel nervous and mildly disheartened. I felt, and still feel like, I have wanted to pursue a non-traditional career path—yet the prospect of doing so has always been intimidating. I already delayed going to college for a few years so I thought that if I pursued what I was passionate about and failed, I would fall even further behind my peers. However, the pandemic has left me feeling surprisingly optimistic about my future and I believe many other people in my generation should be too. I, like millions of other people, am newly unemployed and although I worry about when I will be able to return to work and how I will pay my bills next month, I choose to not let this anxiety consume me because so much of my current situation is out of my control. Instead, I have taken this time to improve myself physically, intellectually,

and emotionally, and prepare myself for what I want to do and the type of person I want to be once these hardships have passed. Many young adults, like myself, have been thrown off the proverbial track that has been ingrained in our consciousness since adolescence: do well in high school, attend a decent university, begin a career and work your way to the top. Given the projected job market after the pandemic has subsided, I believe we have been granted the unique opportunity to reevaluate the paths we have chosen for ourselves. As I previously mentioned, I have always envisioned myself in a non-traditional career but have been influenced by those around me telling me that I should choose a more stable and secure course for myself. However, I now feel more empowered than ever before to take a risk and pursue what I am a passionate about because at this point I feel like there is little left to lose; I cannot lose my job because I currently do not have one, jobs that initially become available for someone with my qualifications will be extremely limited and competitive, and if I fail then I will be reentering the traditional work force in an economy and job market that has had time to recover from its current, dire state. And for those who want traditional careers, they too can utilize this invaluable period of time to prepare and work towards how they will improve their professional value and differentiate themselves once they reenter the job market. Additionally, I have used these weeks at home to heal myself, physically and mentally, and have been able to prioritize the things that bring me the most peace and fulfillment—things that are unfortunately neglected when I try to balance them with work and school. Maintaining the health and wellness of both myself and my family has provided me a greater sense of purpose in a time in which it is easy to feel lost or unproductive.

Fortunately, I believe the pandemic has brought my family closer together due to the fact that it often feels like we view its implications and the current state of the world differently from

those immediately around us. We have always been diligent—one could argue borderline germaphobe—about our health and sanitation and feel compelled, now more than ever, to follow the guidelines set out by medical and health professionals to not only protect ourselves but also to protect those around us. We have only left our home for groceries and to run in our neighborhood, we always wear masks when we go outside, and we practice social distancing; while these measures have been minorly inconvenient at times, we know they are necessary in order to curb the spread of the virus and know that they are only temporary. Despite our efforts, we have been consistently disappointed in seeing the overall lack of attempt to follow these protocols and disturbed by the judgment we receive—in the form of stares and comments about wearing masks when there are few people around—for implementing these rules. The pandemic has revealed that there is a large portion of the population that would rather act in their own self-interest than in the interests of their greater community. When the first cases of COVID-19 were reported and the first stay-at-home orders were instated, there seemed to be at least a little sense of unity—the notion that if we all did our part, we would get through these trying times, separately but together. My family has maintained this attitude throughout the weeks of quarantining together and it has not only preserved our health but has also increased our gratitude for what we have and augmented our desire to help those who are less fortunate than us. Despite the initial optimism, there were signs from the beginning of the United States' outbreak that the initial collectivism would not prevail, particularly evident in the hoarding of groceries and medical supplies. It has revealed the dark underbelly of American individualism—the adulteration of the belief that we are endowed with certain inalienable rights and liberties yet we claim no responsibility for the protection and preservation of the integrity of anyone other than ourselves. Throughout these unprecedented times, my family's actions pertaining to the

pandemic have been guided by science and, more simply but perhaps more importantly, empathy.

Although I vehemently disagree with the individuals who choose not to believe in the facts of this global pandemic, a group of people that includes friends whom I thought I shared a world view with, I do not entirely blame them for their beliefs and behaviors. While they are morally responsible for their decisions to put others at risk for the sake of their own selfish interests, how can one not expect that kind of behavior when we are being led by someone who exemplifies delusion and dishonesty? While I am concerned about the pragmatic consequences of the pandemic—the state of the economy, healthcare system, competence of the government—I unequivocally fear the deep-seated greed, narcissism, and hatred that has been exposed and intensified. Our institutions have historically rebounded after times of crisis and I hope the election of a new president in November will mark the beginning of their recovery; but even if there is a new president, it is extremely unlikely that this ideology grounded in animosity, entitlement, and resistance to change will disappear because as long as they reject facts and reality they will continue oppose rationality. As a concerned citizen—one who normally feels a responsibility to promote progress and prosperity and now feels obligated to protect myself, my family, and those who cannot protect themselves during this time—how do I reason with another individual or group who is simply not based in reality? And not only are many of their views illogical and unsubstantiated, based completely on deceit or their perception of a situation they believe exists, they are willing and practically demand others be put in harm's way. As someone who usually works in the service industry, it is disheartening and disturbing to see people feel such a sense of entitlement over other people's lives. While there are understandably protests against the stay-at-home order from some small business owners who are unsure if their

businesses will survive the pandemic, it seems that many of them come from people who want to be served—people who do not want to be inconvenienced or go without their luxuries, and therefore feel no qualms about putting other people’s lives at risk for their own convenience. The entitlement and blatant disregard for life becomes even more disconcerting when we recognize the fact that many services are made possible by people of color, thus perpetuating the sense of ownership over other people’s lives that has not only plagued this country for centuries, but is also evident in other periods of history such as the desolation of native populations as a result of encounters with Spanish explorers and the expulsion of Jews and Muslims under Isabella and Ferdinand. I believe that the flagrant vitriol and conceit will subside, but I do not believe we can continue the American experiment unless we, as a united nation, accept that we will never be able to return to the way things once were and look towards how we can move forward in the future.

Regardless of what has happened in the past or what may happen in the future, all we can control with absolute certainty is how we choose to act today. Over the course of the last two months I have had many different emotions about the state of the world and the future, ranging from fear to optimism to uncertainty; but one of the most important things I’ve learned is that all of these feelings are valid, and my experience in quarantine should not be compared to the experience of others. Like the Great Depression, this event will influence how many of us navigate the world for the rest of our lives and while we are staying at home, all we can do is decide how we want to enter the new world.