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A Personal Reflection on the Pandemic

The arch of human progress, the global stature of the country I call home, and the advances in technology I have bared witness to in my lifetime are all realities that have made me, as a young American, feel invincible. I come from a humble, middle-class family in Orange County, California. My parents are not college graduates, and my father grew up poor. His mother was an alcoholic and his father non-existent, leaving him to sacrifice his high school education for the sake of taking care of his siblings. When reflecting on my familial roots, especially framed against our fortune today, I have tended to feel as though we have already borne the brunt of history. I have often viewed myself as the offspring of resilience and triumph over hardship. My great grandparents came to the United States to escape extreme poverty in Sicily. My grandmother was born into the Great Depression, had a childhood marked by World War II, and an adulthood that paralleled the momentous decades of the post-war era. My parents rose above their turbulent childhoods and provided my brothers and I with one they could have only dreamed of having. Among us is myself, a first-generation college student at UCLA that will likely be the second in my immediate family to graduate. Reflecting on this and the limitless future, I saw nothing but opportunity and progress ahead – and then COVID-19 hit. So quickly did the things around me that I thought to be facts of life fall apart. This pandemic has

demonstrated the speed at which our interconnected world can be brought to its knees. Markets have tumbled, poverty exacerbated, and a decade of American job growth erased. In all but two months, young people rearing to begin the rest of their lives now face an economy evaporated out of thin air and an uncertain future. In truth, everyday life has a way of deceiving us into taking its ordinary comforts for granted; into thinking that unprecedented times either lie in the past or in the distant future, but never over the looming horizon of the present.

The speed at which the world has changed still perplexes me. In a single day, without getting to say so much as goodbye to many friends and colleagues, school was abruptly transitioned online. Within a month, much of the globe was under strict lockdowns; two months onwards, as I write this, well over a quarter of a million human beings have lost their lives to this disease. Coming back from school, I returned to a vastly distorted reality. My father, who has worked for the same company since he was 27 years old, now did not know if he would have a job the next day. In a mere two-week period, he witnessed upwards of 80 percent of his department vanish. Headlines continually highlight the record-high number of people applying for unemployment week-over-week. My acceptance to the UCDC program for Fall 2020 and an internship I had worked three years to land was now in question. I was bewildered at what I was witnessing; I felt powerless, and above all, I felt an earth-shattering feeling of uncertainty sweep over me. The world stopped spinning. To start my life in an economy with unemployment levels not seen in nearly a century leaves me numb. I do not feel anxiety, fear, or dread, but if anything, I feel lost. Regardless of my feelings, I understand I must accept reality and work within the confines of it in order to forge my future.

Taking this course with Professor Ruiz has imbued me with a newfound historical perspective of humanity's past battles with disease, ruin, and adversity. Learning about how the bubonic plague wreaked havoc on Spanish society in the middle of the 14th century draws direct parallels to what we face today. Just as the current lockdowns have brought the beat of the world to a halt, Professor Ruiz notes in *Spain's Centuries of Crisis* that it appeared as though "life had stopped," "material transactions" and "economic exchanges declined precipitously," and work was hard to come by.¹ Today, the United States stands before a situation reminiscent of this imagery. Jobless rates continue to rise and many small businesses face the prospect of complete ruin. Once bustling retail centers are now ghost towns surrounded by vacant lots. Just as peasants already struggling to make ends meet lost what little they had when the plague struck, millions of America's less fortunate now face COVID-19 compounding their already-dire realities.

The most frightening part about this new reality is that there remains no best course of action to take. Each choice trades values and lives. In many respects, there is no true precedent or data to draw upon that can show us with absolute certainty where we ought to go from here. Regardless of whether we maintain lockdowns, open strategically, or blindly reopen, people will suffer, and many will likely die. What we are left with is a goal to mitigate death and suffering while also allowing people to return safely to school, work, and restore some level of normalcy to their lives. I have faith that modern technology, science, and the resilience of human beings will triumph. Amid all the negativity and pessimism, I remain grateful that I was born into a period where humanity has made such great strides in medicine and science. Watching the swift progress already being made in developing therapeutics and an eventual vaccine is an amazing

¹ Ruiz, *Spain's Centuries of Crisis*, 46.

demonstration of human ingenuity. I am impressed to see the determination of workers on the frontlines selflessly combatting this disease.

One of my greatest worries regarding this pandemic is that the world will come out more divided and uncooperative than it was before. Nativist attitudes and impulses to turn inwards may paralyze the dire need for more robust global cooperation on transnational issues that do not respect borders. Diplomacy has already taken a back seat in world affairs. I fear that hawkish figures within China and the United States, lacking any coherent international strategies, will gain the ear of the public by finger-pointing and stoking nationalism. Although the desire for answers is a logical pursuit after the crisis recedes, I am concerned that it will simply devolve into different sides wanting to clean their hands of possible blunders by deflecting responsibility on other individuals and entities. Diplomatic spats have no place while civilization is battling this disease. My ultimate hope is that humanity learns from this crisis, but only time will tell if that hope is realized.

I wanted to conclude some of these thoughts with a highly personal, sobering, jarring, and plain devastating event that took place today, May 14th, 2020, as I write this. Along with the sheer human cost the disease has had, the economic impact of shutdowns is beginning to exhibit its own bitter reality. Around 4pm today, I received a call from one of my closest friends who told me he had given up hope and was beginning to lose the will to live. He was crying and highly distressed. Prior to the pandemic, he was a recovered addict in thousands of dollars of unpaid student loan debt working as a line cook. As the lockdowns were instituted, he now found himself abruptly and immediately out of a job. In a deeply fearful and emotional tone, he explained that his savings had run dry and that rent was due on the 1st. His government stimulus

check had been garnished by lenders (including educational loaners), and his application for unemployment benefits had run unanswered for 7 weeks. I will never forget what he said in those moments: “I feel hopeless. I do not know why this has happened. I don’t want to just start over with nothing again.” It was a voice filled with sorrow and pain. This was the moment I truly felt the full breadth of where our country stood. I was luckily able to calm him down and ensure he was helped immediately. I only hope he does not make a permanent decision during this period of uncertainty. One of the things that struck me most of the situation was how difficult it was to assure him that things would get better. The truth is, I nor anyone else simply do not know when. Sure, humanity will eventually conquer this disease, but the present is unforgiving of that clouded future. My friend cannot wait for a vaccine, a strategic timeline, or political negotiation. His rent is not due one year from now, his pantry is running empty now, and his will to even live is at a critical juncture. Unfortunately, this is a reality that likely rings true for many families and individuals far less fortunate than I am right now.

Even in the face of such adversity and uncertainty, I am thankful that both of my parents still have jobs, I can still pursue my education through technology, I have a roof over my head, and I have my health. I have been moved by the ability of our country to come together on so many fronts at such a critical time. My hope is that this event can demonstrate to our country, and all of humanity for that matter, that we often face, share, and must confront collective issues that do not respect borders. In the end, history will judge us by the way we mitigate suffering for those less fortunate and ultimately pull ahead as a nation. The United States cannot afford to bog itself down in polarized politics while confronting such an unprecedented challenge. This crisis possesses the ability to either exacerbate disturbing trends already existent before the pandemic

struck or spark a newfound sense of solidarity regarding how we can forge a better future and pull together as a nation.