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May 15, 2020

<div align="center">A Veneered Opportunity to Improve</div>

As a second-year history major at UCLA, one theme has been consistently reiterated to me: humans find different means of coping during challenging situations. Coping often involves the pursuit of escape, rather than direct confrontation of the problem. Sometimes escape manifests in what would be branded by many as a *healthy* means - delving into aesthetic pursuits such as art or writing to distract from reality. However, disasters also elicit what would be generally deemed as a less-savory response, wherein anxiety and confusion spur us to resort to our most primitive traits and subsume the *rationalism* that capitalist society otherwise perpetually demands. Finally, disaster can induce the urge to scapegoat already-marginalized groups and thereby easily assuage anxiety by positing a simple, dichotomous explanation to the complex problems engendered by disaster. Although prior to COVID 19 (Covid) I had theoretically studied these three modes of coping in many historical courses and accounts, especially noted in Teofilo Ruiz's *The Terror of History*, the pandemic taught me that the barriers between such modes of coping are not clear cut. Previously, I had placed these means of coping into stark categories and attributed to each one a distinct moral value. In my mind, aesthetic coping was *good*, turning to primitive traits was weak or *bad*, and scapegoating or demonizing others was unacceptable. I still believe the latter. However, Covid has taught me that turning to aesthetics is not necessarily better than engaging in primitive behaviors. Rather, the two are often conjoined, and in order for me to effectively cope, I had to de-stigmatize the latter, and to cease regarding it as a sign of weakness. I came to realize that it is often by permitting ourselves to turn to our most primitive states that we can heal. Relaxing, taking a break from

work, or allowing oneself to indulge in sensual comforts does not indicate weakness, despite what modern society often asserts. While such behaviors must be managed in moderation, in reasonable doses they are essential for breakthrough and ultimately survival. We must take breaks to maintain our health and become better individuals so that we can create a more altruistic collective.

For me, Covid has reinforced the viability of all means of coping, and forced me to subsume my admittedly judgemental state in order to exhibit greater kindness to myself and others. Since I can remember, I have been very driven. I thrive off of feelings of accomplishment, especially when they are linked to overt positive reinforcement. Extrinsic rewards like good grades or money, therefore, have always motivated me to work. However I am also intrinsically motivated, sometimes to a fault. I used to be unable to fall asleep until I had completed each task on my daily to-do list, even though it was often unessential to complete such tasks immediately. When a paper looms, I convince myself that I absolutely *have* to write a draft at least one week prior to the due date, with an irrational fear that if I do not do so, the paper will be horrible and I will suffer grade-wise. This is true despite plethoric evidence to the contrary - I am typically satisfied with my paper results. Prior to Covid, I had never challenged these rules, which ironically served to reinforce my fear of failure even as I accrued greater success. While this trait is not something to be proud of because it imbues my life with anxiety, it has historically made me successful amidst modern capitalist conditions, where productivity is not only encouraged but demanded. Such positive reinforcement from attaining good grades or a raise at work has always given me satisfaction and deterred me from challenging my tendency to

over-work even as it perpetuates my anxiety, for I thought the alternative - taking even a minute break - was a sign of weakness, and would lead me down a rabbit-hole of declining productivity.

Covid was the jolt that forced me to trust in my record of hard-work, reevaluate my priorities, and ultimately take a break. Since the pandemic began, I have struggled with heightened anxiety, and there are days where I cannot muster the energy required to be what I define as productive: I cannot effectively read, write, cook healthy meals, or even exercise. Furthermore, many of these tasks feel frivolous when so many other, more profound problems are ensuing around me. As so many around me fight for their health and even lives, I have realized the importance of health. By comparison, concerns like grades seem, and in my estimation are, trivial. This realization has allowed me to re-evaluate the standards I set for myself; at times I have lowered them in the realms of work or school in order to dedicate adequate energy for other tasks, particularly mental health. In this new world where I cannot dive into my work and lock myself at a café all day until I have finished the paper draft, whether due to the physical constraint of sheltering at home or the mental one of anxiety, I have been forced, albeit quite unwillingly at first, to lower my expectations. Today, my to-do lists are shorter, I have an order of priorities, and I force myself to go to bed even if I cannot complete a task, because I am lucky enough to have the opportunity to sleep soundly - to be alive with healthy friends and family means that I have a luxury currently possessed by few. In taking a break however, I have been forced to value those parts of myself unrelated to productivity. I have also learned to celebrate little achievements - getting myself up to go for a walk or writing an outline is something to be proud of, and I should not berate myself for not doing as much as I had hoped. Completing less than I thought is not indicative of failure, for it demonstrates effort. I have

learned it is unnecessary to give one-hundred percent of myself to every task, nor is it realistic or sustainable. This has helped me accept the situation, as well as the reality that not all means of coping will be *healthy*. Rather than writing or exercising, sometimes I can manage anxiety only by taking a break, drinking above the daily recommended quota of caffeine, or watching a film. That is okay. Only after I gave myself permission to engage in these *less healthy* behaviors have I become reinvigorated with motivation. I cannot judge one form of coping superior to others. I am not coping in the way that I want, but I am alive and *I am coping*, for which I am grateful.

Nevertheless, there is one atrocious means of coping that has historically proved prevalent during disaster and has again reared its ugly head: the demonization of those marginalized in society whom we have branded as *other*. Historically, during disaster, humans have sought explanations for the horror in which they find themselves, often ones which attribute blame to a specific group because demonization of one particular group provides a clear, simple explanation for a complex problem. Such supposed explanation posits a dichotomy of good and evil actors, and alleviates the anxiety of those not blamed. Typically, scapegoating targets those in society who cannot successfully defend themselves, whether due to an inferior political or economic position, or some other disadvantage that renders them largely powerless. Following the Black Death of the mid fourteenth century, Jews were were scapegoated in such a manner, accused of poisoning Christian wells and thereby blamed for the plague, and without sufficient power to defend themselves. A similar fate befell Muslims in the Iberian kingdoms in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as royal edicts mandated Muslims' expulsion, portraying all Muslims as sacrilegious and often as thieves of Christian's *rightful* jobs, and thus insinuating that they were the cause of Spain's problems; this rhetoric was espoused all despite the fact that the

Muslims' expulsion exacerbated Spain's economic crisis because they were amongst the most economically productive members of Spanish society and their departure left a void in agricultural expertise never to be filled again (Ruiz lecture 4/15/20). Covid has continued this trend of unjust and unsound demonization, as politicians like Donald Trump purport rhetoric that blames China and its citizens for spreading the virus, and perpetuate bigotry in the United States against Asian Americans. Even at UCLA, a campus which I respect for promoting diversity, I bore witness to racist comments hurled at those who appeared to be of Asian descent. Not only is this bigotry hurtful and untrue, it is ineffective: anyone can contract the disease, and many carriers of Covid do not know they are carriers, as tests (at least initially) were neither readily available nor affordable. This attests to the reality that claims which scapegoat any single group are rarely based on truth, but are instead founded on fear, anxiety, and power-hierarchy.

Indeed, the global nature of the pandemic means that dwelling on the consequences of Covid and trying to attribute blame to a specific, local group is futile; we should dedicate energy to finding a means to resolve the problem, in which unity will prove integral. Striving to bestow blame on a single country wastes energy that should be expended to fix the problem, or at least cope with it productively. One coping strategy which I have found effective and observed on social media, has been trying to focus on how I can help others, even if in a marginal way, and thereby give my mind a repose from dwelling on personal issues. I am profoundly grateful to not have had any of my close family or friends contract the disease. However, there are many who are deeply affected: front line workers who are risking their lives daily in hospitals, essential business employees, single parents like my mother's clients who have lost their jobs and have neither the cars requisite to get groceries nor the wifi necessary to find new employment, or

people struggling with mental health disorders for whom social interaction provides a purpose and even will to live. I can use this time to help such people; in doing so, I dedicate energy to something besides my anxiety. If we can come together to fight the pandemic while helping others rather than solely ourselves - by social distancing, for example - we will find a positive way to manage mental health without targeting others. I am overwhelmed at the kindness I have witnessed on social media, as entertainers host free at-home concerts, and that which I have seen on walks, as passers-by flash smiles. Such kindness challenges the long-espoused notion that humans are inherently selfish, a tenant central to capitalism and much of contemporary society. So yes, Covid has had horrible implications: politicians are divided, unemployment is up, bigotry is rampant, and people feel isolated. However only once we are confronted with horrors can we find a coping strategy that, rather than tearing us apart, unites us, and perhaps more importantly, hedges that humans are altruistic by nature. The implications of this potential and realized unity - for warfare, for diplomacy, for our ability to fight climate change - are profound.

While Covid has challenged me, it has also made me realize that coping is largely about perception, and there is a silver lining in every situation. Covid *has* had benefits: it has heightened my resilience, and at a broader level, decreased environmental emissions and fostered global unity on, based on what I have witnessed, an unprecedented scale. If each individual focuses on self-care, it will improve their ability to cope with Covid, for individuals will feel less anger and a diminished desire to scapegoat. Helping others, one means through which individuals can improve their own mental health, will also result in improving others' lives. When executed by numerous individuals, this will produce a more positive-oriented populace, reframing capitalist competition and the present obsession with quick rewards with the more

arduous, but also more long-lasting reward that comes from enduring and coping. Humanity can ultimately emerge as a more positive and resilient collective.