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Lifting the Curtain: A Reflection on COVID-19

Recently, I was scouring the depths of the internet, wasting time as one so often does,

when I came across a small story involving one of the early creators of the Cholera vaccine and a

water spout. Intrigued and finding it fitting for the current period, I clicked on it, curious as to

why these two things were related, if at all. The text, all but three sentences, described how this

particular individual, living at the turn of the 20th century in New York, had discovered (while

crafting the vaccine) that the spread of the city's outbreak was in fact a common water spout on

which several communities relied. When confronting the city officials about its demolition, he

was denied, as they claimed government property should never be destroyed, regardless of

whether it was spreading a pandemic or not. Furious and incensed by this utter lack of care for

the general public, he destroyed the spout himself...only to be arrested for his actions three days

later. While the man's name escapes me and the historical accuracy of this story remains

dubious, its message of authoritative apathy and uncaring seem as poignant then as they do now.

It is stories such as these that remind me, diseases, while in appearance only devastating if

contracted, have a long and staggering tradition of revealing the deep routed inequities of a

society, let alone transforming the historical landscape for all of time to come. Thus, COVID-19

can be perceived as only one of a lengthy chronicle, joining epidemics such as the Bubonic

Plague, smallpox, AIDS, and H1N1 in the public contest for what transformed the development

of society more. However, such narrative does not contextualize nor personalize the story. It

leaves out the singular impact of the now - the intersections of struggle, trials, and inequities that

we as a community were already facing but are now dealing with to such a heightened degree. COVID-19, for my family and I, let alone the community, country, and the world, has not just been a forceful and unshielded encounter with an enemy that we cannot see, but a closer confrontation with the politics of privilege, injustice, and disparity that society views each concurring day.

My first encounter with COVID-19 began in February of 2020, a year already entrenched in the gilded and almost ominous ghosts of the 20th century. Distant whispers of the illness and its societal closures were mentioned almost as an afterthought in a conversation with my friend from Singapore, as topics like the recovery of her father from cancer and the passing of my grandfather dominated the quiet room. There was little else mentioned about this pandemic, just a mutual assertion that it was not good and hope that it would end soon. Looking back, it's almost funny how significant historical events get their start as small exchanges - a few sentences about a sister away from school or a teacher who is now recovering. Little did I know that only three months later, these two words would command control of every single action that the world would begin to take. The United States in particular would react to the spread of the virus, curiously enough, first with the closure of college campuses and universities - not local businesses and geriatric related facilities, as one might think. UCLA, in March of 2020, followed this ruling, after three days of claiming that they were to reflect deeply upon the appropriate actions that would benefit the student, faculty, and staffing body the most during these "troubled times". While indeed, they did prove quite troubling, we, particularly graduating students, felt that such measures were almost preemptive and excluded the voice of the students whom they were counseling. Senior events were closed immediately and graduation/commencements were

moved to a virtual platform with only a single line of consolation: "for it is not the day that matters, but the journey" - a feature of bureaucratic correspondence that will live on for eons to come. No plan had been made to substitute these milestones, no plan had ever been needed. However, as frustrated as we were, this was only the beginning. The real impacts of this pandemic came later, as students and staff alike fled well populated areas, returning home, and states began to shut down completely.

It was now April, and just as the famous social anthropologist Jared Diamond theorizes in his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, COVID-19 had proven there is nothing more destructive, influential, and transformative to society than a disease. All features of a national environment one might associate with a peacefully functioning society were eliminated, with only "essential services and workers" left to defend the many millions of US citizens and their barely functioning economy. News of how the Trump presidential administration was handling the virus spread, each with their own take on how assertions of non-national governmental action was positive or negative. In my opinion, this was only a macro-representation of the same apathy and lack of care for the general public displayed by the 1890 New York officials mentioned in the earlier story. While my family was fortunate enough to be secure in their tele-working and virtual commute to their jobs each morning from home, millions upon millions of Americans were not, as unemployment rates rose to those same astronomical highs of the Great Depression. The ominous Roaring 20's indeed. Already, the gap between the wealthy and the lower classes had reached, nay, surpassed pre-Progressive era statistics, yet once again it was those highly localized "essential workers" that were inevitably stricken by economic fracturing. The shadows of society's skeletons once again rang true, as those with the least were enforced by state

sanction to do the most and do the most they did. These "essential workers" or those employed by businesses that the functioning of society or more accurately, the economy could not do without, were caught - stuck between state mandates and the risk of unemployment. There were no other businesses open, let alone job opportunities away from grocery stores and magnant retailers as my own post-graduate job search results could tell you. There was only this - stores haunted by increasing food shortages, toilet paper disappearances, and the imminent contraction of a disease with no cure. COVID-19 had proven to be as close to detrimental to a modern society's functioning as smallpox had been to the many indigenous groups of North America with the arrival of the conquistadors, wiping out thousands of people, with no cure, no immunity, and certainly no way of returning to the same conception of "normal".

The irony then, in this individual's perspective, lies in the fact that so many thousands of American citizens expect exactly that - a return to normality, unscarred and unburdened by the inequities that this pandemic has revealed. To be fair, there is an argument to be made that this group of people - most likely those protesting the closures of their barber or my personal favorite, their dental hygienist - have the highest chance of returning to their "normal". A group predominantly made of able-bodied, white conservatives, these individuals' normal already profited from the large amounts of privilege that society afforded them, allowing their transition into a world of stay at home orders and sanitary product hoarding to be made easier - if only by their proximity to better medical care facilities and greater amount of intergenerational wealth, allowing them to buy black market items such as hand sanitizer and Clorox wipes. I then ask, what of the differently abled, who were told that the virtual services now available were inaccessible? The undocumented community who remain under threat from amplified ICE raids

that pose as medical services and trapped within detainment centers? The folks who remain incarcerated, similarly caught in places that have inadequate health services but yet are primary sources of exploitative labor? The unhoused populace who are suddenly afforded housing in hotels and other places of residences that "weren't solutions" before? Where shall be their deliverance? What shall be their post-COVID-19 normal? There is no easy answer. Only time will tell the world's solution to these points of conversation and only the world, as community, can answer for them. While it is my hope as a nation that we utilize this societal unveiling as time to reflect and craft more innovative, people oriented policies to address these aspects of care, I am fearful of a far more grim reality. One in which systems of exploitative labor are only increased by the reactions to COVID-19 by high power individuals who capitalize on those who are vulnerable to economic subjugation and which jobs can be outsourced for a cheaper cost, just as the destruction of smallpox laid way for the encomienda system and other forms of unethical work. Unfortunately, like any other significant historical event, only the passing of time will reveal the depths of this pandemic's impact and society's movement forward.

Contrastly, COVID-19, on a micro scale, has only reconfirmed my impressions of privilege, disparity, and trials presently within my own life. Each new report on the virus, every new case discussed, every new discrepancy that is revealed enforces and informs my feelings about my own positionality within the context of the pandemic world. Born into an upper-middle class military family, I have the benefit of accessing sectors of medical services and care that are otherwise unavailable to the public. While individuals are struggling to even access grocery stores with their limited quantity items and increasing price points, I am fortunate to be able to go on to a base and shop at the Commissary exchange, which often does not face the same

frequency of shoppers as alternative sources of venues. These examples do not cover the other privileges I am afforded because of my positionality within the larger socio-economic framework, let alone the ignorance I may have in speaking about the difficulties trials that another community may face. All of which I am aware and must acknowledge, not only for the recognition of what my own possible contributions to these societal inequities may be, but the ways in which I can advocate for the changes that may begin to address some of these issues presently and in a post COVID-19 world. Someone once said that we are all historical actors, all agents of our own design, enacting and originating pieces of history every day, with every choice we make, every step we take. I do not want to relive this moment in history believing that I could have done better, could have worked harder, could have changed something that I didn't. I want to encounter a post-COVID-19 world that evolves into something greater, something better than what it was before, not worse than what it ever will ever be. Diseases and their subsequent catastrophes have long proven to be pivotal moments in which society shifts. As such, this is not the time to sit quietly and observe society's inequities from afar. No, now more than ever it is time to work to correct them, for as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "in the end, it is not the words of our enemies we remember, but the silence of our friends".