

Madison Albrecht: COVID-19 Project – Year 2020

March 2020:

The news of online classes came as no surprise.

It was lunchtime, sometime around noon, and a friend, Rachel, sat across from me. I don't recall the conversation we were having. Must have been a pause in the conversation. My phone buzzed and with a quick gesture, I took it out of my hoodie pocket and glanced at the screen. "Wow! The mad lads actually did it! Classes are online after spring break!" I said with a strange half-excited, half-scared, sleep-deprived glee. "Oh my god!" Rachel exclaimed. People dined around us, others entered the building in close packs – business as usual – but soon enough, even this would change.

Despite my expression of surprise, the thing is, I wasn't that surprised. Just a few weeks before the news, I had been prowling a specific Reddit community called r/coronavirus, which posts articles and news about COVID-19 specifically. Users from all over the world would post news, and the moderators would watch for inaccurate/untrustworthy posts like vultures, circling around and around. That's how I felt at the time too. I just kept circling back to this community, around and around, because I realized that the situation was not getting any better. Japan closed many of their schools as a result of COVID-19 and Italy began to get more and more cases and subsequent deaths. Meanwhile, many people in the US continued to chant "Just the flu, just the flu." Yes, we had seen things like the Flu, Ebola, Zika. They seemed to come and disappear just as fast. But this seemed different. A sense of urgency in multiple countries overseas rang clear, or maybe I felt this way because I was watching the situation so closely. I don't know for sure. At the time, people on the subreddit criticized the WHO for their hesitation in calling COVID-19

a pandemic – sarcasm reigned supreme in the comments. People criticized the US for their lack of testing as well.

Well, the situation finally seemed to hit the US, square between the eyes. University of Washington planned to close their campus of 50,000 students and make all classes conform to an online structure until next quarter – the first university in the United States to take such drastic action. Other schools in the King County area did the same soon after. A few days later, universities in New York state and California state followed suit. Some of them even kicked students out of the dorms. I figured it was only a matter of time before Montana State University did the same and so I braced myself for the possibility. And when I say I braced myself, I mean I felt anxious and lost sleep over the situation.

At the time, I worried about the criteria for the at-risk population and what danger that would pose to the people I know – grandparents, sister, former mentor, and even myself. This is not to say that I'm not worried now, but at the time, the worry was more specific and desperate – I needed to know if thyroid conditions were connected to the severe cases and deaths of COVID-19. I made many frantic searches through the DuckDuckGo search engine – an alternative to Google. Sounds weird to note little things like that, but in an entry like this, I don't want information to slip through the cracks. Several sources seemed to say that thyroid problems posed no additional risk for contracting COVID-19, others sounded confused on the answer. I finally found a reputable source. No, thyroid problems don't pose any additional severity or chance of death. I found a little bit of serenity beyond the undercurrent of anxiety.

Flying to Seattle seemed like a decision that only seemed to get worse as time went on. When I first called my mom about the possibility of canceling the flight, early March, she seemed to think that COVID-19 was only the Flu. Understandable, but wrong.

Later, after the World Health Organization *finally* officially labelled the virus as a pandemic, she changed her mind. We decided that I wouldn't be flying over to Seattle. I didn't want to risk contracting the virus and I didn't want to risk delivering the virus to my grandparents in the Bozeman area (or anybody else in the risk group, for that matter). Besides, the thing is, there are specific risk groups but that doesn't mean you are guaranteed safety – an absence of the symptoms and subsequent lung tissue damage. The people in those risk groups matter too. They're people.

Back to the matter of online classes at Montana State University. Not really a fan. I feel chained to my desk and my laptop; however, I will say that I feel as though I can contribute more in this format. In-person, I tend to keep quiet during class discussions because, first of all, I like to listen in on the conversation, but secondly, I never seem to have the words organized properly until the conversation has already moved on. If you really want to know, this is probably a result of my upbringing, but that's another matter entirely. Online classes allow for more reflection. Although, even that presents as a double-edged sword. While I can reflect more, this can lead to more deliberation on what, exactly, to write at times.

As somebody who likes to chill at home, I'm starting to miss the outside world a bit. I miss walking across campus with my friends and I miss grabbing a bite with them. I miss seeing the faces of people in-class too, even if I kept completely silent. I miss the routine and sense of organization that in-person classes brought as well. My sleep schedule has gone to shit and all my goblin-brain wants to do is mess around and have fun because I'm at home – I'm not at the library where I did most of my school work before classes went online. But I'll work that out soon, I'm sure.

Early April 2020:

The undercurrent of anxiety seems to have lessened in recent days. I hardly look at the news these days, so this makes sense. On one hand, staying informed is essential as a citizen of any country, but on the other hand, staying so informed that your sanity suffers makes for a bad time. You can't waste time worrying about something you can't control. I'm taking as much action as I can for a college student of 22. You can't waste time looking at the confirmed case numbers and the death numbers either – they only rise, and as they rise, so to will your anxiety rise. I don't preach from my high horse. I learned that the hard way. I spent several weeks looking at the numbers, a map color-coded with the severity of the situation, and as the color of Washington state reddened, I worried. All I'm saying is that I don't recommend wasting your time.

When I take the occasional walk outside to get food, social distancing is a reality. The consensus on distance seems to be 6 feet. When I see somebody coming my way, I keep my head down and walk around them as if they were feared royalty and sidewalks were their lush, red carpet.

Despite the distance, I feel closer to my mom and my siblings. We text and talk on the phone more than before. As for the distance between my stepmother and I – that has remained the same. Radio silence. My dad and I text about music though, at least.

An interesting benefit to this situation is that I reconnected with a former English teacher of mine. I'll spare you the details on this one, so long story short, we didn't leave off on the best of terms when I graduated high school, but he was there for me during a very dark time in my life. He had had similar experiences when he was younger and I appreciated our discussions. I

still write with the fountain pen that he gave to me from time to time. Our email correspondence was positive and simple. This reconnection probably wouldn't have happened so soon without the emergence of the Coronavirus.

Mid-Late April:

I heard about the howling a while back. While I understand the sentiment, I can't help but feel like it's demeaning to participate in the howling, so I refuse to howl at 8pm with the others. The people of Italy sing to each other from their balconies while we howl like dogs or wolves... Don't get me wrong, I love wolves. Dogs are pretty cool too. But there's just something so wrong about it – we aren't dogs. We have technology to communicate, you know. We aren't completely disconnected. Twenty people can get together in a Discord voice chat channel and sing together while a bot plays a song for all to hear (a music bot plays music in a voice channel so that everybody in that voice channel hears the music at the same point within a song, across distances. It's basically like being near a speaker in-person). Not to mention, some of those essential workers get their sleep at 8pm and awake to the sound of loud howling. C'mon people!

April 15th, 2020:

My mortal enemy: sleep schedule. I tried to fix it by going to bed at 10pm, but then the next night, I went to sleep at 3am. I'm going to try to fix it again tonight because lack of sleep/troubled sleep makes for a bad time in all other areas of life. One of those areas: I've got sluggish school motivation. The other day, I turned something in... 3 days late because I failed to realize that it was even due that day.

Summer internship? No longer happening. Fun? Can't seem to grasp the concept. Focus? Out the window.

How am I doing? I feel that I can't rightfully answer that question until I get my sleep back on track. But I'm well-connected with friends and family, so that's nice.

April 17th, 2020:

I've been meaning to re-watch the Lord of the Rings trilogy because I haven't seen them in a while and I absolutely love them - they always give me a sense of hope for humanity. I always listen to a lot of music, but some songs hit differently, that's for sure. For example: Toxic by Britney Spears. All I can think of when I listen to that song is COVID-19, haha.

April 28th, 2020:

I can't really seem to grasp at the future nowadays - it's all about the present, taking one day at a time. This doesn't work well for school at all. But at the same time, I'm forced to think about the future. What will I do, now that my plans are in ruin? I feel paralyzed, like I'm looking down a dark tunnel where a large, red reptilian eye narrows it's one eye in preparation to hunt me down. I'm caught between a dark past and what seems like a dark future. It feels like the end of the line - the future seems grim indeed, but we adapt and endure nevertheless. Hopefully.

How will the country change? I'm not sure. I want to believe that it will instill some sort of change for those who work essential jobs - they deserve more for all the terror and stress they deal with, yet they go to work because they absolutely have to if they want to make ends meet - they're holding on by their teeth. They are heroes, but the thing is, they shouldn't need to be heroes. After the Coronavirus passes us by, I hope that the demands that these people make aren't met with disdain, but I fear that it will indeed happen. The rhetoric now is to call these people heroes - for god's sake, there are even goddamn YouTube ads that call essential workers out as heroes, and yet, where's their pay raise? Ads cost money, and the companies seem content to call

these people out by word only. It's sickening. As much as words can help people get through things, as much as words can heal and soothe, as much as I love words as an English major, actions will always count more. Words can motivate action, for sure... but it's just not enough. The wolf can lie through his teeth and say that he will help the sheep move on to fresh pastures while continuing to slaughter the whole lot of them. I'm trying to make some sort of corporate analogy. I don't know if it works. But the point is, these people are heroes for struggling through this, but they don't really have a choice in the matter - they need more compensation for all their toil and time, not just words.

April 30th, 2020 – Midnight – Letter To Myself:

Past Madison,

Sorry to say, things will get worse again for a while. Who would've thought? At least we had a bit of a respite for the last couple of years. A virus called COVID-19 is going to come swinging into your life and you'll lose a lot of sleep. You'll get into that mindset again. The current time reminds me a lot of the Hell Years - similarities are abundant. Infected Mushroom even released a new album. The situation you will face in the coming months will test your endurance, for sure, but remember where you come from. This is just another unusual setback, and you will be able to face it on your feet. ~~(Well, sort of. I mean, we will sit on the computer a lot since classes will move to an online format. So you'll face it on your buttocks.)~~

Remember that thing we wrote a few years ago? Remember your dignity. Despite what happens, you can still hold onto your dignity. You do what you can - you can't win all of your battles, especially during a time like this. Remember the phoenix painting that she made for you? Remember what that represents to you. The phoenix rises up from the ashen grave, aflame with

conviction and spirit. You will do the same, once again. Remember that pen he gave to you?

Somebody wants you to continue writing, even though they are no longer around. He knew what it was like in the Hell Years and he has faith in you to be strong.

If you can, please stick to a normal sleep schedule. That has caused a bit of trouble for future-you. If not, can you at least try to take more naps? I'm exhausted as fuck. I feel like my soul is draining away from my body.

Take care,

Madison

April 30th, 2020 – Some COVID-19 Haikus:

Pandemic

Infectious, human

duration of the disease

gathering darkness

Damn you, Coronavirus

Sitting on my butt

I cannot believe this rut

CORONAVIRUS!

Corvid-19

Don't mistake Covid

for our crow friends, the corvids

who fly on dark wing

May 3rd:

Despite what I said earlier, my sleep schedule hasn't improved. Right now, it's 5 AM... I haven't gone to bed yet. I can see the light returning to the sky past the dull, white blinds of my window. Instead of the usual dark blue, I see light blue. Everything feels wrong. I regret this immensely. I feel pain in my chest, and I don't know if it's a result of anxiety for the future or just plain, old exhaustion. Probably both.

May 4th, 2020:

I've been thinking about the current pandemic and the use of technology. There's an online website that uses Ace Attorney video game characters and their emotes for chatting, and honestly, the newbie chatting area amounts to an utter garbage fire most of the time, but the fact that people can type to each other in real time with character sprites is pretty cool. People aren't just typing to each other with text, they're emoting to each other through the use of character sprite emotions. I apologize if this is confusing. But basically, all of the characters have a specific set of possible expressions (emotes), and much like individual people seem to laugh or smile differently because of their body (which nobody chooses, of course) these expressions look different for each character. For example, the range of emotions might include "surprised," "thinking," "smug," "frustrated," "angry," "neutral," or even "anxiously sweating," – but the look of the emote is different depending on the character. But basically, you can type a message and a screen on the left will show the character talking with the emote that you choose.

During this strange time, there's something more intimate about using these sprites to talk in comparison to typing through text chatting platforms. Lots of people wear masks now, so we can't really see the facial expressions of the mouth – not to mention, social distancing rules have been put into play: you should be 6 ft. apart from the people around you. The fact that you can see emotional nuance through textual chatting is amazing. Of course, there's always video chatting for emotional nuance, but something like this website is a step up from texting or typing to strangers/friends.

May 6th, 2020:

Right now, my brain feels like raw spaghetti. Have some random little thoughts in the meantime.

I worry about the students who are forced to stay home with their abusive parent(s). I hope they're doing alright – and if they're not doing alright, I hope they are able to endure until the school system returns to a state of normalcy. Trying to attend classes online after a parental figure screams at you for an hour can't be good for a kid's mental state.

I looked at the Coronavirus numbers after having looked away for a month, and I'm shocked. I remember when the highest number of confirmed cases was sitting around 15,000. Now, the highest amount of confirmed cases in NY state sits at a screaming 333,549! Insanity.

To be honest, I don't have much else to say. I would like the future to resemble a sunrise, but the future seems to resemble 3AM darkness.

Here's to hoping that life will get better regardless.