

My COVID-19 Narrative

By Julia Burnham, Senior

I confess to being a young twenty-something, who didn't think coronavirus was going to be a big deal. I was wrong. Very wrong. I quickly changed my tune when my friends on the East Coast told me their schools were closing, and they were returning home. I changed my tune again when MSU went entirely online. And again when my mom--who is in the medical field--told me that I couldn't get the virus, because if I got the virus I would be shit out of luck. I have an autoimmune disorder that is specific to my lungs: eosinophilic esophagitis. It's an inflammatory disorder in the esophagus that causes a lot of pain, discomfort, internal bleeding, absorption issues, and food allergies. Additionally, I have asthma and often get bronchitis from the common cold. When I finally did my research and found out that COVID-19 attacks the lungs, I was terrified. If I so much as consume a drop of milk, my airways close, and this virus would do a hell of a lot more to my fragile lungs than any ole whey protein. Once the severity of the situation sunk in, I realized that I was in quarantine and total (well... aside for a fat cat named Mr. Tubs and a loyal, devoted partner named Max) isolation for the long run.

I have been self-quarantined since the last day of classes: March 13, 2020. Max is doing the same to protect my well-being and health, so at least I have my best friend to pass the time with; however, his staying home means that neither of us are earning any money. He's in the process of buying all the parts for and building up his dream mountain bike from scratch. He bought the last part: (\$2,500 wheels) a few days before MSU shut down. While this gives him time to build the bike, and eventually ride to his heart's desire, it doesn't help a bank account that has no influx of cash, and no promise of income in the near future.

Admittedly, I am in love with quarantine life. I have no job, no money (but a fully paid off credit card), and, oh, so much time to pause. I've spent 9 out of the last 12 months in some sort of altered life with 6 of those 9 months being entirely isolated (aside from my cat and my partner) because of two serious concussions, so I feel comfortable in this socially distanced, home-based life. I've lost myself, hated myself, found myself, grown more than I ever wanted to and then realized I was still so far from ever knowing one true self that I should be happy and kind towards any self that I find, for there's room for all of them. I do, however, remember the claustrophobic, depressive, maddening feelings that overwhelmed me a year ago. I vividly remember the pain, the lack of self-worth and the depreciation of all that I had been working for and toward. Those feelings ate me alive. I know that a lot of people are experiencing this now, and I wish that I had a bigger platform to offer them guidance or courage. We live(d) within such a high pace, brutal, cyclical, hamster wheel themed, world of "success" that recognizes taking time to do nothing is scarier than having obstacles to hurdle. Doing "nothing" is frowned upon, because it's not linear. It's not directly propelling you into your future that will be full of more propelling and more propelling, while you're just looking forward to circling the hamster wheel

again so you reach the downward part of the cycle where you get to breathe, before the uphill battle comes surging around again. Being on the wheel means that you always know what comes next. You're always a part of something--a system. It spreads the illusion of being "in the know". When you're on the hamster wheel, you're giving into expectations, into rigid ways of living that society accepts, that your parents accept and that is often welcomed by adjacent peer groups. But, you lose sight of yourself. If I've learned anything from quarantine, from isolations, from my concussions, it's that seeing yourself is far more important than seeing the self that everyone thinks you should.

It's a strange feeling to be well versed and practiced in "missing out", staying home and being disappointed. Life has seemed to hit me over the head (literally) for over a year, but really for much longer than that. Once I got past the depressive nature of realizing how many of the goals that I set would fall short, how many experiences I would let slip by and how many opportunities I would shut the door on, I started thinking of my situation as a chance to grow. I wasn't quite sure what parts of me needed growth, until they were right in front of me. For a while, I found purpose in my nothingness, because I felt like I was growing. For the last few months all I have wanted is to stop growing. I have been sick and tired of the growing pains, the constant change and always trying to be the bigger, better person. Then, COVID-19 hit, and it couldn't have been more clear that all of the agony I experienced was in preparation for this crazy, chaotic mayhem. I feel calm and ready for whatever the next six months bring. All-in-all, I feel really lucky to have this time to pause and to appreciate that the people of earth and the earth are getting a chance to breathe--yes, I know that's a little ironic, since coronavirus attacks the lungs, but... I feel like I'm getting a chance to reset that I never thought I would.

It turns out that I'm human and just like everyone else, I need to see myself through my eyes, not the world's, which means being honest with myself and whoever reads this in the future. COVID-19 has been, and I'm sure will continue to be, a totally whack experience. Some days are incredible--they're full of sunshine, mountain biking and yummy food. Other days are dreadful--they're full of high levels of mortality-salience, longing for what isn't and heavy existential dread.

I have been struggling with feeling so much promise, but not a lot of hope in this strange time. There is so much promise that this virus could finally be what we need to disrupt all of the systems we have in place that simply do not work--at all, but I'm not sure it will. There's promise of a revolution that could rewrite our current worldly trajectory, but I'm not sure it'll happen. I hope that this experience illuminates the critical state of our moment. I hope that the people who need to be convinced that Trump can't be our President again, come to see how he's weakened our healthcare system, our economy and our empathy. I hope this experience shows people how the earth can heal if we give her a chance. I hope this disrupts our branch of capitalism enough

that people stop trampling over one another in their individual pipeline pursuits to success, and instead recognize that we are all people with families (blood or not), passions, loves and interests that can be met without knocking our fellow humans down. I hope all of these things, because the promise of their existence is there, but I feel burdened in hoping that people can be kind enough to join together rather than divide against one another. I feel promise on principles, and I think that's what tarnishes my hope. Principles can only get us so far, because they ignore lived experiences and context. Principles can offer direction and guidance, but they won't be an active agent in decision making. Decision making is burdened with personal value, societal value, and the pressure to find value in the meaning that you're making. Principlism, though effective in notion, is riddled with fault in practice, and royally upsetting my fragile hope.

A couple of days ago I let Max cut my hair--big mistake. I've been cutting his hair for over a year now, and I'm not sure why COVID-19 gave me the impression that he could successfully cut my hair, but it did. Maybe it was the instagram memes mocking people for quarantine haircuts, and my desire to show them I didn't care what they thought. Maybe it was the irresistible itch to have something be different. Maybe it was a foolish bout of bravery. Maybe my sudden courage and faith came from knowing that no one will really see my hair for the next few months, so if he did mess up (and he did) that it would ultimately be okay.

Regardless of the instigation, I asked him to cut 2 inches off. He cut 8. I'm really not sure when 2 inches has ever looked like 8 inches, but I'm also not really sure when normal looked like my house being a total institution. I also asked him to sort of taper my hair down to frame my face, ya know--a cute look that would start 2 inches below my chin--I have bangs. And instead of taking just the very front part of my hair to use in the framing/bangs process, he cut my hair above my chin and extending about four inches back into my hairline. Needless to say, the disparity between bangs and my longer hairs was too abrupt, so after a few days of being passive aggressive about the whole situation, I let him try again. It looks a lot better, but I have short hair--shoulder length short. I haven't had short hair since I was in highschool, but hell, if there's a time for change, now is better than ever. He's been trying to make it up to me by cleaning all of the floors in the house with a sponge, deep cleaning our garage, and making me pancakes most mornings--could be worse. Anyway, the main takeaway is that if you see a funny instagram or twitter meme about couples cutting each other's hair in quarantine: it's not a joke. It happens. It will almost always turn out bad. And, well, it'll be maddening, then humbling and then really fucking funny.

Admittedly, I am no longer in love with quarantine life. I have no job, no money (a maxed credit card), and, oh, too much time to pause and think.

% 10 Things That Make Me Happy

Sunshine. Sunshine really makes me happy. Sunshine allows for easy beauty, and in times like this that's really what I want: ease in finding beauty. Snow on the trees also makes me happy. Waking up in the morning to a winter wonderland tickles me. Seeing the snow on the trees and getting to meander through the world while it twinkles back at me is something that grounds me, something that makes me want to make people feel as sparkly as the snow does me. Flowers--Wild Flowers. Damn. I love them. A subtle spring day--the kind where it's warm enough for shorts, but you still want a sweatshirt. The kind where the wind is comforting; there's no bite to it, and the flowers are ripe with kind greetings. Alive. Awake. And calling for your attention. I love that. Love. Love also makes me undeniably happy. I love love. I love loving people and things and places. I love loving moments. Feeling love, giving love and feeling whole, because of love--that, that makes me happy. Moments. Not just any moments, but moments that linger. Moments that make you think "remember when?" Moments that don't leave just because time does. Moments make me happy, because they can be horrid and then gone. Moments make me happy, because they sew a patch into your heart that says "I'm here". Moments remind you of where you've been. Stories. We have always lived through our narratives. We live 1000 years ago and simultaneously in the now through the stories that people tell. We will live 100 years from 2020, because of the stories that are told about us in this pandemic. Stories let you escape into someone else's world, while also showing you how to find home, how to find your center. Stories are the language of our lives. Waking up slow. I love waking up whenever my body decides I'm ready. I love hot tea and brunch. I love Jack Johnson in the morning and all things that come with cliches. I love living like I'm in a love song. Dessert. Well--good food in general, but always dessert. I love the feeling of sitting down after a long day and eating a mouthwatering dessert and feeling so whole, because I'm a sugar addict, and it's fine, because good desserts are orgasmic. Sand in my toes. I love walking down a beach and just feeling the sand exfoliate my sole. I love the sound of crashing waves and the delicate, resilient nature of sand. I love laying on my back with my feet in the sand doing mini foot crunches just to play with the different feelings that arise. And finally, songs to sing along to. There's nothing quite like dancing around to good music that makes your whole body groove. Pure happiness rushes over me when a song hits my heart just right. I love it.

4/7 an unedited poem that starts each line with the letter "F"

Fine. I'll let you bat my toes and get your
fur all over the bed. It's
funny how cats think they own everything.

Feet in my
face. Claws in my leg, can't move a muscle in
fear that I'll disturb *the Prince*.
Felines--they own us. Dogs love you no matter what, but cats--
forget it. Cats own you. Endless meowing, until
finally we give in and
feed them. It's a fucking
frenzy.
Food and cats. Not a common alliance, but
for Mr. Tubs food is life. Oh sure,
flop down right on my
face--I would love that. Inhaling
fine hairs and sneezing like a
finatic.
Fine. I'll let you eat my chicken, but just this time.
[five minutes later]: sure you can eat my
fish too.
Funny how cats own everything.

Yesterday (who really knows what days of the week are anymore) I had an honors seminar for three hours on Webex. It's sort of like a glorified book club that gets you an honors degree, friends that feel like family, and time to talk with really smart people about facets of the world. It's my favorite type of learning. Most people admit to drinking wine or beer during class, but wouldn't any good book club? I mean, afterall, we're all coping here. We talked about a lot of really interesting aspects of human nature. This great guy, Harari, wrote a book called *Sapiens*. From his text spawned conversations about how capitalism is the most widely adopted religion in America, even for people who pledge their faith in other forms. I mean, think about it: capitalism is a belief system. It governs the decisions you make, how you form your identity, what success looks like. It doesn't answer the quibbles of afterlife, but it instead treats afterlife as retirement. If you think of your whole life as a capitalistic religion, then you're set. It tells you what to do, how to live correctly and what happens when you step off of the hamster wheel *if* you've lived correctly. So if capitalism is a religion, then what does that say about progress? Well, Harari would say that progress is imagined, because all of the codes that people abide by are not rooted or grounded in our genetics, but grown in our systems. History and biology quite literally tell us that we were not born with hierarchies--we created them. If we created them, they were imagined. So progress is based on imagined systems. So then why do we put so much weight on always making progress? People seem as though they are longing to get back to "how

things were”, so they can continue to live a life that is headed towards something, constantly moving and evolving. But what if we changed what progress means? We created it after all, so what if this is a great era of reform. We are on the cusp of a revolution, so what if progress and success looked different than they do now? We are all brainwashed by the idea that because what is happening now isn’t normal that we are lesser, weakened. But what if that’s because the way that progress was curated was to make us feel as though the hamster wheel was our only way. What if we changed our religion from capitalism to something else (not communism or socialism, something new)--what would that look like?

For a while, I had an "A" and "B" schedule that I rotated between. They both trended in similar ways, but with different activities. In general, I started each morning doing whatever I usually need to do in order to wake up and feel ready for the day: some form of exercise. After a workout, showering and breakfast, I would complete a daily house chore and move into school time. I usually tried to work for 2 hours or however long I needed to finish the work for one of the classes that I decided I would focus on for that day. I usually then gave myself a break and played games with Max or watched netflix or did meal-prep (depending on the day’s designation as “A” or “B”). After my break, I would work for another 2 hours or so, and call it quits. Following my work period, I rewarded myself with a long walk and some yoga, which was then followed by dinner and movies or MarioKart. This all worked for awhile, until I felt like I had created another hamster wheel for myself. This wheel rewarded working longer than I wanted to, shortening my play time and gave strength to disordered eating habits. I've found that if I wake up in the morning and feel off or lacking that my best bet is to lean into those feelings and let them be, no matter how uncomfortable they may seem. If I need to go back to sleep until 11 and not do anything that day: fine. If there are days where I wake up and my workout feels good and I'm ready to conquer, then I embrace the day and work for as long as I feel like it. If I don't want to do anything, I don't. I still usually always try to do my chore and go for a walk in the afternoon though, because it makes me feel more connected to something. I'm not sure if that something is routine, or my past habits or what, but it usually works to give me some sort of purpose. Purpose is something that is hard to find in times like these. I've found that giving myself whatever grace I need whenever I need it is my best bet to not losing motivation in things that I know I need to do (like get my school work done, so I can graduate).

I sort of feel unstable. Well, I do and I don't. It seems that each day comes with new challenges and things that try to drain my spirit. Somedays I sleep well and wake up feeling rested and ready for the day, no matter what comes. And then some days I'm awake all night due

to nightmares and past traumas and it feels like the day starts off seven feet down inside a pit, and sometimes it's easier to stay in the pit rather than muster the courage and energy to climb out. I've been trying to give myself grace and time to grieve the loss of life as it was. It feels like this grief is harder than most since it isn't permanent, some things will at least return to as they were--like seeing friends and playing together in the mountains--but some won't. It almost seems easier to grieve something that's just... gone, rather than grieving a sense of normalcy, because that's all it is: a sense. It's easier to move on from something that is tangible.

Either way, knowing that some things will be as they were, but many won't and it won't be as it was for months is a sort of grief that I've never tried to manage before. It feels like I'm floating in this weird statis where there's no point in thinking about or planning the next step after graduation, because it won't be a fruitful thought for quite a long time, but that planning can also be a source of hope. Oh, good ole hope. So, I guess I'm a basket-case. I'm feeling drained and not excited at all for graduation, because then what will I do? Even if it's hard to muster up the motivation to do school work, it's something constant and after graduation there will be no work.. no school.. no socializing. I want school to be over, but I don't. It's a day-by-day thing.

Some days are good, even great. Some days are as good as washing down uncooked, instant, plain, oatmeal with boxed wine. It's just not good. It's bad. It's hard. It's hard to swallow. And hard to repeat. The weather has me feeling even more stuck. The enormity of everything being on pause is wild, and Bozeman's weather seems to perpetuate that. We're stuck in winter here, with glimmers of hope, just like life. We're stuck with dashes of hope that it'll change sooner than later, but it's not. There's always something that drags us back into the eternal winter.

I applied for unemployment over a month ago. I haven't received a penny. Neither has Max. There's an enormous system clog. A junction of shit meeting other shits, bigger shits. This feels like a bad poem. I'm poor. Really poor.

An ode to my heart

Someone once told you they loved you--they lied.
Someone once told you they hated you--they lied.
Someone once told you that you were unworthy--they lied.
Turns out these things were said over and over again.
Someone once told you a lot of things, and then:
they said them again, but you--you welcomed
their expression. Sometimes you broke. Sometimes

you soared, but what you never did was give up.
Your resilience let you feel the deepest depths of pain,
without becoming vengeful or saturated in spite.
Someone once told you a myriad of lies, and you
believed them, because you're vulnerable, you're honest
and you aren't afraid to weep. You are not naive, you are
strong enough to face those betrayals without getting lost, and
if you do get lost, you're resilient enough to survive
and become whole again.
Thank you, heart, for being more resilient than my mind,
my body and my words.
Someone will tell you they love you--they'll lie.
Someone will tell you they hate you--they'll lie.
Someone will tell you that you are unworthy--they'll lie.
But you will always wait patiently to embrace their lies
and give them love.
You will do this because you are resilient.

I think a big takeaway for me from this experience is forgiveness. Forgiveness to myself and the people around me. Forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness is strange. But forgiveness is what I and the world need to embrace and encourage.

I'm now 7 weeks into quarantine, it's my last day of undergraduate classes, and I haven't spent any time with anyone besides Mr. Tubs and Max. It's hard. It's a strange time that doesn't get any less strange as time moves forward. It's weird what social distancing does to social interactions. If I brave grocery shopping (I only have twice in 7 weeks), I see people wearing masks who are scared to walk down the same aisle as me. There's sanitation stations everywhere, limited entrance points and very few open check out lines. People stand far apart and no one can tell if you're smiling at them because buffs, masks and odd cloths are covering the smilers that we haven't been using as often as we usually do. On the trails people step up on mountain slopes to avoid coming within 6 feet of one another. I voluntarily wake up at 5, so that I can get on trails without seeing people, something that I wouldn't normally want to do. When I pass a fellow runner on the Galligator, I forget social cues and common phrases. My usual "Hi, enjoy your run" or "Hi, how are you?" turns into "ha-thanks me too, bye run". It's a jumbled,

odd, chaotic mess. We're all tumbling, some harder and faster than others, but, regardless, we are all disoriented, confused and not quite screwed on straight.

The other day, my professor asked me to write a note to myself on the first day of the semester. Here's what I wrote:

Dear Julia,

Life is going to hit you like a bag of bricks. You're going to be hurt both physically and mentally, you're going to struggle, you're going to be sad, but you're also going to accomplish some truly incredible things. You're going to be offered chances that you never dreamed possible that show you how much people really believe in you. You're going to find a way to be the glue for a lot of relationships. You're going to be heartbroken when you injure your hand as a byproduct of another concussion, because you won't climb for at least six months. You're also going to realize that you're a damn good baker, a damn good mountain biker and a damn good writer. And best of all, for the first time ever, you're going to believe it in your core. So take a breath, enjoy all of the yoga and stay present. You're going to learn so much about yourself and the world, so hang on. So many bad things will happen, and some of the best moments will too, so don't panic (if you can). Be brave. It's all going to go to shit, and you're going to do your best. And yes--you will binge Gilmore Girls and Glee, and you're going to just accept that that's who you are in this phase.

xoxo, Julia

Reflecting on this time is really odd, because when I think back on these last few months--on my senior spring semester, it wasn't so bad, but it was *so* bad. In all honesty, it was a lot better than quite a lot of other semesters have been, but it feels heavier. It feels heavier, because so many things were *supposed* to happen that didn't. Releasing the desire for what is *supposed* to be is something that I have been working on each and every day. When it's raining, I can pout, try to cover myself and prevent my body from the exposure, OR I can be present and soak in the vibrance around me. I can be in the moment and embrace the unsettling parts of my day. I can look at what's coming at me with compassion instead of dread. I can lean deeply into my discomforts and listen and love harder. I think I still have that guy hope. Maybe we grew a part for a little while, but if I can be hopeful and compassionate, I believe that others can too. And maybe if we all read a few good books, spend some time in the woods, and let our hearts love then maybe both the masks covering our smiles and the masks covering America's faults will fall, lending a new system to come forward.

Until later, stay present, stay kind, and don't divorce hope. He's not that bad.

Featured COVID-19 Narrative

By Grant Klug, Senior

Although the sentiment may be cliché, my time at Montana State University has been such a life-changing experience. I have refined my passions, gained incredible new friendships, and laid the groundwork for a career in biomedical research. The culmination of my years at MSU were to be experienced at various events throughout the spring of 2020, but all fell by the wayside as a byproduct of COVID-19.

When I first heard of the coronavirus, I didn't think it would affect my life significantly, if at all. When I heard through various news outlets about some virus originating in China, I fully expected it to be buried deep within the archives that contain other sensational news stories and headlines, but then late February arrived. Events started getting cancelled around the United States, and I had a friend at the University of Washington transition to online learning. This is when I realized the consequences of the virus were spreading quickly and more vastly than I ever could have expected.

I was accepted to a Gordon Research Conference (of which my boss had frequently called quite snooty in their selection of presenters and attendees). This opportunity presented me with the chance to showcase the research I had been conducting for the past two and a half years to a national audience of researchers at the top of a field that I am trying to penetrate into. The conference also promised valuable networking that could help me decide how to navigate my specific path through such a complex field. Additionally, this conference was to take place during my spring break and gave me an excuse to travel down to southern California during a cold, gloomy, Bozeman spring, which is always a welcome change of pace. However, by the first week of March, the impact of the coronavirus caught the attention of the conference organizers, and they cancelled the conference. The cancellation anguished me, for not only did I have to scrap all of the work that I had put into my presentation, but also I lost the chance to gain some valuable connections that I desperately needed in order to take the step in my career.

Another meaningful and culminating event that was cancelled due to COVID-19 was Collegiate Club Triathlon Nationals in Tempe, Arizona. While it might not be as impactful as other once-in-a-lifetime events, I was frustrated and disappointed that all my training and suffering (damn, I hate swimming) had abruptly ended without a final display of my abilities and hard work. Had I known that my last triathlon with the team was six months prior, I might have trained better for a nice last hurrah. But, so it goes.

The cancelled event that I am most disappointed about may not be specifically my graduation ceremony, but all of the other events that accompany it. Those last few days of sitting in a classroom with my peers knowing that all I've known for the last four years is slowly coming to an end...gone. Celebratory banquets with friends (and faculty) that I've gotten to know very well...cancelled. Intimate gatherings with close friends as we reminisce on our best and worst moments...postponed until future notice. With some people moving back home or to predetermined post-graduation destinations, I realize that I may never get to say goodbye to all of the people who helped shape who I am today. People are constantly asking me what my plans are

post graduation, and I have no idea what to tell them. I am looking for jobs throughout the northwest, but with everything going on there aren't a lot of companies actively hiring, and some aren't even posting available jobs. I have "apply to jobs" on my daily to-do list indefinitely--as if I needed more stress in my life. While I sit here enumerating my troubles, I am reminded of an infamous Kourtney Kardashian quote that serves as a nice reminder that I don't have it nearly as bad as it could be: "Kim, there's people that are dying" (don't judge--it's been a rough quarantine).

Life in a pandemic is honestly not nearly as dramatic as I thought it would be, but I think that's because of my situation in a small Montana community. When I think of a pandemic such as the Spanish Flu, albeit much more deadly, I think of a world in which there are cots in every house with people sick on every street (I think I have a very distinct picture from my tenth grade history textbook as the inspiration). Honestly, if it weren't for modern luxuries that allow us to limit our social interactions, maybe my world would look like this. Nevertheless, I can't quite fully adjust to a quarantining life, and I can't seem to focus on anything while surrounded by the distractions of my apartment (looking at you, fridge). I've rearranged my bedroom, living room, fixed my car, started making new recipes, and watched a LOT of random TV series get boring within a week. I make grocery trips roughly twice every three weeks and have only seen people's caution toward the virus increase (a good sign). The last time I went to the store, about 80% of people were wearing face masks: surgical, cloth, woodworking, you name it. My only hope is that everyone takes this seriously, so that this situation is not prolonged. This pandemic might have turned everyone's world upside-down, I just hope that people can orientate themselves back to normal (or on a better path) once the dust settles.

Featured COVID-19 Narrative: Corona Abroad

By Alyssa Pack, Junior

I began March of 2020 packing up every single one of my belongings and saying goodbye to a life I was loving so I could move to Argentina for what I thought were going to be some of the best months and memories of my life. I had been preparing for this journey for 5 months and dreaming of it since middle school. I had gone through the extensive processes of getting accepted into a study abroad program. I paid all of the fees. I got all of the visas. I did vast amounts of research on the necessities, the do's and the don'ts of traveling solo as a woman through South America. I wrote a novel of sites I wanted to see and things I wanted to do throughout my travels. I struggled with self doubt regarding my ability to leave everything that I knew and move to a place where I barely knew a soul and struggled with the language. I lived with the hurt I knew that I was causing to my boyfriend by leaving him for so long. I accepted the healthy fear that was constantly inside me and reminding me of its existence. Amid all of the doubts and emotional turmoil, I sobbed my way through goodbyes and hopped on a plane with my two new friends: the unknown and independence.

When I left the US, there were practically no pandemic-related worries for my trip since almost all cases were still in China and a few in Europe. No one even suggested or gestured that I should be concerned. However, by the end of the same month as my arrival I was at home, on my parents couch, having my food made for me, and surrounded by familiarity.

My second day in South America was filled with an orientation for all international students and was also my first test of Spanish speaking and friend-making skills. My initial impression was great. I became acquainted with a super adventurous English-speaking group of gals, who all had the same objectives for their abroad experience as me: explore and learn Spanish. The first weekend we toured the city together, having park picnics, seeing monuments, and dancing the night away at Boliches. Then on the Sunday before classes began, we got an email saying that there was some concern of the European student's health, and since we had all been exposed to one another that we couldn't come to school for the first week. In our heads, this news meant a free week to do some more adventuring. We took some days to plan how we would use our extra time away from school. We knew there would be more weekends to explore more of Buenos Aires, so we thought it was a good idea to hop on a bus and travel cross country to a town called Mendoza. Mendoza is the wine capital of Argentina and is known in part for its hostels.

Upon arrival in Argentina, my passport was scanned as "invalid" in the system. It claimed that my passport was reported stolen. Yet, I had it in my hands and obtained my visa with the validation of it only 2 weeks prior. I sobbed and called 100 people from airport custody, and eventually convinced the migration officer to let me through with the promise I would head straight to the embassy to get a new passport. Receiving a new passport seemed like a no-sweat

task since I thought that I would be in Argentina for 5 months, and I figure that that was plenty of time for the passport to arrive.

Luckily, I was able to get on the bus to Mendoza with my US license and a copy of my passport. We spent four carefree and exhilarating days in Mendoza--days that will be remembered as some of the best in my life. I figured that the group of girls that I was traveling with would be nice, but they turned out to be some of the most genuine, kind, and best travel buddies that a girl could ask for. The whole trip was enriched with endless laughs, wine and storytelling. I was in true bliss, and the few new reports about the virus starting to get serious elsewhere in the world didn't trigger any anxiety or fear. One girl's school 'suggested' that she return home, and MSU emailed me stating their support in whatever decision I felt was best. These warnings and concerns seemed ridiculous to us as we lived in our fairy tale. How could the world be on the brink of a pandemic when we were having such a splendid time?

Our return tickets from Mendoza were for Sunday evening. We finished our day with a three hour long happy "hour" that consisted of bonding and planning for our trips to come. We headed to the bus station and waited in line for ours to arrive. Now, I am not going to lie, we were five white, English speaking, young girls, at an Argentinian bus station--to say we stood out would be a grave understatement. So while we were waiting, a police officer approached us and asked to see our passports. The girl in our group who spoke the best Spanish gave hers first, and when the officer saw that she hadn't been in Argentina for more than 14 days, she fiercely stated something in rapid, heated Spanish and led us all upstairs to a separate room. My heart was beating faster than expected: we were so confused. I turned to my friend and said, "Is this really happening Rachel?" After a while we were then told that Argentina recently imposed a new mandate that all international travelers must quarantine for 14 days after entering the country. We explained to them that we left our 'home' in Buenos Aires before that was a rule, and that it would have been impossible for us to have expected this. All of us had been in the country for 12 days at this point, and the officer asked to see proof. Me--not having my passport--did not have proof, and he stared me down and said, "You are definitely not getting on a bus without a real passport." Fear ambushed my body. My passport would be arriving in Buenos Aires within a week to the apartment that I was renting. I couldn't stay alone in Mendoza for a week. I tried to plead to the officer that I was allowed on the bus to Mendoza with a photocopy passport, so I should be allowed to return. But with my beginner Spanish and fear radiating through the words, it was useless.

The five of us walked out of the station in complete defeat. We ordered a taxi to a hostel and started making some difficult calls. Our parents were upset and scared. Our Advisor was frantically trying to figure out how to help, and we were exhausted. Some of the girls' parents were demanding they come home as soon as possible and were frantically convincing them to return to the US. People were talking about getting on the bus in two days, once our 14 day quarantine ended. I was urgently making calls to the embassy hoping to figure out how they could help me get on the return bus, but they were zero help. My mom was the first to tell me

that I needed to accept that I might be stranded in Mendoza until my passport was shipped. I was trying to grasp this concept when the hostel informed us that they would be closing the night after next, and we needed to find other housing options. Que complete panic. My heart was achy, and I felt physically nauseous for about an hour. And then, thank God, our advisor in Buenos Aires ordered a private car to come pick us up when the hostel was set to close, potentially sacrificing his health exposing himself to us, but saving us from several nights sleeping on the streets.

Shortly before our car was scheduled to arrive, we ventured from the hostel for the first time in 2 days to grab snacks for the 14-hour drive ahead of us. The entire town had changed, there were lines outside every store, the atmosphere was overwhelmingly ominous, and we were being stared at like we had a sign on our chests saying “COVID-19 Positive.” It was the longest 30-minute excursion. When we got to a store, a policeman came in after us and picked me out. He began asking me questions in Spanish that were faster than I could comprehend. I tried to answer him the best I could by trying to tell him we were from the US and had been in Argentina for more than 14 days, and that we have a private car coming to get us soon. The look on his face was not one of belief. I felt like he was about to ask for my passport when one of my fluent friends came and saved the day. She explained more clearly our situation, and he let me go with the stern farewell.

Despite all of the chaos, I still thought that I was staying in Argentina. I was committed and had given up too much to not remain in South America. MSU emailed many more times, and started suggesting that students return home immediately. Almost all my new friends had given in to their parents and schools nagging and were headed back to the US within days. My parents were leaving the decision completely in my hands. They trusted that I would be able to discern what was best for me. I appreciated that, but at the same time was so overwhelmed on what to do that their input would have been nice. I was scared, living in a foreign country during a pandemic, but craved this adventure and opportunity more than I felt alone and fearful.

Once I returned to Buenos Aires a sense of security returned. I had a room that was mine and that I couldn't be kicked out of it. However, on Thursday, March 19th, Argentina called a national stay at home order and declared that all international travelers carry their passport at all times. So that eliminated all the security I thought I had. I had no passport. I couldn't leave to find familiarity, and this pandemic was getting serious.

My friends and I exchanged worried texts, and before I knew it every international student I had a contact with was going home ASAP. There were no longer ANY direct flights to the US, and flights from other countries were being canceled at astonishing rates. My worries increased tremendously. I was calling my mom debating back and forth what was going to be best for me. Finally, I realized that if I had any hope of returning to normal classes in Buenos Aires that it would make sense to stay. I would meet more people and continue to remain in full immersion. However, with my low Spanish fluency level I was only capable of taking classes for

international students, and my advisor was unsure if those classes would be anything but online. This was my turning point. I wanted to be home, and I wanted to be home soon.

At this point, I had become quite familiar with the US embassy from our extensive emails and phone calls while constantly requesting information on my passport arrival. By some miracle I received an email stating that my passport came early, and I could pick it up under special circumstances first thing in the morning. A complete wash of relief rushed over me, as I was able to leave the country and return home to hopefully some version of normalcy and comfort.

I made sure I had my passport in hand and called my mom sobbing asking her to get me on the next flight out. With long holds and a mother's persuading words I got a flight that night that would take me to Panama, then to Houston, and finally: home. I began packing immediately and a whole new sadness drenched me. I packed my climbing gear for the dream of traveling south to adventure in Patagonia. I packed my swimsuits and beach dresses for my surfing weekend at the coast. I took down the few decorations that only hung for a few days. I put all the hopes and possibilities into my pink suitcase and backpacking bag. I was given an incredible taste of what could have been the best semester of my college career, and now I would never be able to replicate it again: this was the hardest part. I felt so utterly jipped, why did it have to be *my* semester that got crushed to pieces? There were millions of students who went before me and all they had to worry about was themselves, not a worldwide pandemic.

Nonetheless, I had a taxi coming to pick me up, and again I had to maneuver all of my belongings into my bags. The time came, and I said goodbye to my very temporary home, and I got into a taxi. The driver asked very seriously to see my boarding pass, and wouldn't move until he had proof that I had a flight. The news was playing on my trip to the airport, and I heard a bit about the new rules, but my Spanish abilities are so underdeveloped that I was uncertain of all that I was hearing. I did gather that international travel was one of the few exceptions to the stay at home order, and that the shelter in place mandates were heavily enforced. The airport was about 30 minutes from where I was staying, and we were stopped by three different police barricades, asking about our travel. I knew this is *not* where I wanted to be, which made the situation both scary and reassuring, since I knew I was leaving. A few hours prior I was crying to stay in Argentina, but on the taxi ride I couldn't help yearn to be home. I felt so alienated and alone, and I still had a 20-hour travel day ahead of me. The taxi man kept glancing at me in the rear-view mirror, probably curious about my tears. But I could not hold back--I had too many emotions and rapidly changed plans.

At the airport the severity of Argentina's precautions was even more evident. I got my temperature taken before entering the building by a full suited man, who just before me took a man to the side because his temperature read 1 degree higher than the healthy range. My heart was pounding. I knew I wasn't sick, but the fear alone seemed to raise my body heat. He let me through, and I was transported to an eerie space packed with desperate travelers. The floors were covered in layers of sleeping bags and their backpackers. The flight board was covered in red,

and airline tellers had lines 20-30 people long with families and solos alike anxiously awaiting a plane ticket.

I arrived 4 hours before my flight. The lines in the airport were what seemed like eternal mazes, so I joined everyone else trying to check a bag and waited 1.5 hours to hand over my belongings. Going through customs was quite an experience. When I got to the front of line, the man that I spoke with knew no English. After one glance at my passport he said in Spanish “Residents cannot leave the country; the president made a new mandate.” I promptly told him I wasn’t a resident, my passport was from the US, and I wanted to go home. And he responded that since I had a student visa for 5 more months, I couldn’t leave. My heart dropped and panic tried to sink in once again. I told him that seemed implausible, and asked if he could please ask someone else, because I needed to go home. I had to be at home.

After what felt like eternity, a supervisor came over to me and evaluated the situation. Thankfully, they allowed me to proceed. After getting out of ear shot, a psychotic like giggle escaped from my lips. This situation clearly had some sort of grudge on me, and it was doing everything it could to push me to my emotional limits. I knew and accepted that international solo travel would be challenging, but this all seemed far larger than what I bargained for.

The next 20 hours were a complete blur of wandering airports, small talk with other travelers, tears (I have never cried so much in public ever), and reminiscing of my short South American journey. When I reached Portland, I collapsed into the arms of my family--exhausted and finally void of terror. I found comfort in familiar people and a language that I knew.

The following weeks were a mourning period for me, a type of grieving that I had never experienced before. My study abroad plans and visions were burned to the ground, the unknown future was unnerving, and I felt as though I lost an experience of a lifetime. Truthfully, I cried almost every day for 2 weeks. I was in full quarantine isolation in my parents’ home. I couldn’t leave and the weather was rainy and depressing. I had to adjust between speaking English with my family followed by a two hour Spanish class without losing focus. I have never felt so defeated. I really struggled to find the *why* in all of this. I believe that everything happens for a reason, but so far I can’t decipher this. I just keep asking *why*.

After some healing time with my family and watching the news as the situation escalated, I began to feel thankful and at ease with the decision I made to return home. With no sign of improvement ahead, I began to preoccupy my dreary thoughts with crafts and projects around the house. I need more than wallowing in my own loss, because I also realize everyone has lost something through this all, and some people have lost everything. There is no use in measuring relative pains, for we are all mourning. So, with all the might I can, I will pursue my study abroad classes online, I will share my short adventure with anyone who will listen, and I will be retiring to my dear Argentina. My travel bug will not be killed by COVID-19.