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WRIT 326 - COVID Project

Kirk Branch

March-May, 2020

COVID-19 Project

March 9th, 2020

"You're still going on your trip to Washington?!" "I guess so..." was my response to all the questions I got as I packed my things and loaded the bus for our week-long choir tour to the United States's epi-center of the virus. In my mind, I was just going on a normal choir trip: months of preparation leading up to singing at the regional ACDA conference. It hadn't really crossed my mind that it might be cancelled or that we wouldn't be able to travel. So, I packed my bags and got on the bus, a travel-sized bottle of hand sanitizer and extra roll of toilet paper in my bag because the internet had told me to do so. For now, the problem of the Coronavirus or COVID-19, as I had recently learned seemed to be the slanging term for the sickness, seemed far, far away. I felt the effect of the Bozeman bubble around me as I carried on with my daily activities, classes, and trips to the local coffee shops. "This doesn't seem like a new normal," I thought, but oh was I wrong.

March 12th, 2020

The bus is buzzing with news of COVID-19. We're on the way back from Spokane now and it seems like everything has changed in the past few days. Spokane was a ghost town with closed down shops and restaurants and the amount of people everywhere being limited. We sang for 20 people at the conference in a 1,000 seat auditorium. My hands are cracked

and red from washing them so many times. I got glared at for clearing my throat on the street. We all just received news that our classes will be switching online for the remainder of the semester. My friends are concerned about how their music classes will work in an online format. I guess this means no more choir class? How will this system work as an education major where I'm supposed to be going into schools for class? So many questions, but for now it still seems like a distant reality lost in a fog of toilet paper shortages and panicked tweets.

March 16th, 2020

It's only a few days later and I find myself in the midst of a southbound spring break venture. We are on our second day at Zion National Park in southern Utah where they have officially closed all visitor centers, shuttles, and ranger stations. The vibe is a bit eerie as the park feels emptier, but I feel thankful that a virus can't shut down nature. The trip provides a good space from the realities of facing online schooling and social distancing back in Bozeman, and I'm grateful for the chance to still be traveling with some of my best friends. PLUS the gas is cheaper! Score! Maybe this COVID isn't all half bad... the reality, however, is vastly different as small businesses in the towns we stop in are closing and groceries stores are beginning to run out of certain goods. Although I do feel fortunate to be experiencing these stunning landscapes, I can't help but notice the building pit in my stomach that it might have all been a bad idea. I'm having doubts if traveling really was the responsible decision at all. Am I being selfish?

March 19th, 2020

We are traveling back from our trip and I'm beginning to feel the reality of it all smacking me straight in the face. Suddenly my parents, who are both teachers, aren't working for the next few months. My sister got sent home from college and isn't allowed to return to get her things from her dorm until a later date. All the things I was looking forward to are done. No more Rhapsody A Capella performances, end of the year Voice Center awareness events, choir practice, Eagle Mount Swim and Ski programs, even school. How am I, an extrovert who plans out every single minute of the day to maximize time and be with those around me, supposed to do this? I'm concerned for my own sanity and the sanity of others around me. I know the coming days will be times of adjusting and processing.

March 23rd, 2020

The first day of online school is here. I clunkily log onto my Webex accounts and attend class via a monitor and headphones. It's nice to see everyone's faces and hear that there is still laughter in the world in the midst of what seems like a very very dark time. Most of my closest friends are heading home for the semester, and the ones that are here are practicing major social distancing. It's a lonely feeling in the midst of changing times, times when I'm used to leaning on others for support. I know this is best though. I am realizing that although this is extremely hard, we can all do our part to social distance and help prevent the spread of this virus to those who are affected most. I am also discovering that trying to solve all the world's problems in my mind at once is not the way to approach a situation like this. I can only control what I can control, and for me that means finding routine in this

new life to stay sane. Perhaps this whole thing is a reminder for the world to slow down and take a few more deep breaths for a while. That's how I like to think of it at least.

March 26th, 2020

Today has been hard, really hard. I realized this is going on day 4 in a row that I have felt tired, unmotivated, lethargic. I began to brainstorm what the cause of this exhaustion could possibly be. Was I getting sick? Was I mentally drained? What was the source? It was through a conversation with my roommate, who is very similar in personality to me, that everything clicked. I had the major realization that I am way more of an extrovert than I thought. I always knew I liked being around people: they make me laugh and smile, and I love learning from those around me. I never realized, however, that this is where I feel alive, this is the area where I gain my energy and get revitalized. I feed off the energy of others. Deep down, I always thought I was an introvert who, when finally given the time, would recharge from that craved time along to oneself. Boy was I wrong. I realized the tired, sluggish times came from this lack of normal energy source. Although this was a very hard realization to have at a time such as this when social distancing and isolation are words I am using to describe my circumstances daily, it came as a huge awakening that I need to find ways to self-supply this energy. A mindset had to change and new habits needed to be adopted. I need to learn more about myself. This has become the new quest.

March 29th, 2020

The creative juices are starting to flow! I am beginning to realize that "social distancing" and "fun" don't have to be mutually exclusive words! I had a virtual dinner with a friend! I had a 6-feet apart dance party with one of my friends who lives a street over from me! This

joy came from a switch in mindset. Instead of moping and sulking around feeling sorry for myself and the current circumstances, it was time to take the situation and make the most out of it. No, it's not ideal to not be able to physically make dinner with friends or be able to give someone a hug when you run into them, but there still are ways for connection. I have begun to feel grateful to be alive in the time we are. We are able to see someone's face and hear someone's voice with the tap of a few buttons on a screen. We are able to send encouraging messages in a plethora of ways. We are able to document the daily joys we come across. Life really isn't as bad as it seems; just a time for adjusting and learning and growing.

April 1, 2020

Today, another seed of hope was planted in my heart. I work at a tutoring center here in Bozeman called Sage Learning Center where we provide personalized education programing to elementary, middle, and high schoolers who don't learn well in a traditional classroom setting. We have taken the last few weeks off from tutoring due to COVID-19 and have been brainstorming ways to still keep the tutoring process going during this time of change. Just because this is happening in our world doesn't diminish the need of education or the need for some forms of structure in a developing child's life. We finally made a breakthrough! Today was our first trial round of using an online format for tutoring with our kids. We were able to Zoom call the students and see each other's faces and hear each other's voices, which warmed my heart to have this kind of connection with students I love once again. As an education major, it was also so neat to be able to see an alternate form of education taking place before my very eyes. Things are looking up!

April 4th

I drove home today which was interesting. I feel torn. There's part of me that is just beyond excited because making this 14-hour drive back to Iowa means I will get to see my family who are easily 3 of my favorite people on this planet. This is the huge perk of this whole situation. I normally wouldn't have seen my family until July, but here I am, sitting with them now early April. But I also feel this sense of this completely not being right. The only other vehicles I really saw on I-90, one of the most popular routes in America, were semis and there were signs for COVID-19 about every mile displaying warning signs and messages to stay home. This isn't what I'm supposed to be doing right now, not where I'm supposed to be. I guess this is the new normal, however, and time to enjoy these moments with the ones I love despite the crazy and sometimes scary circumstances.

WRITING PROMPT: April 7th**The Stolen Orange**

When I left I stole an orange

I kept it in my pocket

It felt like a warm planet

Everywhere I went smelt of orange

Whenever I got into an awkward situation

I'd take out the orange and smell it

And immediately on even dead branches I saw

The lovely and fierce orange blossom

That smells so much of joy

When I went out I stole an orange

It was a safeguard against imagining

There was nothing bright or special in the world

Brian Patten

And here is your prompt:

“Right now, if anything, what are you doing to help imagine the bright and special in the world?”

For me, noticing the bright and special things in this world has definitely been about a shift in thinking about the big things in the future to the little moments in day-to-day living.

Noticing the sunshine outside, the moments of laughter from FaceTime calls with friends, or the joy of making a new recipe are the moments we can live for nowadays. I've also found so much joy in the creation of music as making music with others is one of the things I miss most about this whole experience we find ourselves in. I have also started keeping a gratitude journal that has helped me focus in at the end of the day on the moments I'm thankful for instead of always just thinking about the negatives, what ifs, or cancellations.

April 8th

I have been home now for a few days which really has been wonderful. Things so far have seemed relatively normal, besides the fact that my parents now order groceries online. We have been able to cook and bike, play games and laugh together like we normally would when I visit. But tonight it hit me that things aren't the same as when I usually visit at all. I had just gotten off a FaceTime call with my 2 best friends from high school. These are 2

individuals that I love with so much of my heart, but I only get to see 2 or 3 times a year as I go to school in Montana, one goes to school in Las Vegas, and the other in Iowa. And here we were, talking and laughing like normal, over FaceTime, this time not from our relative college locations, but in the same town mere miles apart. This was a hard realization to face. I so badly just wanted to be able to see them in person and give them hugs. Seeing them is part of my normal routine when I am back in Iowa and it really sunk in that we don't have normal at all right now all over again.

April 13th

Doing school online is hard. Personally, I find it extremely hard to be motivated or even excited about classes that I once loved because I feel so removed from the classroom setting. As an education major, this time and experience has been extremely interesting to observe. I've heard of top students who might fail classes, people who are made for their major feeling lethargic to their schoolwork, and even all-knowing professors admitting they just don't always know the best way to handle things. I've also wondered a lot how long this type of schooling will last, and am really recognizing it just doesn't work for some students. Some don't have access to WiFi or a computer at all. Some, like some of the middle and elementary students I am still tutoring online aren't being able to keep up in their classes because this learning style just doesn't meet their needs or work for them. Others like my sister, a fellow college student, feel extremely discouraged and alone. My sister has struggled with anxiety and depression since middle school. Because of this, she did schooling online for a few years of high school, which was what was best for her at the time, but was not a very positive experience at all. Doing online school now is very

triggering for her and makes her feel as though she is taking a huge step back in a journey she has worked so hard to make forward gains in. What do we do for these students?

April 16th

Going off of my previous entry, it has been extremely interesting to hear about my parent's experience in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. My dad teaches elementary P.E. and my mom teaches middle school art, so both are not currently working their jobs in a traditional sense. Both of my parents feel the best and most important parts of their jobs is reaching and connecting with students in their classes. That element is now suddenly missing from their teaching and is making them feel melancholy and removed. My parents are still putting lesson plans online for the students to complete if they desire. They range anywhere from dance videos to get the elementary kiddos up and moving, to drawing projects urging students to draw what feelings and emotions they are experiencing during this time. I commend and admire my parents for rising to the occasion and still creating a means of connection for their students. It could be a long road ahead.

WRITING PROMPT: April 16th

"What's on your quarantine playlist? Watchlist?"

I would say that for the most part, I am trying to limit my screen time during relaxation, as both school and my job are both online currently. That being said, however, I have found so much joy in watching The Great British Baking Show on occasion. There is just something about lovely pastries and cakes that is so soothing to the soul. Also, I am ashamed to admit that I have started watching Listen to Your Heart, a new spin-off show of The Bachelor, with my mom and I secretly love it. As for tunes, I will forever dig Harry

Styles' latest album "Fine Line" (feel free to judge, I'm a bit ashamed myself), but have also loved exploring new artists, such as Oh He Dead, Jorja Smith, and Brittany Howard! Check em out!

April 18th

Today is my aunt's, who happens to be my favorite person on this planet, birthday. I felt the joy bursting from the phone as I sang her happy birthday over FaceTime and got to talk to both of my cousins and uncle for a bit as well. They all live in Minneapolis and were getting a take-out order from my aunt's favorite Tai food restaurant. It was great to see their smiles and feeling this connection to those I love even in this interesting time a part never fails to make my day. They were planning on eating a picnic dinner on their porch because my older cousin doesn't live with them and is having to quarantine pretty seriously because his roommate works in the children's section of a hospital in downtown Minneapolis. This just got me thinking about all the incredible people who are risking their lives everyday when they go to work just for the benefit and wellbeing of others. Can you get more selfless? Suddenly my cushy, doing crafts, watching TV shows, sleeping in life didn't seem as unbearable as I was sometimes making it. They all definitely made my gratitude journal that night.

WRITING PROMPT: April 21st

"How has your view of the future changed, if at all? I am thinking both in terms of your own individual movement into the future and of the future of the country and the world, or anything else that this question leads you into. "

"Well, this is interesting," is really one of the only thoughts that seems to break through the superficial haze of the life I am currently leading. I find that I am usually a very optimistic person, looking for the sunshine throughout life, and recognizing that if I laughed that day, things must be pretty good. But now, it's hard to remember those small moments of joy when a cloud seems to permanently be resting over us. This cloud separates us from our friends and family, from jobs, school, even dreams and aspirations. It seems as though life as we once knew it is just on pause for the time being. And the scary moment for me, is that we don't know how long this moment will last. I am the type to look forward to things ahead, have a goal to work toward. It seems that currently, it's hard to look into the future because everything is unknown- events might happen, or might not, and it's almost as if I'm afraid to get my hopes up about anything. BUT, trying to stay optimistic, this moment of pause is such a good time to remind ourselves of those little times in life that can bring us so much joy and rejuvenation. For now, I am trying to focus on these moments in the here and now rather than the big picture. Just taking things one day at a time :)

April 23rd

I am now back in Bozeman after a wonderful trip home spending time with family and today is my birthday. While I still felt so much love pouring in all day from friends and family near and far, it's hard to not crave proximity with these people I hold dear on a day like today. I find that I am wanting to gather with all my friends and laugh and share food and stories, finding a sense of normalcy again. When will we be able to do this again? Will we be able to do this again? These are scary thoughts to have as I enter a new year of life. I

usually use birthdays as a launching pad or moment of rebirth in a sense with goal setting and optimism, and I am finding it is a bit harder to feel that this year.

April 26th

My partner wanted to take me camping to celebrate my birthday, which is just the kindest gesture. We drove out of Bozeman a few hours to a spot he had picked on a beautiful lake and got to go on an incredible hike the next day. It was wonderful to get out and get a breath of fresh air. It is moments like these that the craziness and loneliness brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic seem distant and almost out of mind for the time being. When you're outside, things seem normal. The birds still chirp, the shoots of new flowers are still sprouting from dampened soil, the sun still rises and falls everyday. Normal. I feel this is a time (one of the many in life) that we can look to nature to learn from and set an example for the way we are living. Things are carrying on. Beauty is still being created. Things are still growing and blooming. These are lessons we can heed always, but especially in these moments of uncertainty and unknown. Nature is constant and forever wondrous.

WRITING PROMPT: April 28th

“Write a note to yourself on the first day of this semester. “

Dear Lucy,

Hello, it's you, from the future (cheesy, yes, just always wanted to say that in a real context so I figured it was apropos). This semester is going to be a wild ride. This being said, however, this time will still hold some of the best moments, hardest laughs, and biggest reasons for growth you've ever experienced. For now, hug your friends a little tighter,

smile at people while out and about, enjoy the busyness, and spend quality time with those you love. Things will be different, but this doesn't have to mean bad- just a change for the time being. It's alright to have sunny days and ones filled with storm clouds, but in the end, everyday you'll learn, smile, and grow a bit more!

Cheers to these crazy times- you got this, we all do!

Sincerely,

Me

WRITING PROMPT: April 30th

"Write one or more pandemic haikus."

We Are Ghosts

A haze covers all

We are floating through this life

Time moves fast, yet slow

Virtual Blues

Seeking connection

How do you feel through the screen?

Hearts down like wifi

Underlying Color

The sun's out today

On the surface it's normal

Below, dark lingers

May 1st

As finals week approaches and the semester comes to a close, it's hard to not be thinking about what would have been happening at this moment if this whole COVID-19 situation wasn't happening. For me, some of the big things that come to mind are the final choir and a cappella concerts of the year that have now obviously been cancelled. This would have been the last chance to sing with graduating seniors that I feel so lucky to have gotten to know, and these events serve as a celebration of a year full of music together. This is one of the hardest realizations about this experience for me. I have come to notice that I really took getting the opportunity to make music with other people almost daily for granted in every sense of the word. Forming these intimate, personal bonds through music is unlike anything else I have ever experienced. Music is something that's made to be shared. It's something that should be experienced together and created with others. I am feeling this loss heavily through this time, but am looking forward to the sweet, sweet moment that we will all be belting together again soon.

May 6th

Here we are. The last day of the semester is here. This is my final essay, my final assignment of junior year. Normally, my friends and I would celebrate the culmination of another wonderful year of growth and hardship, laughs and tears, exclaiming "We made it!" for all to hear by sharing a meal and drinks and each other's company. This year it feels different as the line between the school year and summer has become blurred together.

Some friends are here in Bozeman and others are scattered across the country, which still just doesn't feel quite right. Although these circumstances aren't ideal, I do feel extremely lucky to have gotten to complete another year of higher education, an experience everyone deserves, but unfortunately don't all receive. Through these feelings of loneliness and loss at times, the silver lining of it all is that there *is* something to miss. Experiences, friends, classes - these are all things I know I haven't appreciated fully, but am now starting to as they aren't as readily available as they have been in the past. Why is this always the way it goes? All in all, this experience is vital in remembering to live in the moment and enjoy the experiences you're having and people you're with, even in times that seem more difficult than others. There are always sunny days ahead, and that fact remains true, even today.