

Katee Orr
Experiencing a Pandemic

The first I heard about coronavirus was a meme on Twitter about the beer. After that, Michael Barbaro explained it a little more via The Daily podcast. COVID-19 seemed far away, like most world issues that have occurred in my lifetime. Living in Montana, I have never experienced a hurricane or tornado that washed my house away or flipped it upside down. My upbringing gave me the privilege of not witnessing a civil war in my backyard. All of these events, had they occurred, would have drastically changed my entire life, but they never happened. This pandemic is the first major event to occur in my lifetime that has drastically changed my lifestyle in a matter of days. Sure, there have been major policy changes, new laws, wildfires...etc but nothing that came, as an unforeseen circumstance, that uprooted my day-to-day activities. There is immense privilege in that statement, and I recognize that. This pandemic has led me feeling a certain amount of guilt and massive amount of gratitude.

I feel so guilty that I am still employed, and my job has a level of security. I feel guilty that I can be in the comfort of my parent's home, distanced from others and still have a paycheck. I feel guilty because I wonder why me? Why am I the one who gets to sit at home and take classes, earn a degree and work from my couch while some other 22-year-old girl is not offered the same luxuries. I read articles every day about the millions of people this virus is impacting negatively. From farmers who have to throw away crops, to truck drivers with no places to eat, to the African American communities who are disproportionately affected by the virus who am I to be sitting on my parent's couch every day? What can I do? Besides donate to the food bank and give blood and tip the restaurants at take-out? What can I do?

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Thinking about my way of life before COVID feels strange. The idea of getting up and going to class and work and dancing at the bars and skiing and going to cycling class, all those things seem distant from the life I am experiencing right now. I look at my calendar from February and wonder how in the hell I did it all.

7:00 A.M – Workout class

9:25 A.M—WRIT 494

10:45 A.M—Work

12:15 P.M—CAP Mentoring

1:00 P.M—Work

3:00 P.M—WRIT 326

4:30 P.M—Study

7:00 P.M—Student Organization Meeting

8:30 P.M—The Bachelor Watch Party

I wonder how the hell I fit all that into one day when now even opening my computer feels like ascending Mount Everest. I knew I was trying to do too much, when I was in the weeds of doing too much. Running around like a chicken with its head cut off, I needed to feel the solid ground beneath my feet. I do now. I am grateful for this Pandemic because it has allowed me to press pause on the catastrophic symphony that was my life. And I feel so damn guilty that I am grateful for a Pandemic that is killing hundreds of thousands of people and ruining lives. That I get to reevaluate my priorities and read good books and dance to good music, when others' livelihoods are at stake. I feel so guilty. I feel so grateful.

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On a Zoom graduation celebration, we played Pomp and Circumstance while viewing a slideshow of the English graduates. My professor explained that save a Pandemic, we would be walking across the stage of the Brick Breeden Fieldhouse, shaking hands of faculty and President Cruzado and watching blue and gold balloons rain over us. Champ the Bobcat would dance down the aisle. I would take photos outside with my family and have brunch. Then, start a job. There were so many things that were “supposed to” happen and while they do seem trivial, it doesn’t make them less real. Spring Break, the end of ski season, Big Sky Pond Skim, Coachella Valley Music Festival, then Commencement. Instead, time happened, and those things were all cancelled.

I imagine in fifty years there will be an AP United States History exam prompt that asks about the Trump Administration response to the coronavirus outbreak of 2020. There will be context too, in fifty years. The Pandemic will be summarized into a few pages, a chapter maybe, of a textbook. Key figures will be memorized. The United States will be compared to China, South Korea, Italy. Students responding to the prompt may think back to their studies about the Orange Man who reigned over the United States during the time. The Pandemic will hopefully feel far away—something the students’ Grandparents survived.

There might be a movie, or a documentary made about the coronavirus Pandemic. The day-to-day activities of privileged people like me will be summarized into a montage of Tik-Tok, Tiger King, virtual workouts, finishing papers, and Outer Banks. The heroic actions of doctors and nurses, grocery store workers and delivery people will be set to an uplifting song. It’s one thing to look at a historical view through a wide lens, but this Pandemic has allowed the layers of

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humankind to be revealed. The layers of compassion, understanding, ignorance and fear. Where some people are carrying guns, others are wearing masks— both for protection. When some people howl on their porches, a cry to support the essential workers —others remain in their homes. The layers of humanity are being revealed day by day and week by week. There is too much sadness and despair and uncertainty to begin to comprehend. So, instead of guilt I choose compassion. Instead of fear I choose to optimize joy.

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