

Harrison Backer  
College Writing 2  
Life During the Pandemic  
05/04/20

### Life During the Pandemic

No one ever really knows what's going to happen throughout the course of their life. More than likely, if you were to predict what your life was going to be like ten years in the future, you're going to be way off on your prediction. Ten years ago, I would have been eleven years old in middle school in Sioux Falls, SD, and could never have predicted that I would even be living here in Bozeman, MT. I would have never guessed that I would be attending Montana State University pursuing a degree in Fish and Wildlife Management and planning on pursuing a career in Wildland Fire Suppression. Fast forwarding to the fall semester of 2019, I would have never been able to predict that the events so far in the spring of 2020 have transpired the way that they have. COVID-19 has affected every individual in the world in one way or another. It has personally changed my academic career and changed the way I have carried out my life for the past three months.

It was about two weeks before spring break in March 2020 when students at Montana State were first informed of the coronavirus outbreak in China and that it could possibly spread to the United States. I was in an entry level cell biology course on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at the time and my professor would give us daily updates on how much the virus had spread as well as how the virus would affect the human body once infected. At the time, no one seemed to really take it seriously and didn't think much of it. I, especially, had no concern and thought it would be close to impossible that a disease that resembled the flu would make its way all the way to the states and then spread to the resisting state of Montana. Ever since I moved to Bozeman in the summer of 2017, I had always thought that Montana had kind of a buffer from the rest of the country and that the state would be the last to be affected by anything whether it was nuclear war or a pandemic. It wasn't until that first week of spring break when I started receiving emails that the university would potentially be putting all classes online to limit contact between faculty and students that I realized the gravity of the issues that were at play.

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At the time this started happening, I was on spring break with my girlfriend Julia in Minneapolis MN with her family and I was celebrating my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March. I have never been one who enjoys celebrating my birthday with large groups of people or even throwing a party with friends. But as most Americans know, your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday is a pretty monumental milestone in which you are now of legal drinking age and most celebrate by going out on the town and ordering your first drink at a bar with some friends or family. Going back a few years to high school, I remember being in class with some of my buddies and all of us trying to plan out when our 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays would be and what all of us were going to do to celebrate. I can remember the monotony of scrolling through my old iPhone 4 that took so long to load because I had had it for almost five years and scrolling through the calendar to the year 2020. Only be depressed to find out that my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday would be on the 16<sup>th</sup> which just so happened to be a Monday.... while all my other friends had done the same and their birthdays lined up on a Friday or even the weekend. At the time I didn't know exactly what college I really wanted to attend and for that matter didn't even really know that spring break in college was a thing. So flashing forward again to the fall of 2019, my girlfriend and I find out that my birthday lines up perfectly with our spring break and that we would go to her parents house in Minnesota and celebrate by going out to the bars with just the two of us and then go to the Saint Patrick's Day parade downtown the following day. So it's understandable that after all the years since high school thinking that I would have to go to class the day after my 21<sup>st</sup> and then come to find out my birthday landed perfectly on our two week spring break that I would be very excited to be spending it with just my girlfriend in a city with countless bars and a huge parade. Then it is also understandable that when I find out the week before my birthday that the parade in Minneapolis is canceled and most bars would be closing their doors due to the COVID outbreak and how a little ashamed I felt. Oh well. Life goes on and this is only the beginning of my experience during the pandemic.

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That following week and a half in Minneapolis is a week that I'll probably never forget for the rest of my life. The city had just issued a stay at home order that all citizens were to abide by saying to only leave your home when absolutely necessary. It was then that I felt like Julia's and I's lives might be in danger. Not only were we over a thousand miles away from our homes in Bozeman, but we were in one of the most populated cities in America and one that has an international airport where people would be coming and going from all over the country. On top of that, Julia's parents were actually both out of the country for business related purposes and fortunately would be coming home but they asked us if we would get as much groceries and toilet paper that we could since everyone in the city would stock up and these commodities would be in short supply. On a side note, I think the shortage of toilet paper is what most people are going to think about when they reflect on this pandemic. I remember being awestruck at the amount of people we encountered at several different grocery stores, including a super target, and how everyone was wearing masks. People were running around with shopping carts as fast as possible trying to get enough food and supplies for their families and some were even stealing out of other people's shopping carts. At the same time, there are people yelling at each other because one of them broke the six-foot buffer zone that was advised by the CDC. Not being a very big discount shopper, it's what I imagined black Friday to be like at a Best Buy with an apocalypse going on simultaneously. At each store we went to, you would be lucky to find even the simplest of non-perishable items like canned goods or pasta/sauce. If you were fortunate enough to find a roll of toilet paper or paper towels, you had better guard it with your life like you were the first one to find a seam of gold during the gold rush.

During that second week of spring break, Julia and I went to my parent's house three hours south in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Though Sioux Falls isn't nearly as big of a city as Minneapolis, there was still much concern amongst its citizens regarding the outbreak. As it turns out, a few weeks after

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Julia and I visited, my Dad notified me the meat packaging plant Smithfield Food Inc. in Sioux Falls had a coronavirus outbreak in which over 700 employees tested positive for coronavirus. Making it the largest hotspot in the United States according to Forbes's website. While in South Dakota, my Mom and Dad told me how the virus would be affecting their jobs and that they would be working from home until further notice. It wasn't quite as hectic in Sioux Falls as it was back in Minneapolis. A lot of the businesses were still open even public places such as gyms and some restaurants. Julia and I were able to spend only a few days at my parent's house before we decided to head back to Bozeman since we had online classes starting that next week and thought it would be smarter to be back at our homes.

Upon our first few days back in Bozeman is when the orders were starting to be issued that you should self-quarantine for a minimum of 14 days with as little contact with others as possible and to not gather in groups larger than ten. For the next week or so, Julia and I spent most of the time apart at separate houses since she lives with two other roommates and I three other roommates so we could at least be separating each other's homes from potential contact our friends might have. As far as the 14-day self-quarantine went, I myself did not follow it as strictly as others did. When I wasn't trying to cram and get all my homework done, I would usually go out fishing or bear hunting. Since I had just turned 21, I decided to purchase a new handgun as a little birthday present to myself. Most of the stores I went to were various places that sold ammunition because there was a restriction on how much handgun ammo you can buy at once. Some stores would let you buy five boxes of ammo, some two, some four. For anyone that knows how much training goes into perfecting shooting a handgun, they know that one box of ammunition does not last very long. I had talked to a gun clerk at one of the stores and he said firearms sales had gone up some 300 percent across the country since they started issuing stay at home orders. Typically, when I pick up a new hobby, I find myself getting super frustrated if I find I'm not very good at it. I have spent a lot of time growing up shooting rifles and shotguns and bow and arrows but

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not so much time dedicated to handguns. So, a lot of my time was dedicated to shooting hundreds of rounds of ammunition on a piece of state land not too far from my house in Four Corners.

At the time, Montana had around 300 confirmed cases and only about a third of that was in Gallatin county. From what I understood, most of the cases in and around Bozeman were from other college students who had traveled via airlines to other parts of the country and picked up the virus. My house is in Four Corners which is about five miles west of Bozeman, so I felt safe going to get any supplies I needed there at the Four Corners Murdoch's for any tools and outdoor related equipment. My roommates and I would go to the grocery store in Belgrade where we would get enough food for the four of us for the next two weeks. It was weird walking into those stores. Almost every business had markers lined out on the floor that were spread six feet apart, so customers knew how far away to stand from one another. At every business that had checkout counters, plexy glass was used to protect the cashier from potentially being contaminated from sneezing or coughing and every employee wore latex gloves. Though it was advised to wear at least something to cover your face, I never saw a lot of people, in the smaller cities at least, that wore a mask. I think part of it has to do with what I mentioned earlier in that most Montanans think there's no possible way that they could be infected. Some sort of underlying stubbornness at play.

One of the harder things that affected me on several occasions was not being able to shake hands with anyone. In mid-April I was looking to purchase a backcountry touring ski setup and found a guy that was selling some on Facebook marketplace. When I arrived at the individual's house, there was sort of an awkward moment when we first met as we greeted each other from a distance rather than up close and personal and exchanging a handshake. This scenario played over on several occasions throughout the month and was very uncomfortable for me. It has always been an old habit for me and

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good manners that an exchange of a proper handshake was used when just meeting someone or to confirm a purchase. I can't really put into words what it feels like other than each of those exchanges just felt fake to me and that they had no significance. Not to undermine the value of verbal exchange but a good handshake is something I have missed a lot during these times.

A topic of major concern during this time has been the issue of finding work or having financial stability during the pandemic. Most if not all businesses have closed their doors and if they haven't, they likely have cut wages or even staff. Being a full-time student during the fall and spring semesters I have never had a job while trying to focus on schooling. During the summer, I work out of Billings, Montana as a Forestry Technician for the Bureau of Land Management in wildfire suppression. In short, I work as a wildland firefighter based out of Billings but travel all over the country wherever resources are needed to suppress wildland fires. I have been very fortunate during the pandemic since my job is seasonal and I only work in the summer months and save enough money to last through the school year. Accompanied with that, President Trump signed a multi-trillion-dollar bill that provided Americans with a stimulus check to help during these hard times. As far as my job goes and from what I was told by my superiors, there will always be fires and bodies are needed to put them out. As of now, I have been told that the only thing affecting my job is that the 20 man crew I am on will likely be split up into two ten man modules and that instead of traveling all over the country like we have in years past, we will be confined to our region of Montana and the Dakotas. I cannot describe how thankful this news made me at, knowing that my job is secure unlike the hundreds or thousands of people in America and around the world are getting by providing for their families on little to nothing.

I wanted to save the portion pertaining to my academic career for last since I think it's only fair to give a synapse of the whole semester during the pandemic. Needless to say, it has been one of the

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hardest semesters for me in my entire academic career. When I first heard that classes at Montana State would be going online, a part of me was a little excited that students would not have to return to campus and instead could work from home almost like a super long vacation. The other part of me was terrified and knew that personally, online classes have not gone well in the past. The first month and a half of the spring semester was one of the best I've had in all my schooling. I felt like I was pretty well managing all my classes and had great grades going into spring break and had a daily routine for schoolwork, exercising, and spending time with my Julia. After spring break is when it went downhill. With classes being online I felt like I had all this free time suddenly and didn't need to dedicate it so much to my academics. Like I stated before, I have taken a few online classes prior to the pandemic and the same thing had happened. Call it what you will but whether its lack of motivation or not delegating priorities, I don't learn as well reading or watching a computer monitor as I do with hands-on experience. Especially being a biology major, I had several labs this semester with one involving dissecting flowers and annotating them. Completing objectives that felt like minutes in a classroom took hours to complete on a computer. I have never been the most tech savvy, so I do not enjoy spending long periods of time on a computer though I do feel like maybe the pandemic has helped me in that field. I felt like I was always being rushed to complete assignments so that I could go and do the things I actually wanted to do like spending time with Julia and being outside hunting and fishing. It also didn't seem to help that two of my roommates would be nearing their graduation and the work loads they would have for the week seemed like nothing in comparison to mine. Regardless of how many excuses I try and make for myself, I was just excited for the semester to be done and gone.

One good thing that did result from all the extra time spent at home was all the time that was spent with Julia and some other friends. That was probably one of the most important factors in staying sane throughout this time was just having good friends to talk to and play board games or even crack a

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cold one. Julia and I got to spend more time together than ever which helped to show us a lot about each other and what it means to live together. The hard thing with fire season starting the second week of May and going right up to the first week of school in the fall is that we don't get a lot of face time in the summer. This year will be different since it will be her first summer she stays in Montana instead of going back to Minneapolis but even with that there's maybe only a week or so total throughout the summer we will be able to see each other. So, having some extra time during the school semester has been a challenge and a blessing all at once.

2020 has been a whirlwind of events that I think none of us could have predicted. We haven't even made it halfway through the year and its already consisted of some of the most grueling hardships some of us will ever have to endure throughout our lives. I just want to take this time again to say how fortunate I feel even though I feel like it has been a very tough start to the year, I know I do not have it nearly as bad as some. I would like to thank all the faculty of Montana State University for everything the campus has done to assist the students and I would especially like to thank the professors for all that they have done adapting to the events of this spring.