

The Lens of Time

My Brief Coronavirus Memoir

By Zachary Weber

Introduction

Even as I write this now on November 15th, 2020, I wonder if I am perhaps being too dramatic, presenting my memories of the COVID-19 pandemic in a style befitting some gothic horror novel. Normally I would dismiss such a concern as petty or insignificant—and I could very well do so by the time I reach the next paragraph—but this feels like a unique case. I have heard several times this year that we are “living history” or something to that effect. Aren’t we always? Yes, and for the longest time (until just now, in fact) that was the end of it. I never paid much mind the assertion that we are agents of some pivotal plot point in our world’s story, but now as I undertake the task of portraying my experiences as even somewhat interesting, I am developing a bit of an epiphany: it is not that we are “living history” as I have so often heard; we *are* history, and that is what daunts me.

I am writing now for the express purpose of submitting my personal account for public reception, and while the chance of it receiving any significant attention is minute at *best*, I cannot help but be at least a little fazed by the idea that I am creating a lasting relic of history. People are right when they say this time will undoubtedly be referenced in future history books if not extensively detailed. People will study the global impacts and nuanced ramifications of this pandemic for years, decades, and centuries to come (if humanity is even still around that far into the future). On the off chance some scholar scouring the most obscure corners of the internet stumbles across this memoir in search of resources for some dissertation or whatever, I can only hope it fulfills its purpose and does not serve to besmirch my legacy. (I pray to God it doesn’t *constitute* my legacy.) If you are that student of history, get in touch with me! I would be delighted to hear that this paragraph-long attempt at a joke resonated with *someone*. If I am dead, comatose, or otherwise impossible to contact, I wish you good luck on your studious endeavor! (I know there is no way you read this far just for fun.)

Levity aside, what follows is my personal account of my life during the COVID-19 pandemic and my best attempt to

relate it to your interest. Writing is my greatest passion, so I hope my writer's flare enhances the reading experience rather than muddling it with purple prose and inadvertent pretentiousness. The realization I have come to through writing this introduction is that this is as much a reflection of my personality as it is of the pandemic. While that may seem like an irrelevant or even egocentric statement, I promise it bears some significance. Lockdown and quarantine facilitated this sort of introspection at a turning point in my life, so anxiety over the future dominated my mind over the course of my isolated months; consequently, when I look to the past, I think of the future, and from here in the present, they both seem like such a blur. That is the lens of time.

School Shutdown

When the first coronavirus outbreak occurred in Wuhan, China in December of 2019, no one here in the United States could have predicted what it would eventually become. I certainly did not expect it. Living in a rural part of Wisconsin's driftless area, I figured the coronavirus would play out much like the ebolavirus as far as I was personally concerned. I would hear about it in the news whenever the media was not busy sensationalizing something else, but it would never come anywhere near me. I was too busy just trying to power through what was effectively my last year of high school to pay much attention to current events. (That might just be an excuse, though. I could *never* be bothered to watch the news.) In retrospect, it is weird to think that, when the coronavirus broke out, I was just looking forward to Christmas break. It started before Christmas! The few months it took to really pick up in the United States were cited as a testimony to how fast it could spread, but let me tell you, being high school, those few months felt ungodly slow.

Rumors that we might get out of school for a week or two began to circulate, and I was not complaining. When they eventually came to fruition in March, the announcement that we would switch to online learning for a few weeks after the upcoming spring break was met with unanimous excitement. When even teachers posited that we might not return until after summer and generally communicated to us students with transparent uncertainty, it became clear that what we were experiencing was once-in-a-lifetime *if that*. I was still more than happy with never having to step foot in a high school class ever again, but as digital education progressed, people's viewpoints started to diverge. Not everyone remained content for as long as I did, and that largely had to do with not everyone benefitting from the remote learning format. Now that I think about it, you are, in fact, reading this, presumably, to get an understanding of what life was like during the pandemic, so I guess I should probably describe it!

While different schools handled the state-mandated shutdown differently, the unifying aspect seemed to be Zoom calls. If it was not Zoom, it was Google Meet or some other similar software. The typical grid of disheveled classmates or coworkers eventually became a nationwide phenomenon, and I remember hearing people lament not previously buying stock in the companies behind the software that made virtual meetings possible. Despite the root cause of such a drastic shift in format being a pandemic, the widespread response to everyone's shared experience was to turn it into a joke (because what else, right?) Although I never participated in the memes much myself (because memes are nothing more than unoriginal jokes), I definitely noticed the trend despite my social media presence being pretty much nonexistent, and it persisted for months.

As much as people wanted to make light of the situation that we all found ourselves in, discontent brewed beneath the surface of things. The idea of never returning to high school was unappealing to many seniors who wanted to spend the last of it together in person. I was junior myself, but I was on track to move on to college the next year anyway, so I think I have a right to say I did not understand the fuss. I could not wrap my mind around the sheer volume of disgruntled students' collective voice. As far as I was concerned, graduation meant a diploma. The ceremony and applause were just for show anyway; missing such a superficial procedure was nothing to stress over. To be *so* upset over missing the chance to be the center of attention seemed quite self-absorbed, to be perfectly honest, but I don't think the people who subscribed to that mentality all did so out of egotism. It was just unsettling for an event that should have been a guarantee get completely skipped over, and people were not comfortable with where things were headed. Even on that level, though, I could not relate, at least not then. The frustration would kick in soon enough!

Until then, though, I was just riding out my final months of high school. School days were not nearly as long as before, homework was substantially reduced, I did not have to be around so many people all day, and even Advanced Placement exams were made easier to compensate for lost instruction time. Spring sports were out of the question, but I never partook in them, so I

did not mind. Our junior prom got canceled, but I would not have gone anyway, so I could not have cared less. The only thing my family missed out on during this time was our scheduled vacation to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, but to be honest, I was not even bothered by that. I have never been outgoing, and had I been in charge of things, we would have never planned a vacation to begin with. If you are from that area, I mean no offense. I am sure it's a wonderful place; I just did not want to, you know, *go there*. I did not want to go anywhere! How wonderful was it that we were expected *not* to!

At least where I was from, though, I felt alone in that thinking. Every day, it seemed more and more people around me actually *wanted* to go back to school, until one day, just like that, our second semester was over, and I was done with high school. I had not officially graduated—I still needed one more credit that I would go on to acquire via college courses—but I would never have to attend again.

Summer Suspense

The first portion of summer break was fine. As with any other summer break, I was just enjoying the lack of school. Many other people all across the country complained about the lack of available activities, but since there existed no excursion nor attraction that could have intrigued me, I spent my locked-down summer the same way I spent any other summer and the same way I would have spent it had COVID-19 never existed: I pursued hobby writing in hopes of eventually making a career out of it, I played piano because I enjoy experimenting with music, I watched movies and played video games because fiction engrosses me like nothing else, and I satisfied my curiosity via endless internet rabbit holes. Such activities are, for the introverted, the equivalent of lively parties for extroverts. That facet of my personality was atypical in my hometown of about two-thousand people. Sure, everyone watched movies, browsed the internet, and the like, but my total disinterest in gossip and athletics was definitely abnormal in such a small town. Though I am sure some might object to the claim, I will maintain that those two things formed the basis of nearly all recreation that could be accessed without leaving town.

Basically, my ability to entertain myself without external aid put me at odds with the festering frustration most others experienced, both locally and beyond. I know I was not alone in my comfort, though. I have heard of others who felt the same, but it did not last forever. I had so much spare time to indulge myself in my hobbies and passions that they started to lose their appeal. The novelty of being expected to stay home began to wear off, and the unbearable boredom began to set in. I started to understand how other people had been feeling all along. The difference was that my dejection could not have been so easily alleviated by access to time-killers and diversions. I never would have guessed that the most introspective time of my life thus far would be brought about by a pandemic.

As summer break waned and the current school year approached, people began getting busier. Lockdowns and restrictions, at least in my area, became laxer, and life started

returning to somewhat normal for many people. School was to be available both in person and online for five days a week, and simple activities such as eating out and golfing were opening up again. For me, personally, none of that meant anything. The last couple weeks of my summer overlapped with the hectic my family was experiencing in returning to school. Both of my brothers were younger than me and in school, my mom worked as a teacher, and my dad worked at the family company in town, so for the final portion of August and into the beginning of September, I was often alone with nothing I needed or wanted to do.

My lack of energy and motivation were, as far as I understood, common during this time; in fact, as I said, many people started experiencing these depressive symptoms earlier than I. Anyone who lived through this time will attest to how strange and frustrating it was to constantly be cooped up at home, but for someone who *liked* staying home, the idea that I would get sick of it after only a few months surprised me, and the problem ran deeper than that. I had just about completed my high school curriculum and was transitioning into college. I needed to decide where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do, but I kept running into a problem that I still grapple with to this day: my ambition often clashes with my realism. If my ambitious dreams could be complemented by a bit of quixotism, I might set myself for massive disappointment down the road, but I cannot help but wonder if I would prefer that to constantly dreading the possibility of living an unsatisfying life. For someone like me, not leaving an impact or making use of my talents and ideas is a wasted life, and there is no worse thought than my life someday feeling like a waste.

This whole internal conflict of mine has admittedly been unnecessary doom and gloom, stress over the uncontrollable. With so much time to myself and my interests depleted, though, I really had nothing to do but think, and in such a miserably bored state, all I could think about was whether life would ever get better. Of course, the pandemic would one day go away, but the pandemic itself started to feel like an afterthought. Its only significance in regard to my personal troubles during this time was providing the lull in my life necessary to provoke my

troubling ruminations: Do I really want to be a writer? Is it a reasonable ambition? Should I pursue something more realistic? Would I be able to live with myself for abandoning a dream? Will my ideas pan out the way I intend? Will my work really enrich the lives of others? Is that *all* I want out of life? Maybe I *do* want a wife and kid someday.

It was overwhelming, as you can imagine, but there was no escaping it. The only remedy was a temporary one. My creative, imaginative bursts would leave me with fleeting hope, but in between writing or piano sessions (which can only last so long), I would go right back to lounging around, anxious for the future. I would wonder, *Even when the pandemic eventually subsides, will my life still be so dishearteningly mundane?* It was not *my* fault that so little entertains me and that pop culture and social media consistently fail to capture my interest. With my happiness and well-being riding on the lofty goals that stemmed from my few passions, that pressure would lead to me imagining myself, decades in the future, regretfully looking back on a wasted life with nothing to do and no one to engage with. Boredom and isolation were the links between the pandemic and my worries, and it did not help that there was so little to distract me from them.

Even worse was that, during the same time, the pandemic became increasingly politicized because of the upcoming election (which was a mess and will surely be remembered as such). Every time I hear about the pandemic now, I am reminded about why I hate politics. People's lives became political stepping-stones, and the suffering economy was destroying lives we had *not* lost. As tragic as that was, though, it was a pandemic. People were inevitably going to die, and economics would undoubtedly be disrupted. Depending on which talking point politicians preferred, they would pretend we were experiencing the redux of either the Black Death or the Great Depression, but the reality is that this was COVID-19. We were not going to lose half of Europe, and we would not have to enter a world war to get our economy back on its feet. Politicians all just wanted to pretend they were going to fix everything or *would have fixed* everything. No one could have controlled a virus, and how closely the virus affected any given individual was a tossup.

What *did* impact every single American during these few months was the shock of having our very way of life stripped from us out of nowhere. In some ways, people actually benefited from being forced to take life slower and spend more time with their families. Materialism and hedonism stopped being at the forefront of society for a while, and that was a win in my book. The unfortunate fact is that no one focused on that; no one wanted to think about what we could learn from history despite touting that we were “witnessing it unfold before our very eyes”. People ignoring the subtler but deeper ramifications of these events made me believe that, after it was all said and done, people would go right back to their vain, vitriolic, violent, tendencies (which they already have). For someone who was already struggling with hopeless thoughts about the future, that notion did not do me any good. My personal pessimism blended with an amplified cynicism aimed at the rest of the world. Everything was going wrong, and my first months out of high school were miserable. Why should the rest of my life have turned out any better?

College Chaos

I passed my first college course during the summer after eighth grade, and throughout high school, I continued to accrue college credits in order to boost my grade point average and, more importantly, accelerate my progress through both high school and college. This extensive, early experience gradually acclimated me to college classes, and as a result, I was none too nervous about my first semester taking *only* college credits. This was the fall semester of 2020, and I was actually pleased with my classes being online. COVID-19 was part of it, but I mostly just did not want to commute forty-five minutes to Eau Claire multiple times a week, especially when winter would come around.

Although being able to receive my college education from the comfort of my own home was convenient, it meant my daily isolation persisted. The hours upon hours of needless dread were at least somewhat lessened by my preoccupation with virtual meetings, prerecorded lectures, digital assignments, and plenty of reading and writing, but the thought still crossed my mind that I was missing out on the chance to ease my anxiety through access to university opportunities. Maybe the fear that I would spend my entire life unmotivated and unhappy would diminish if I were able to obtain a clearer direction to my goals.

Frankly, though, I dodged a bullet with my absence. It did not take long for the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire to have positive cases start popping up and entire sectors of the dormitories quarantined. As of the time of my writing this, things seem to have calmed down a fair amount, but from the little time I *have* spent present on campus, the typical, bustling college life is absent. The party scene has never been for me and never will be, but the dreariness that permeates what should otherwise be a motivating environment is not any better. (Okay, maybe part of that was the fact that the one in-person class session I attended was on a rainy day, so the breath that fogged up my glasses stuck and effectively frosted over my field of view.) Regardless, even though people were able to attend

college, it did not seem to quell the mood the coronavirus cursed us all with.

College, to me, despite how some might have disagreed, was still school, and school of all things could have never mended my situation. An additional stressor was not what I needed; I needed something to give me a sense of purpose. That is not to say, though, that college only contributed to my problem. I would say that its effect, for the most part, was neutral, but unlike the eventless weeks leading up to my first semester, it had its highs and lows. That, at least, was enough to sometimes distract me from my unwelcome existential crisis.

My situation has improved since the semester started, but I could not pinpoint any cause of that or when I even noticed I was doing better. I must have gradually moved away from my propensity for negativity, and while I surely still have my moments of defeatist thinking, I would not say I am questioning the meaning of my existence so thoroughly. At times, during the summer, I would second-guess my dreams and ambitions, something that is unthinkable for me when I am at my best. I am, overall, as unwavering as I would like to be in my determination to succeed.

I do not know what brought this clarity upon me. I would wager that the chance to expand my writing experience in college and receive appropriate feedback has bolstered my resolve to make that passion a primary focus of my life, and getting busy with sustaining strong grades has filled the void I experienced in summer, but as I am writing this now, I feel that I have underestimated how dramatically my mentality has bounced back and forth throughout this pandemic and how significantly the experience has impacted me. I notice now how important this newfound insight is. I have always had dreams and goals, and in many ways, they have remained the same, but they have also greatly matured, and now, more than ever, my place in the world is clear. At least, it seems that way.

COVID-19 thankfully never struck my family as hard as it did others, and while my sympathy goes out to anyone who suffered from it more severely than I, I cannot pretend that it ever felt like the looming threat that the media portrayed it as. This undoubtedly has much to do with me living in a very rural

area, but the point is that, as far as my story is concerned, the pandemic only served as the catalyst for a more abstract, personal struggle. I certainly did not enjoy the months of anxiety, but I am thankful things never got worse than that for me, and to my surprise, I am actually kind of grateful that I have come out of such an ordeal wiser in a way. I cannot help but wonder how things would be had none of this ever happened. Sure, there are obvious things that I need not even name, but this pandemic has had more discrete impacts, and that is the point I am trying to make.

It might seem that I am writing as if the pandemic is in the past, and while I would argue that the worst of it is over (hopefully history does not prove me wrong), it is still very much prevalent in our society. The media does not focus on in so singularly, but that is because politicians, magnates, and journalists have found other things to sensationalize. Now that the election is over (albeit dubious and contested), these people have no need to constantly remind us about the coronavirus. I do not think we ever forgot about it; we just learned to live with it. Although illness and hardship are indisputably unfortunate, I hope that, at the very least, society will come out of this situation stronger and more self-aware. I know I have, and despite the circumstances surrounding my personal realizations, I appreciate the growth I have experienced during this time. After all, what else should we do if not make the best out of what life gives us?

Conclusion

Proofreading my writing here, I worry that my thoughts are too broad and so far ahead of my fingers that what I have produced is a worthless, jumbled mess. It reads, in many parts, less like an account of my experiences and more like a recollection of my feelings throughout the pandemic. While our conscious thoughts manifest in clear phrases, feelings beneath our consciousness are often harder to put into words. I know what I want to say; I just hope *how* I have said it is comprehensible. The point I am trying to raise about the COVID-19 pandemic was that, on an individual level, there was more to it than the basics that the media reported. Death counts, economic statistics, public reactions, and other such things are significant for sure, but tasked with depicting *my* experience, I find it more appropriate to write about things on a more individual level and offer a glimpse into *one person's* life during this particularly historic year.

It is strange—and slightly amusing—to me that even *I* am struggling to grasp the overarching point of this memoir based solely on what I have included in its contents. As a fiction writer, I am used to deliberately developing coherent themes in my work, but this is not fiction. I am not writing a story to enrich the lives of my readers; I am simply telling them what happened and, to the best of my ability, explaining what it was like to experience. I am not the author, only the messenger. Unlike fiction, I can neither clarify nor obscure this story. Due to this uncertainty, I invite you to think just as critically as I about what the takeaway is here.

Personally, I believe my own experiences during this pandemic have exemplified how gain can come from hardship. Suffering is not something to be celebrated, but it is an inevitable fact of life, so seeing as how we must deal with it, trying to turn any part of it into something worthwhile is the logical thing to do. Recognizing even the good that has come out of this year does not belittle all the misfortune brought about by its plethora of struggles. If we fail to learn from our experiences, our suffering is in vain, and at this point in time, I fear that is exactly

what will happen. Unless enough people are able to retain the lessons that we have learned this year, they will be lost in no time.

This year has demonstrated the importance of caring for one's family, reason to acknowledge the little things in life, value in slowing down to appreciate immaterial blessings, and how to find the truth between conflicting barrages of propaganda and disinformation. Just as quarantine and isolation prompted me to reevaluate my life, I am sure many others felt lost and uncertain. In that situation you have to make a choice: will you submit to suffering and crumble under pressure or find purpose in the pain and motivation to persevere? Life is a series of chain reactions called chaos theory or the butterfly effect. Anything that happens will inevitably result in both positive and negative consequences, so all we can do is try to maximize the good, mitigate the bad, and keep on our path.

Sure, I *could* go on to spite the universe out of resentment for my prolonged distress, but both for my own sake and all those around me, I will be better than that. I will turn my experiences, both good and bad, into knowledge and wisdom that I will take with me for the rest of my life. I will make these experiences worth the trouble, and I implore you to do the same. If you're stuck with nothing to do for one reason or another, or you're simply going through a rough patch, do not simply expect the answers to come to you. If you stop for a while and take a break from the busyness that pervades modern life, you will find yourself able to think more clearly about your life as a whole. You will find that the past, your future, and your present perception of the two are all intertwined. Look through the lens of time and decide how your past will influence your future. If there's one thing I learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that we do not stand a chance if we are not willing to think for ourselves and take agency over our own actions *and reactions* to what happens around us. God help us if the media's alarmism comes to influence public thought even more than it already does.