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Some Reflections after COVID in London

At the beginning of quarantine, when COVID-19 got serious enough in the US that everything was shut down (or perhaps many months into it—the memories blur together now), I told myself that once it was over, I would write a reflection on the pandemic and how it impacted me. I don't entirely remember the reason I wanted this. Maybe it was simply me fantasizing about a time when the pandemic was firmly in the past. Maybe it was me forgetting, at home with not enough to do, how little free time I usually have. Maybe it was me desperately hoping that the timespan from March 2020 to the end of the pandemic (however I was characterizing that end in my mind) would be one that I didn't want to entirely forget, that it wouldn't have been a waste, that in the future I could tie this horrific disaster up with a tidy bow and say "well, that was bad, but at least we learned something!"

At any rate, in January 2021 I added a task to the "No Due Date" section of my to-do list called "Reflection on COVID". With the World Health Organization declaring the end of the public emergency a week ago, I suppose now feels like a reasonable time to call the pandemic over in the US for most intents and purposes. Of course, people are still getting sick and dying, and I don't want to minimize that. But most Americans that want to have been vaccinated, most mask mandates have now been lifted, and very few of the markers that we're in a pandemic still remain. I'm writing this in London, a place I was planning to visit in the summer of 2020 and waited three years to. Riding on transit in Europe this trip has been the first time in over three years I've ridden public transportation without wearing a mask, and while I didn't feel quite as

comfortable around people as I did before COVID, I think I felt about as comfortable as I'm going to for a long time. I suppose now seems like a good time to cross this off my to-do list.

Quarantine, the initial months, was of course the most disorienting. I watched live on Sunday, March 15th as Governor McMaster announced that South Carolina schools would be closed for two weeks, which then turned into a month, and eventually the rest of the school year. I, like all of us, remember that time and after so vividly. The first day I had off from school, I used the time to go to the DMV to get my passport. I had plans to go to London in May with my grandparents, and I'm not sure it even crossed my mind that everything would still be shut down two months from then. Clearly, I was not living in reality, but were any of us, really? Those first weeks and months were bizarre, and scary, and none of us knew what was happening though many (certainly including me) pretended to.

With the benefit of some hindsight, these months of profound change and isolation were probably the most difficult part of the pandemic for me. But there was also something nice about all feeling like we were in it together. There were people protesting lockdowns immediately, but they started as a fringe minority. There was generally a sense of support for one another, and it felt like most people were on the same page with staying home and being cautious. Everyone was scared, but also telling each other that we could get through this because we couldn't afford to lose hope. There was space to lay in your bed and mourn the things you lost, even little things. There was time to connect with old friends, and to do whatever you needed to cope. In those early months, South Carolina didn't look too different from England and elsewhere around the globe—there was space for essential workers to do their jobs, and most other people who could were staying home. The roads in South Carolina were mostly empty like the subway in New York like the tube was in London. I was incredibly lucky, of course. I didn't lose people I loved,

or experience financial instability, or homeschool children, or put my life at risk as a healthcare worker. But still. It felt like a shared experience to some extent.

As the pandemic wore on, that sense all but disappeared. The death of George Floyd, BLM protests, parents pressuring schools in a thousand different directions, a president mocking COVID precautions, a divisive election, and a myriad of other issues felt like a reminder that America's problems were very much still there, and now we would have to navigate them alongside a pandemic. Cases were rising, but people were starting to lose the energy to care anymore. In his touching collection of essays, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, John Green wrote in September of 2020 that "plague is a one-star phenomenon, but our response to it need not be". I found the idea comforting when I read it, but I was starting to lose hope that it would ultimately ring true. Some groups of people were doing their best to be safe—I was only going to school once a week, for example, which made it even more infuriating when others had completely stopped trying. My church youth group starting meeting without masks in September, and when I emailed my leader with a slightly more diplomatic version of "why the hell would you think this would be a good idea?" he essentially responded that people were tired of being careful and he didn't think people would come if they were made to be cautious. I felt deeply uncomfortable and anxious going there, so I stopped.

I felt I was being responsible, but also, the pandemic gave me a perfect outlet to indulge the worst parts of myself. I started following the news more closely, and I sought out people being stupid about COVID—people and politicians refusing to wear masks and yelling about their rights as Americans, parents protesting their children being forced to suffer the indignity of wearing a mask in school, conspiracy theorists spouting misinformation about the vaccine when it became available. It outraged me, and I don't think I was wrong to be angry because those

people's actions caused a lot of additional suffering. But a small part of me also enjoyed it. Of course it did; why else would I have sought it out? I enjoyed feeling smarter than them, being in the right while they were in the wrong, feeling altruistic because I would wear a mask and get vaccinated while they selfishly refused to.

When the vaccine first became available to me, my mom didn't want me to get it. This was out of a sense of caution toward a medical treatment she saw as new and not sufficiently tested rather than believing the conspiracy theories, but it still infuriated me. In our many fights about it, I told her that "there is literally nothing you can say to convince me that the vaccine is dangerous". Realistically, there still isn't anything she can say short of citing several well-designed large-scale medical studies to convince me of that—she isn't a doctor, and I don't regret getting the vaccine (a few months later than I would have liked) at all. But this clearly was not a helpful thing to say in a dialogue, and I don't blame her for throwing up her hands and walking away. How do you respond to that? It reflected my same sense of viewing the pandemic as more black-and-white than it really was, and a conviction held with a depth I'm somewhat ashamed of that I was right and I was better than those who were wrong.

In May of 2021, a year after I was originally planning to go to London, I probably could have gone. But my grandparents, who were unwilling to get the vaccine, couldn't, so we pushed it back another year. By that point, COVID was starting to feel like something normal that we were going to have to live with. The emergence of the Delta and then Omicron variants were scary, but it was hard to feel like they were as much of an emergency as the original strain. I wore a mask in class, I avoided huge crowds, and I still felt more anxious about my health and those around me more than I had for the first 16 years of my life. But the novelty had worn off. I started college, and it was always a consideration, but not at the forefront of my mind. I got

COVID for the first time in January of 2022, and then again in August, and both times were difficult, but I wasn't afraid for my life like I might have been in 2020. It was routine by that point how to navigate COVID. I got tested, isolated, notified the people I'd been in contact with when I wasn't wearing a mask, and went home. The social and logistical parts were harder than actually being sick.

Last summer in 2022, my grandparents and I pushed back our trip to London yet again, because I had an internship that conflicted with when they were free. It felt like another reminder that the pandemic had taken things and plans that now might never happen. By that point, my anxiety about COVID was mostly gone, but being careful about it still felt like part of my identity. I often checked the CDC website for their mask recommendations in my area, which were based on the number of cases and hospitalizations. I hope you won't judge me too harshly for this inexcusable thought pattern, but there was a small part of me that wanted the recommendations to be put back in place so I could feel that sense of moral superiority again. Let me repeat that: part of me functionally *wanted more people to be sick and hospitalized* so that I could judge other people for not wearing a mask in response. I wanted to feel vindicated that the people who hadn't sacrificed as much as me had caused the problem. It was a subconscious part, but still. The people spreading misinformation were misguided, but I almost seem worse.

It's now May of 2023, and I'm finally in London. I went with a class before I met my grandparents and felt much more comfortable exploring on my own than I would have three years ago, but it did happen eventually. Travelling here and then around the city has really made it feel like the pandemic is firmly in the rear-view mirror. My transit was a stark contrast to the first time I flew and stayed in a hotel in 2020, when I had a panic attack feeling like COVID was in the air and I was being contaminated. Three years later on this trip, I had minimal anxiety

being crammed into the flight from Greenville to Atlanta, the first time I'd been on a plane without a mask since 2019. It didn't bother me walking through the Atlanta airport despite it being just as crowded as before the pandemic. When I sat down for my eight-hour flight to London, I talked to my seat partner for a few minutes, something I almost never do. I didn't feel the obsessive need to use hand sanitizer after touching anything, and I didn't feel my breath catch in my chest when I heard people coughing or sneezing. COVID crossed my mind, but it was a passing thought rather than a nagging, constant fear. I thought about how we rarely find ourselves in a situation so vulnerable to and dependent upon strangers as on public transit, but this thought struck me as rather lovely instead of terrifying like it may have felt three years ago. Instead of viewing those around me as threats to my health, I saw them as companionable people with as full inner lives as me. I wondered why they were traveling or returning to London, how they were feeling, how comfortable they were, and I felt a sense of connection to them even though in all likelihood I'll never see any of them again.

I've felt the same way travelling since I've gotten here. The tube is crowded, but I don't avoid using it. There was even a time where I chose to use it when I could have walked just as easily, because I wanted to try doing it alone. When I was in a pub and asked to hold the hand of the person to my left and to my right, I wasn't incapacitated until I washed my hands like I would have been two years ago. When I've seen faded, peeling signs asking people to social distance or wear a mask, they feel like relics of the pandemic rather than still applying. When I was on a bus so full that I could barely move, I found it unpleasant, but mostly because it was too hot and I didn't want to bump into people and make them uncomfortable, rather than worrying the people around me would infect me. They could have, of course—human bodies are

disgusting—but my brain can't afford to be as worried about that as it has been for the last three years. The occasional cold is worth it.

I'm extremely thankful that the pandemic is mostly over. It wasn't as smooth or short of a transition out as any of us had hoped or most of us had expected, but the “new normal” people were concerned would never quite resemble pre-COVID really seems mostly the same as before. I feel much better able to empathize with people I see walking down the street again. It was obviously always an oversimplification to think that I could determine a person's worldview or care for others by whether they were wearing a mask—my dad didn't wear one that often, for example, and I agree with him on most of the important things—but it was easy to fall into that way of thinking. Now that basically no one is, it's easier to relate to other people again. America has innumerable problems, but it is nice finally feeling like I can stop worrying about this one.

I think this absence of COVID in my mental space is the real reason I feel like the pandemic is over, not the WHO announcement or the statistics. I suspect others feel the same way, and so of course if they were barely thinking about COVID two years ago, the pandemic probably felt over to them then. I expect that's why many chose to not wear masks (they didn't feel needed to them) or get vaccinated (they thought the small risk outweighed the perceived benefit). The news and people around them weren't talking about how bad COVID was, and so they made judgment calls in the same way I did, just with different outcomes. I think those people were misguided, but it's reductive and unfair to label everyone who didn't do the same things I did selfish. I'm angry at the polarization of our media and the actions of many of our politicians that made so many feel like that was okay, but I don't feel as angry at the general population anymore.

So overall, I can't wrap up the pandemic with a bow like my past self wanted me to. I'm rarely one to try to find silver linings in disaster, especially when I suffered very little compared to many others, and the idea of doing so with COVID seems especially laughable. Maybe we learned something, but it doesn't feel like anything as much as the amount of suffering that resulted. The pandemic highlighted and inflamed many problems in the United States and the world more generally, but it doesn't feel any clearer what the solutions are. How do we address inequity, misinformation, political tribalism, and our tendency to view those who disagree with us as inherently flawed? I certainly don't know, and I'm not sure anyone does. We can talk about echo chambers, polarization, and algorithmically influenced media feeds, but we've been doing that already. How do we fix it? How can we improve our odds that the next time a situation like COVID comes along, it isn't so much of a mess?

I'm torn whether to end this reflection on a note of frustration or hope. It feels like the suffering from COVID was a waste, and I don't know if we're going to get better because of it. But I also don't think despair is productive. It's an easy narrative to fall into, but what's the point in trying to fix problems that we believe are unsolvable? Martin Luther King Jr. wrote 55 years ago that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I can only hope that COVID-19 was a downtick, that we are getting better and kinder, and that 55 years from now we can look back at this pandemic as a trying time from which we healed from and which inspired us to become better. Maybe I'm being naïve, but even if I am, I think it's the best course of action. In spite of all our problems, all of the things we've done wrong, I choose hope.

