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FINDING LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS: LIFE, LOSS, & LOVE DURING PANDEMIC
TIMES

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Finding light in the darkness: Life, Loss, & Love

Introduction

There is a collection of moments in my mind that make me so undeniably happy, even though they happened in the midst of a global health crisis. I helped my father adjust to working from home and learned so much about what he did for a living. My dog laid across my lap as I took classes from my bedroom. I sat across the table from my sister as we did homework together, something we had not done since I was in high school. I had tea every afternoon with my mother as we chatted about the happenings that day. My partner and I had nightly phone calls where we would talk about anything but the news. Though these may seem like small moments, there is a sweet compilation of memories that define my experience more so than everything else.

It is an inscrutable fact that there was a great deal of darkness brought into the world with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, with lives once lived being replaced by a “new normal.” The death toll rose steadily, with hospitals being filled beyond capacity and pop-up clinics being assembled throughout the nation. Loved ones were separated in more ways than one, with stay-at-home orders and lockdowns now at the forefront. Even when in-person, smiles were to remain hidden under a piece of fabric and individuals were kept out of reach from one another in order to slow the spread. However, to say that this tumultuous moment in history was only bad is to undermine the experiences of those who lived, learned, and adjusted in order to persevere despite the trying circumstances. It is too easy to be swept up by the numbers of infections and fatalities and disregard the lives of those who persevered. There is simply more to the story. Human experiences cannot only be defined by numbers.

As theorist and philosopher of politics, ethics, and culture Judith Butler suggests, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a vulnerability that we all share. Our lives are precarious, but some more so than others. Love is not a given, but it is a requirement if we are to truly be in it together. Loss is inevitable. But it does not need to be only a matter of mourning. An appreciation for our

shared vulnerability, says Butler, allows us to feel for the lives and the loves and the losses of “someone whose name you do not know, whose language you may not speak, who lives at an unbridgeable distance from where you live,” (Butler). Then again, such an appreciation can also move us to acknowledge the names of others, to learn what they have to say, and to close the gaps between us. This might begin with a question that Butler poses: “When the world as we know it falls apart, what then?” The stories that I recount here are meant as something of a provisional answer to that question.

Before I began this project, I battled with the idea that I could write a serious piece that challenged the narrative surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. I wanted to chronicle life and its nuanced definition, free from its ties to places and people seen along the way. I wanted to look at loss as an opportunity for something new, with tones of mourning intertwined with those of unashamed gratitude. And I wanted to see love for all that it could be, as something that endured in the face of adversity and adapted to the state of change in which we lived. These three themes defined my project from its onset, but I set out unsure that anyone would take it seriously because of the gravity of these pandemic times and, perhaps more importantly, unsure that anyone would have had any meaningful experiences at all.

But as I began to interview individuals for this project, people overwhelmingly shared that while some times were consumed with fears of sickness and uncertainty, there was so much time where positivity took the forefront. People spoke so candidly about their experience during these pandemic times, sharing how their lives were affected in unexpected ways that yielded unexpected results. Life was bent but not broken. Loss was redefined. Love was found in the absence of others. All at once, this project came together. I spoke to friends, family members, acquaintances, and strangers, all of whom shared deeply personal anecdotes, but their stories began to connect in a way they can only connect when living during a shared experience such as this.

I was able to write their narratives under the shared themes of life, loss, and love, as well as connect their stories under critical reflections that highlight both the individuality and the interconnectedness of the human experience during these pandemic times. It was my aim to preserve the stories of those who lived, lost, and loved throughout the coronavirus pandemic so

as to contribute to a human-based narrative of what it was like to continue on during the coronavirus pandemic despite the adversity.

Life

As the saying goes, life waits for no one. The coronavirus pandemic did not begin with a bang. It did not begin as an immediate threat to our wellbeing, to our way of life. It began with faint whispers of something more to come. The World Health Organization was alerted of an unknown virus that had taken over the lives of individuals in Wuhan, China on 31 December 2019 (Aizenman). It was not until 11 January 2020 that what we now know to be COVID-19 claimed its first victim (Taylor).

It was as though the pandemic was coming at us in slow motion. First it was, as academic Brad Evans alludes to in his introduction to “The Quarantine Files,” a problem held in abeyance simply because it was so far away (“The Quarantine Files”). China, then Italy, then Washington. We watched the virus slowly zero in on us and adapted practices we thought would only be used by others. Masks, distancing, quarantine-- we did what we had to do to stay alive.

So often we cling to the idea that our lives are defined by the places we go and the people we spend time with. However, with the rise of the coronavirus pandemic, both of these things were snatched from our grips. The normalcy of our lives was replaced by isolation and uncertainty, accompanied by a lot of free time. Though some viewed life during the pandemic as mundane, others had a different perspective.

Human beings were undeniably connected by the historic moment which we shared, yet there are many who argued their experience could not be fully understood by looking at the global and statistical effects of the pandemic. Though it is important to understand the widespread implications of the health crisis, it is also important to acknowledge the individual experiences of those who continued on despite the circumstances. It is only by looking at both of these perspectives that we can begin to understand life in the face of the coronavirus. The following narratives showcase those who found more meaning to pandemic life than mask mandates or social-distancing could begin to describe.

Rosie

Rosie was a sophomore in college when the world shut down. According to CNBC, she was among at least 14 million other students sent home, not knowing when she would return.

“It was so weird to think that it was all real,” she said. “I did not think it was going to be around as long as it was.”

For this reason, she was forced to remain home for several months, unable to leave because of the fear of contracting the deadly virus.

However, Rosie admits that this was not necessarily a bad thing. At a time in her life where everything was so uncertain, the world slowed down and she was finally able to look herself in the mirror.

“I had lots of time to introspect, to think about who I am and what I want.”

Taylor

She first realized the severity of the pandemic when she was the only car on the highway in the middle of the day.

“I don’t think I really ever fully processed it,” Taylor noted. The pandemic hit like a brick wall and suddenly, it was “this is life now.”

However, she admits that she did not have as difficult a time as many college students when adapting to life at home. Taylor enjoyed being home and living alongside her family, and did not miss the wild nights so many dream of when they think of life on campus.

This is not to say that Taylor had it easy, as she suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety that thrives when she remains in her home environment.

According to an article published in the National Center for Biotechnical Information, the symptoms of those with pre-existing mental health issues were actually amplified during the stress of the pandemic.

Nonetheless, the physical distance that was placed between Taylor and her life as she once knew it was extremely beneficial.

“The longer you’re away from people, the more you realize you do for other people and not yourself.”

So much of her identity consisted of what other people thought she should do, so the pandemic experience allowed Taylor to find an identity that was completely her own.

So often during the pandemic, we confronted the tag line “we’re all in this together.” However, this saying simply is not true.

Though we may be bound together by a particular historic moment, our experiences are all individual. Taylor found herself on her own, in the absence of others, as she no longer felt pressure to uphold what they expected of her.

Jim

Jim is a mellow old-soul who thought his life experience during the pandemic was not worth recording.

His life, he noted, was affected in very normal ways, such as not seeing others in person, developing a fear of the germs that could be lingering anywhere, and becoming accustomed to mask-wearing.

Jim recounted a story of the first time he went for a bike ride, about a month into the pandemic.

“A rider wanted to pass me, and I’m like, ‘No way you’re gonna get in front of me and I’m gonna breathe your air. It’s not happening!’” he said with a chuckle.

There was such a learning curve that came along with living during the early months of 2020, that what now seems outlandish then seemed like the only way one could protect themselves.

This type of panic was common when the coronavirus became a reality for all Americans, with people panic buying, using anything they could to cover their face out in public, and washing everything that entered from the outside world with cleaner.

Jim’s main takeaway, though, was subtle but powerful. He had lived on his own for several years, so the solitude imposed upon everyone with the onset of the global health crisis was nothing new for him, but it still came with its challenges.

“I learned that I could handle things I didn’t know I could handle.”

Eli

The university Eli attended was one of the last to send its students home indefinitely. He watched as his friends from other establishments made their way back home as the severity of the situation slowly sunk in.

Soon he had returned home, and though he is a rather positive individual, he too found that this isolation became lonely.

“At first,” he admitted jokingly, “I was like, ‘Psh, I’m balling. I’m playing video games, I’m chilling. Then I was like hey, I miss my friends.

“Maybe I learned I’m a little more extraverted than I thought I was.”

Because of this, he was excited to return back to campus for the start of his junior year later that fall.

Despite the fact that life on campus was heavily restricted because of the virus, he noted that living on campus alongside his friends after several months apart positively impacted his mental wellbeing, a rarity in times such as these.

Katie

You can tell just by speaking with her that Katie is a fierce spirit. She lives thousands of miles from her loved ones, but wouldn’t trade her life in California for the world. Katie works for a production company in Los Angeles, meaning her time is spent running around from location to location meeting interesting people along the way. However, the hustle and bustle of her life all changed with the rise of the coronavirus pandemic

According to the County of Los Angeles Public Health, as of March 19th, 2020, all nonessential businesses were to be closed and, with the company where Katie worked among them, she was sent home.

Fortunately, Katie was able to adapt to working online within a matter of a week, which helped to keep her busy. However, though her life before the pandemic was filled with human interaction, Katie was forced to live in solitude.

“I cannot wait to go back,” she noted, now a year into working from home.

No longer was she able to meet face-to-face with others for work or catch up with friends at various bars, restaurants, and farmers markets on the weekends. She was alone, indefinitely.

Her days were filled with 12+ hours of work, spending time with her dog, and exercising, but still noted that “I had a lot of anxiety and I was very lonely.”

Not only was her mental health taking a toll on the onset of the pandemic, but she also felt a complete lack of control when it came to the health of her loved ones.

“The first month was probably the hardest, only because there was so much unknown.

“It’s scary. Like, I’m out here, but all [my family is] 3500 miles away. That’s the hardest part.”

Since the beginning of the pandemic, she has missed many birthdays and holidays she would have otherwise been home for. Though she has stayed in constant communication with her relatives during the pandemic, there is nothing like being in person.

“It’s been almost a year and a half since I’ve been home. That’s pretty tough.”

However, being alone for an extended period of time has also come with invaluable lessons she never would have learned had it not been for the pandemic.

“I always knew that I was self-sufficient and I’m a pretty independent person, but I don’t have to have all these things,” she said. “I’ve realized that I could probably handle stressful situations a lot better than I thought.”

Though she would prefer to not wear a mask, work in her office, and finally be able to see people again, Katie, confident in her own strength, finished with “if it has to be this way for a while, I know I can deal with it.”

Bob

The shutdown was frightening for Bob, who works in construction, as his job revolves around working in close quarters in homes other than his own. His work life was hung in the balance and he was worried he would be unemployed for an unlivable amount of time.

However, the opposite was true. Bob found more work than he had had in years all because people were spending more time in the homes they came to discover they had been neglecting. This was a prosperous time for Bob and many like him, but it was also very anxiety-inducing.

“I was literally terrified at the beginning of this because, as I said, I was going into people’s houses, all masked and gloved up and keeping distance,” he said. Because of this, he was “very aware of what [the coronavirus was] and what it [could] do.”

Though he spoke in a solemn tone, glimpses of gratitude shone through when Bob revealed that perhaps the best consequence of the “new normal” is that he became more aware about the fragility of the human condition.

It was a lesson we did not know we needed, but indeed it is true. Life is fleeting and death is as visible as the air we breathe.

Larry

Larry knew the pandemic was coming shortly before the world shut down, as his wife is a pediatrician.

However, the little warning that he had did little to help him prepare for what was to come, especially when it came to his congregation.

Larry serves as a reverend in a congregational church. On any given weekend prior to the pandemic, there were approximately 1200-1500 people in attendance. However, within a matter of a mandate, not one was allowed for in-person service.

“It was a huge change for us,” he said. “It went from the place being crowded on a Sunday to looking like death valley.”

Though surprising, online attendance was through the roof as many individuals committed to congregating in their own homes.

The success of online service “caused us to re-evaluate how we do things,” said Larry.

It also allowed him to step back from the hecticness that was his life and take time for himself.

“It’s caused me to slow down in life and say, ‘ok, what’s really important and how should I be living with a less hectic schedule?’ Maybe there’s a different way to do it.”

Larry then shared that a congregant reached out to him during the pandemic for help with preparing for his funeral. Though the man was in perfect health, the rise in fatalities across the nation at the hands of the coronavirus propelled him to handle such affairs. This was not something Larry would typically be able to do, but because he had so much time on his hands, he was more than willing.

“Maybe, when I was so busy, I mighta said, ‘Gee, I really can’t do that right now.’ Whereas now, I go like ‘ok, I need to do that for him and his family.’”

Though the pandemic took so much away from us, it also allowed us to shed the time-restraints and obligations of day-to-day life.

Joe

As a middle school gym teacher, Joe first registered the severity of the coronavirus as he watched classrooms across the world shut their doors.

Rumors began to swirl around schools closing in the United States, with his being one of them.

“They were very secretive about it because they didn’t want to make the kids nervous,” he said.

However, this left him in the dark, not knowing what the future would bring.

Soon enough, Joe was teaching physical education from his living room.

In the beginning, he notes, it was more about “just trying to survive.” The purpose of the Zoom calls was to give something to do, to provide both a routine and an outlet for their energy.

This evolved into “opportunity lessons,” which allowed students to decide on what exercise they would complete that day. Joe gave them options such as taking a walk with their parents, doing jumping jacks in the living room, or completing online worksheets that taught them about the importance of staying active.

Joe shared that being an educator during the pandemic “brought a new experience on teaching,” as he was pulled in a thousand different directions all at once.

However, despite the difficulties he faced, he found life during the global health crisis to be somewhat inspiring.

“You never want to live through a pandemic, but it really enlightens you about the way the world really is.”

Valarie

The coronavirus pandemic brought its fair share of challenges to the young woman whose life was very quickly confined to her four-room apartment.

“That was its own little hell,” she said of adjusting to working at home, especially when her fiance lost his job.

The two had completely different schedules and seemed to clash heads more than they used to.

“He was home all day, nothing to do, playing a lot of video games, and to be honest, drinking a lot more than he normally does.”

The tension surrounding her living arrangement, working from home, and planning a wedding that complied with COVID-19 protocols was simply too much. However, Valarie notes that the pandemic also allowed her to find an outlet for this stress.

“It did give me a lot of time to work out, which was really nice,” she shared. “Because we were working from home, I didn't have to look nice during the day, so... I would go for a walk and/or a run at lunch and after work.”

Stress relief, Valarie noted, was also found in the form of ultimate frisbee, something she never expected. She and her old friends met twice a week for almost six months to reconnect, toss the frisbee, and reconnect with one another.

“Without the frisbee team, I would've had nobody to talk to,” said Valarie.

Despite the initial difficulty the pandemic presented her with, Valarie was able to adapt to the “new normal” by finding happiness in unexpected places by keeping her body moving to keep her mental health in check.

Don

Don is a spunky 92-year-old man who never holds back. However, when asked to reflect on how his life has changed because of the pandemic, he had little to say.

The pandemic was neither good nor bad. He was separated from his family and friends, but it was fine. He didn't find any new ways of connecting with others. There was nothing special about his first in-person reunions. His life went on, unchanged.

When doing this interview, I thought nothing he said could be salvaged. After all, I am writing about how life has been changed during the course of the pandemic. However, upon further contemplation, the idea that this elderly man was able to continue living in the same way speaks to his silent adaptability, an undeniable strength in a time like this.

Grace

Grace was five months pregnant when fear surrounding the coronavirus began to seep in. She was on a seven-day business trip at the time, with meetings and sight-seeing to be scattered throughout the week.

Within a matter of days, all of her plans and meetings were canceled. Grace tried to get a flight home to New York days sooner than she had anticipated. Though she was able to do so, heading back home in a silent cabin full of people wearing masks did nothing to calm her nerves.

“It was very ominous,” she shared.

Even though she was able to return home, Grace was unable to escape the impending doom brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. Within a matter of days, New York was under lockdown.

By the end of April, Grace had begun to realize that things were not going back to normal anytime soon. This, along with being almost seven months pregnant, made her feel isolated in her own thoughts.

“I had so much insomnia because of the anxiety,” she said. “I’d wake up at 2am and then I’d go into spirals of reading the news.”

However, Grace did note that there were advantages to being pregnant and eventually giving birth during the pandemic.

“We were both able to be there,” she said of both she, who was able to work from home, and her partner, who was laid off from his job at the onset of the pandemic.

For the three months of her maternity leave, her small family unit was able to simply exist in their own bubble, unbothered by anything else. An unexpected benefit, however, came when Grace returned to work from the comfort of her own home.

If she had been in the office, breastfeeding would have required pumping in a room the size of a closet, washing and drying her equipment in the breakroom, and trying to discreetly stow her pump away. However, because she was home, Grace was able to breastfeed and pump without the sense of shame that new mothers are often privy to in the workplace.

“That was a huge benefit,” she said. “Maybe the biggest one.”

Grace also relished the thought that the pandemic “collided with a season of change” in her life in a near-perfect way. She noted that she wanted to pull back from constant socialization as she sought to move onto a different stage in her life, and the pandemic served to encourage this behavior.

“It’s a little slower pace of life that I’ve been liking,” she remarked with a smile on her face.

Pandemic Life

As previously mentioned, “we’re all in this together” was a tagline used by many throughout the course of the pandemic. It signified a united front in combating a common enemy, a war against a health crisis. However, the language we use to describe our experience in the face of the coronavirus is undeniably important. As pointed out by author Costanza Musu, the use of this vivid language presents us with a problem because it is not true (Musu). We are not soldiers in the trenches fighting an “invisible enemy,” nor are we all sharing the same experience during this unique moment in time.

Yes, we have learned to adapt to the uncertainty that was first presented to us in March of 2020. We shielded our breath with masks. We learned to wave instead of shake hands. We stayed home when all we wanted to do was leave. We are undeniably connected by the fact that our lives were affected, but what the vocabulary used to explain this historic moment neglects the individual experiences that also define us.

Take, for example, Larry and Grace. At the onset of the pandemic, Larry was a recent retiree and Grace an expectant mother. They were at two completely different stages of life. However, they both noted that the pandemic, while obviously difficult, allowed them to slow down in a way they had not been able to. Indeed, it was a positive life change that allowed Larry to concentrate on those he cared about and Grace to immerse herself in everything motherhood has to offer. The beauty of their connectedness lies in how their stories are different, yet united under a historic moment in time.

It is here we see how we lived through these pandemic times both as individuals and as mere parts of a larger whole, something that is often glossed over when we consider how the coronavirus pandemic is being documented with data points at the forefront. We did not share all of the same experiences, but we are still united under a global health crisis that has caused these individual changes in our lives. There is, then, a duality to life both as an independent being and as a member of society that serve to define our lives.

Perhaps, then, “living alone together” would be a more appropriate phrase. To harken back to Judith Butler, “however differently we register this pandemic we understand it as global; it brings home the fact that we are implicated in a shared world,” (Butler). Her poignant words

describe the very essence of this project, as I wanted to document the pandemic through the eyes of those who lived it while contributing to the larger narrative about the coronavirus pandemic. These stories of life, though very different, are connected under a common theme: people continued to persevere and even learned something about the lives they lived during this life-defining moment.

Loss

With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the most banal of interactions like sharing space with strangers, hugging one another, and breathing indoors had become taboo. Everyday norms had become wrought with danger. So we had to let them go.

The loss we were confronted with at the hands of the pandemic ranged from the most extraordinary and painful losses of loved ones to the more melancholic reminders that life as we once knew it was over. Every life that was lost to this deadly disease is a life that deserves to be mourned, as the coronavirus has wrought devastation upon human life. However, this loss of life cannot be used to silence the ordinary losses of those who have not been touched by death. There were “smaller losses that [did not] involve loss of human life, like the loss of a job, a missed career opportunity, the death of a pet or lost time with people we love,” losses that also needed to be grieved (Parker-Pope). So many things we once had were now things we took for granted as we learned to live without them.

Oftentimes, and indeed, during the midst of a global health crisis, we tend to think of loss as something exclusively bad. People have lost loved ones, jobs, and opportunities that will never be seen again. However, it is unfair to say that loss during the coronavirus pandemic was solely negative, as for some it opened up the opportunity for further advancement or deeper understanding.

It is through these stories that we can come to understand loss as something more complex. Loss is not inherently negative. In fact, it may have just opened the door to new opportunities we never would have expected and the following narratives seem to prove just that.

Drew

Drew was a senior in high school when the coronavirus first hit, but was seemingly unaffected by losing out on the tail-end of his last year. He did, however, have high hopes for his freshman year at college, leaving his home in Connecticut for Boulder, Colorado with such ambitions in tow. However, as he would come to learn, they would be radically affected by the pandemic.

“My expectations were one thing and my reality was totally different.”

Not only did Drew not get along with his roommate, but because of the safety protocols set in place at the college, he was unable to leave his dorm room outside of attending class. This made it challenging for him to make friends, which was only made more difficult when individuals aged 18 to 22 were not allowed to enter the city of Boulder.

He moved back home within a matter of a month and finished the remainder of the Fall semester from his bedroom.

Needless to say, this did not give Drew the freedom he expected from college life.

Because of this, he decided to take a break from school in the spring, but moved back out to Colorado for a change of pace. His days were soon consumed with skiing and working as a ski-lift operator.

Not only this, but Drew was also able to make more friends than he had at school with people from all different ages and walks of life.

However, this year did not come without criticism from some.

Drew noted that where he is from “you’re looked down upon if you don’t go to school.”

But this skepticism did not keep him from finding the best in what could have been a very bad situation.

“My first year of college was a total disaster, but in the end, I learned a lot from it and probably had the best year of my life.”

Molly

She called her sister one afternoon, asking if she could pick her up from school. Though the route she walked from school to her house had become ingrained in her mind after nine years, she wasn't able to make her way home.

Molly was told to pack up all her belongings that she would need in the next two weeks, weighing her backpack down with all of her textbooks and binders, as that was how long their now extended spring break was to take place.

She never saw the inside of her 8th grade classroom again.

Molly was sent home from school because of fears surrounding the novel coronavirus and, soon, her hopes of dances, field trips, and graduation were no longer within reach.

"I waited all that time. All those years of watching everything graduate and get everything we always wanted, and we didn't get any of it."

Her life soon became fully-virtual, with classes being converted to the online format in order to adapt to pandemic life. She lost everything she ever expected, including saying goodbye to her classmates that she had known for the past nine years.

"You didn't get to see everyone for the last time," Molly shared with a twinge of sadness.

However, her teachers were determined to raise their spirits. They banded together to make their graduation somewhat memorable, driving by the house of each 8th grade student in a line of cars so long they blocked the entire street.

"It was like a little parade," said Molly. "It was really nice."

Students were given the chance to say goodbye to the teachers they had had in their lives since kindergarten. The drive-by graduation, though atypical, was a beautiful attempt at making the coldness that accompanied online living more personal. It sent the message that although students were no longer in the classroom, they were not forgotten.

The loss of the normal drove others to think creatively and perhaps made students feel even more valued than they would have in an uninterrupted year.

Kieran

Kieran has been in the restaurant industry for over two decades and, as he has primarily worked at or owned Irish bars, he knows St. Patrick's Day is the most important day of the year.

However, when the coronavirus became a threat to the wellbeing of many, the governor of Connecticut had to make a tough decision.

The night before St. Patrick's Day, all bars and restaurants were to be shut down immediately. Kieran, typically known as humorous and witty, simply remarked,

“It was a major setback.”

The food they had been working so hard to prepare, the bands that were scheduled to play for the crowds, and the money that would have come along with it were all gone.

“The funds we would have made the next day would have carried us for the next few months,” he remarked in a solemn tone, “so we maybe had to go 2 to 3 months without any income, which was very hard.”

Indeed, within a matter of moments, Kieran no longer had a paycheck to rely on.

“It was a strange time.”

However, he did have the support of the community to bolster his spirits.

“A lot of neighbors used to come and leave sticky notes on the window, ‘Wishing Well,’ ‘Come Back Soon,’ ‘We can't wait to be opened again,’” Kieran shared. Though he refrained from showing emotion, the tone in his voice showed just how meaningful these “nice little things” were in the face of such adversity.

Fortunately, Kieran was able to reopen his restaurant, if not as quickly as he had hoped. The process was long and drawn out, so much so that he lost many loyal employees along the way.

However, this did not dampen his excitement, as he was eager to be able to work again.

With a smile on his face, Kieran noted “it's good to be back.”

Patrick

Days before the pandemic consumed our sense of normalcy, Patrick was working a dead-end job.

“It wasn’t a valued job,” he said. “I didn’t enjoy it and it wasn’t monetarily rewarding.”

So when the coronavirus wrought fatalities among the job market and Patrick’s went with it, he wasn’t all that upset.

In fact, Patrick had long been thinking about returning to school to pursue a graduate’s degree in International Affairs, so when the pandemic hit and he was left without a job, this dream became a reality.

“That enabled me to go back to school,” he said excitedly. “It was definitely a positive.”

“I wanted to do something I was more interested in.”

However, going back to school wasn’t the only life change Patrick experienced at the onset of the pandemic.

Because Patrick and his girlfriend lived in Manhattan, NY, the fear of contracting the novel virus was at an all time high.

“We had the good fortune to have her aunt [own] a place in eastern Long Island that was pretty remote, especially during the winter time, so we were able to take refuge there.”

Their new temporary home brought on a new project for Patrick to indulge in, with a mission very close to his heart.

The beaches on the North Fork, the area in which they were living, were being mistreated by the humans who frequented it.

He pointed to examples of garbage littering the sand, public defecation in the bird sanctuary, and hundreds of undesirable fish caught only to be left to die on the strand. Finding the abuse of his safe haven reprehensible, he was determined to enact change.

“I spent my time combing the beach for garbage, cleaning up the beach, and trying to change policies in the North Fork for littering and overfishing.”

The result was more trash cans to avoid litter seeping into the ocean, as well as a booth at the entrance to the beach that controlled the number of people coming from other towns in order to deter hurting the beaches and the creatures who live in it.

“It's supposed to be a shared resource, not something for some to exploit and abuse.”

Patrick, an expectant father, found this to be a rewarding task. Not only was he able to protect the environment for its own sake, but he was also able to work toward a better world for the good of his child.

“I can be more effective in my family's life, and for my children too, so I can look in their eyes and say I tried to make things better in this world for them.”

Caitlin

Caitlin was a sophomore in high school when the coronavirus pandemic took the reins of her academic experience.

“I looked at the news and I saw that this wasn't just happening in Fairfield, it was happening all over the U.S.,” she remarked about the severity of the situation finally sinking in.

Though she admits the pandemic was not ideal, she also remains grounded in the fact that she was largely unaffected as many others were.

However, she did share that her social life was “strained a lot” as a result of being forced to complete her sophomore year online.

Conversations in the hallway were now taking place over FaceTime and frequent hang-outs were diminished to rare socially-distant gatherings.

The following academic year brought its own set of challenges, as Caitlin was now forced to adapt to the hybrid-learning style.

“We weren't able to focus online, so no kid would be able to come into class in-person and be able to relay what happened the past three classes because they were online.”

“Junior year was weird,” she noted, but “it definitely made me value in-person teaching more.”

Steve

As a physician executive at a hospital in New Jersey, Steve was well aware that something dangerous was in the air as early as February of 2020.

“People were thinking it was just a flu, but we knew it was more than 10 times that.”

Whispers throughout the medical community hinted at the coronavirus wroughting mass destruction across the united states, with many fearful that hospitals would be overwhelmed.

“Even if [the estimates] are concervative, this is gonna be terrible,” he recalled thinking after hearing the projections. “A life-changing, devastating problem.”

Sure enough, the New Jersey hospital system he heads was hit hard. Though Steve’s role in medical leadership had evolved into being more technologically based, that changed with the onset of the pandemic.

“I haven’t been in direct care as much. When this hit though, of course, I did help. I stepped in more to do some more patient care.”

However, his role in informatics was becoming increasingly more pressing.

“We had just started to bring the best computer system to all our 11 hospitals,” Steve said when asked how his role evolved because of the coronavirus.

The work he and his team had begun prior to the pandemic to do would ensure more safe and reliable care, as well as put in systems for the best practices.

“We were too far along to go back,”and because the informatics system was crucial to the hospital system remaining operational, they needed to keep going.

Though this may seem like simply bad timing to some, Steve shared that the new system helped to put protocols in place that would aid medical professionals in treating those with COVID-19. Had the pandemic occurred while they were operating on the old lagging system, who knows what could have happened.

Not only did he help to save lives, but he was able to do so from a distance. Because his job did not require him to be at the bedside, he, along with the rest of his team, were able to work remotely for much of the pandemic.

There was a lot of fear surrounding those working from home not being as effective as they would be if they had been in the office. However, Steve shared that his team proved to be more productive, safer, and happier.

Prior to the global health crisis, Steve would commute to New Jersey from Connecticut every morning and back again every evening.

“I tr[ie]d to make it home for dinner every night, but you miss a lot of stuff,” he said. But when working from home became a reality, this all changed.

Steve was now “there for all the moments, even if it's just a few minutes of break,” something he valued tremendously. “That’s the biggest blessing.”

Caroline

At the start of the pandemic, Caroline worked as a paralegal’s assistant in Florida. However, things changed all too soon for the part-time student, who was just months away from receiving her paralegal certification.

“I was laid off from my job,” Caroline admitted with a look of dismay, and although she was promised she would eventually be brought back, she never was.

Her main takeaway?

“Nothing is permanent.”

Though clearly disappointed about being let go, this proved to not necessarily be a bad thing. Caroline had lived in Florida for several years after her father was relocated there her freshman year of college, but she always knew she wanted to make her way back up to New England. Up until this point, there had been nothing but roadblocks in preventing her from doing so.

However, after she had graduated from the paralegal certificate program and had nowhere to work, Caroline had all the time in the world.

“Me losing my job enabled me to move back to Connecticut,” she remarked about a long-time dream coming to fruition. “This was my chance to get a new job and start over.”

However, this was easier said than done. The 1,200 mile trek up the coastline during May of 2020 was frightening to say the least, as there was a sense of fear with every stop she had to take that the coronavirus could be lingering in the air.

To add to this, Caroline left home on bad terms with her parents, who were upset that she wanted to make such a drastic change. However, with continued effort and daily-contact, Caroline mended the relationship and pursued her dream of moving to Connecticut

Once she settled into her life as a New Englander, Caroline focused all her effort into finding a job. She had dozens of interviews, with some taking place on the phone, others on Zoom, and still others in person. After lots of rejection, Caroline finally was offered a position at a law firm that promised to provide substantial training and wanted her there for the long-term.

After much struggle, things finally fell into place. Caroline was able to jump on an opportunity to move and find a job that made her happy, an opportunity that would not have presented itself had it not been for the pandemic.

With a smile on her face, she said “don’t listen to other people and don’t let the opinions of others get to you.”

Sue

Sue was one of many who felt overwhelmed by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020.

“I feel really betrayed by the fact that people were aware of how bad it was but they did not let people know.”

There was a sense of fear that lingered in her voice, but, she acknowledged, she did not allow the fear to consume her. Her role on the Board of Governors at her social club required her to step up and protect others during this tumultuous time.

“We’re responsible for the health and well-being of our club,” she remarked. Though this may seem like a simple task to some, with more than a year and a half of living alongside COVID-19 under her belt, Sue now knows the gravity of this undertaking.

She and a team of others banded together in order to ensure the safety of the club’s members. Though she was sad to see it, precautions included shutting down the building, furloughing workers, and discontinuing many functions that helped keep the club afloat.

Sue placed an importance in “following the science,” even when it made others unhappy.

“They would say ‘it’s not that bad,’ umm yeah it is,” she shared. “It was terrifying. I mean, you’re talking about not being able to breathe.”

All in all, though, Sue valued the experience she had and the role she played in deterring the spread of the deadly virus. Not only did she help to keep others safe, but she also learned something important about herself.

“If somebody told me in the beginning this [pandemic] was gonna be for a year and a half, I would’ve said I’d never be able to survive. But we’re very flexible human beings, and we’re very able to adapt.”

Timothy

Timothy was a sophomore in college when the coronavirus pandemic first hit, but it was only his first year living on campus. It was clear to see attending classes from his bedroom was not the college experience he was expecting.

“At first, it sucked,” he admitted honestly.

However, Timothy noted that his professors were more understanding and his education was just as enriching, if not more so. This prompted him to remain home for the duration of his junior year.

“Most people I know didn’t want to stay home, but after that first semester, I realized how good of a student I can be if I just focus.”

He shared that though his extraverted-self felt fulfilled when on campus, the constant distractions had held him back from reaching his full academic potential.

This self-awareness allowed him to thrive in the remote classes he took his junior year, but also helped him when he returned to campus in Fall 2021.

“Although I have the distraction now that we're back on campus, I would say I do take my studies very seriously compared to how I used to,” said Timothy.

On top of this academic success, Timothy also found that his time at home allowed him to reconnect with his family. He was able to spend time with his mother, who had just finished several months worth of chemotherapy to treat her cancer diagnosis.

Being there for her in her time of need, as well as living through this historic moment helped to strengthen his character.

“I think I became a better person from the experience,” he said. “Just being more grateful for everything that is now coming to us. All our privileges and rights and freedoms, things that we absolutely take for granted everyday.”

Pandemic Loss

It is impossible to recover, restore, or regain anything that has not been lost. So when the pandemic hit and took our sense of normality and the everyday practices that went along with it, I was simply not content with loss being contained to its negative connotation.

I lost the entirety of my junior year to the coronavirus. A time in my life I should have spent wandering around campus, hanging out with friends, and getting the college experience everyone had told me so much about was spent in my bedroom. I did classes from my bed. I talked to a few friends through a screen. My expectations were consumed by a global health crisis, leaving me to mourn my loss and move on.

The thing is, though, I found that the losses I faced also helped me. I grew closer to my family members. I prioritized my mental health in a way I had not been able to before. I learned so much in my classes and was able to bond with both professors and peers alike. My losses were complicated, and I was determined to find out if others had the same experience too.

Initially, the people I spoke to were admittedly skeptical of my attempt to see beyond losses as more than what they were. However, it was through open conversation with these very same people that we found the loss of the expected often allowed for the unexpected to flourish. Indeed, philosopher Roberto Esposito had a similar takeaway when life as we knew it was upended by the novel virus. “What else is life, after all, if not an ongoing institution, the ability to always create new significances?” he writes, as he challenges preconceived notions of what we are told to feel during this difficult time (“The Quarantine Files”). Where there is loss, there is also opportunity. There is hope.

Caroline was distraught when she was laid off from what she thought was her dream job, but this allowed her to spread her wings and move to another state in order to start over again. Steve was forced to work from home at the onset of the pandemic, a reality that was initially frightening, but this allowed him to both work more efficiently and be present for moments he would normally miss. Molly lost the last few months of her eighth grade experience, but in this loss she found the support of a teaching staff she had known since she was 5 years old.

Though it may not always be easy to see, with every challenge presented in the form of loss also comes an opportunity to keep pushing through, to adapt and overcome. It is merely our job to fully embrace the resilience of human beings and see losses as things that drive new experiences, rather than things that only end pre-existing ones.

In his *Mourning Diary*, philosopher Roland Barthes showcases the grieving process through words he scribbled on pieces of paper while dealing with the death of his mother “As soon as someone dies, frenzied construction of the future” he wrote, acknowledging that though grief-stricken, he found moments of joy in reflecting on the past while moving forward (Barthes et al.). It is here we see the sheer complexity of loss, both as something bad and good, as something devastating and healing.

Love

Social isolation took on a new meaning with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, as mandated separations put space between loved ones indefinitely, separating them during holidays, milestone celebrations, and even spontaneous get-togethers. Though love was once seen as dependent on physical closeness, the distance people were required to maintain changed this

definition, showing that six feet was not enough space to separate them entirely. The transition from seeing people on a regular basis to being stuck at home may have been eased by the presence of technology for many, yet it was not easy. Connectedness trumped proximity as we learned to love through screens, showing affection through calls, emails, and texts. Birthdays were celebrated either online or with drive-bys, where friends and family members would line up in their cars and wave. Even those who did live together experienced connectedness differently, as the time constraints of outside obligations ceased to separate them. These moments of simplicity spoke volumes about the importance of maintaining a sense of community and caring for one another, especially in times of hardship.

Love in the face of a global health crisis may seem like the ultimate contradiction, but it is perhaps the most important quality that has persevered. It was not easy, as there was an extra effort people had to put into showing love because it could no longer be felt in a touch, a hug, or even a smile across the room. What does grabbing someone's hand look like when they are sitting in another house? What good is a smile when it is hidden through a mask? How do you show that you are there for someone without really being there? All of these questions and more had to be confronted during the pandemic, but it was through this confrontation that individuals were able to redefine what love looked like for them during pandemic times. The following stories serve to capture love in its new state.

Chris

Chris could see something coming by the changes in the stock market, as if they were indications of an oncoming storm.

Little did he know that what was coming was a deadly virus that would affect life as he once knew it. Though Chris was once constantly traveling for work, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic had him grounded.

However, and perhaps unexpectedly, this would be something he would come to enjoy.

His daughter works for Airbnb, but because of the pandemic, was moved to remote work. Rather than remain out-of-state, she braved the pandemic and flew home to be with her family.

“I am at the age in my life where things like spending time with my daughter really matter to me,” he shared.

This rarely sentimental man saw the extra time the pandemic gave him as extra time with his offspring. Though they would have seen one another in occasional trips across the country, the extended amount of time they were given with each other was priceless.

Alicia

Spring break had just concluded when Alicia returned to work at a college in New York, around the time when rumors of a deadly virus began to circulate across the country.

Though normally calm and collected, when she ran into a staff member who had come in contact with someone who had a sore throat, something took over.

“I had a visceral, physiological response,” she said. “I wasn’t worried about the pandemic until he suddenly was in the room and I was like, ‘I’m really uncomfortable with you being here.’”

Not only was Alicia afraid because of the sheer number of students returning from traveling after spring break, but she also felt “exceptionally vulnerable” because she was 7 months pregnant at the time.

Though she was able to work from home, even standard procedures at the hospital prior to the birth were anxiety-inducing. In one of her final examinations before giving birth, Alicia recounted a startling story of two individuals carrying a young man towards the entrance of the hospital.

“Her son could not breathe,” she shared, also noting that the sight made her stop cold in her tracks. It was at that moment she knew just how serious the coronavirus was.

However, that would not be her last traumatic visit to the hospital.

“[My husband and I] get to the door. I’m having contractions on the sidewalk. It’s 3am. This is a busy hospital. There’s usually lots of people,” she said. “There’s no one. It was weird. It was post-apocalyptic.”

No one, except for a security guard tasked with bringing patients into the medical center and, as it turned out, keeping everyone else out. She cried to him on the sidewalk, saying she was promised her partner could come in with her for the birth. The security guard held his ground, so she went forward alone.

30 hours later, her child was born with her husband finally allowed to be by her side. Though stressful, it appeared everything turned out to be ok.

That was until 2 weeks later, when Alicia developed a fever.

“I remember texting my sister, ‘Please help Chris take care of Aurora if anything happens to me,’ because I just didn’t know.”

Thankfully, the fever broke and turned out to be nothing more than what it was. The trauma subsided and, as Alicia shared, “the good stuff came after.”

For one, because of the mandated lock-down, Alicia was required to continue working from home and was not being pulled in the hundred different directions that new mothers typically are pulled.

“I was really able to focus on her. Prior to her being born, I was sucked up in the news and what was happening, and then after she was born it was like ‘Here we are. We’re together.’”

Additionally, her husband, a professional sailor, was grounded because of the canceled races across the nation. She noted he did not have to make a decision between his career and his daughter, which “was a blessing for our family.”

On top of this, Alicia was soon able to form a pod with her family members who lived right down the road. They spent their days outside together, with Aurora lounging by the pool with her cousins, and made it a tradition to have Sunday dinners together. She came to value family even more than she already had, and also relished in the thought that her daughter was able to be around loved ones during the pandemic year.

“I spent more time with my sister [and my mom] in the past year than I have my whole life,” she shared, growing sentimental. “It was like going back to childhood.”

Though many would define the pandemic as being isolated and lonely, Alicia found that because the world slowed down, she was able to find support and camaraderie in the presence of those she cared about most.

Damian

Damian works in the air transportation business, so when the coronavirus pandemic caused a nationwide lock-down back in March, he was worried his job was in jeopardy.

However, upon learning evidence to the contrary, Damian found life at home to his liking.

“I sort of enjoyed working from home,” he shared, pointing to the freedom of not having to travel.

He was able to pick up hobbies and start projects he would have otherwise not have had time for had he continued working from the office.

However, what was most noticeable was how the pandemic gave him more time with those he cared about.

“I got to spend a lot more time with my girlfriend, which was very nice.”

Damian’s time was also filled with phone calls to loved ones, his mom in particular.

His mom is 83 years old and lives in New York, an undeniable hotspot at the start of the pandemic.

“I was going away at one point locally and I actually went, got a covid test, went to the city, brought her and her boyfriend to my house, then left, so they got to be out of the city for a week.”

Though she is undeniably “resilient,” he was more than relieved that she was in her partner’s company.

Damian was far from sentimental to say the least, but he did show just how much he cared about others in the short conversation we had with one another.

Kate

“I think this is the last time we’re going to be together for a very long time.”

These were the words spoken to Kate by her sister in mid-February at what would become their last family gathering of 2020.

Her sister works as a nurse in New York City and was aware that the disease would be catastrophic from early on, showing her family a presentation that predicted over 400,000 deaths.

Kate was astounded to hear this novel virus could be so detrimental and was crippled with fear knowing that her sister, husband, and former colleagues were on the frontlines.

“I don’t know what people did without their faith,” she shared.

As a devout Christian, Kate found gratitude in the little things, such as having her four children under one roof again.

“It was a beautiful thing,” she shared.

On top of seeking to be gracious rather than anxious, Kate prayed that she find some way to be useful during the course of the pandemic.

Days later, she got a call to work at the local phone bank in order to help people schedule vaccination appointments. Kate jumped at the opportunity to help others and soon was working several days a week making and taking calls.

Soon after this, Kate, a registered nurse, was asked to assist in vaccinating the homebound.

It was because of this opportunity she formed an unexpected friendship with a 70+ year old man, Bob, who drove her to the places where she would administer the vaccines. This kind elderly man devoted himself to serving others was so giving that he and Kate formed an unbreakable bond.

Through her faith and her willingness to help others in a time of darkness, Kate exhibited love. However, ever humble about her own contributions to the vaccination efforts across the state, she directed her gaze at the kindness of others.

“They don’t get a lot of press, but there are so many people in the world who are doing so much.”

Helen

In January 2020, Helen had just begun working as CEO for an organization dedicated to helping the homeless population find housing.

Within a matter of months, she was dealing with a public health crisis while trying to uphold her responsibility to take care of those who were having trouble taking care of themselves. Despite this added stressor, she tried to maintain a positive outlook.

“I saw a lot of good,” she shared.

The root of this goodness, as she saw it, was the collaborative effort that went on between CEOs of different organizations in an attempt to protect the homeless. All different agencies worked to find homeless individuals hotel rooms while trying to decompress the shelters and keep them from contracting the virus.

When reflecting on how everyone banded together in this moment of uncertainty, Helen became emotional.

“Whether somebody was the hardest to serve or the easiest to serve, it didn’t matter,” she said, holding back tears. “It was [about] getting people safely into a bed.”

So often love is seen as romantic or familial, but it soon became clear that Helen had a strong love for serving others that simply went beyond her job description.

Perhaps this sheer passion came from her first-hand experience in working with the homeless population, as she described them as so often not caring about themselves. This notion, however, was something that changed during the public health crisis.

“They saw themselves as somebody who was really cared about within a system. They had a part in protecting themselves,” said Helen. “I think it was the first time in a long time that they felt that they had a part in the community and [were] collaborative in keeping everyone else safe.”

The outpouring of effort and love, though tiring, was well worth it. Helen has accomplished many things throughout her lifetime, but to see the changes she had a direct hand in making positively impact the lives of others was truly priceless.

“I feel very proud to be part of such a system that not one person who was homeless in Fairfield County died as a result of COVID,” she revealed.

Tyler

“It was like a mini-horror movie,” he said of his experience living with the coronavirus.

Double-masked while taking showers, dodging other family members in the hopes that he would not infect their air, losing his ability to both taste and smell. The events surrounding his contraction of the virus felt surreal.

Despite this, Tyler noted that he was drawn to finding the best in a bad situation.

“People are naturally inclined to hold onto something or to find something positive,” he shared. “For me, it was in the summer [when] I met Chloe.”

The romantic relationship was admittedly weird at the beginning, as the two first met when the severity of the virus and just how it worked were not fully understood. Though their relationship was entirely dependent on the virtual format for a while, the couple eventually decided to meet up in-person.

He, somewhat begrudgingly, shared a story from the end of their first in-person date, saying that it is still something Chloe teases him about to this day.

“I gave [her] a side hug, which in hindsight, it doesn't matter either way, but in my head, it just seemed less risky,” he said, laughing through the blush that had spread across his face.

However, coming to the conclusion to meet up in the first place wasn't exactly easy.

“There was always a risk associated with that,” he said, noting that the beginning of their relationship in the pandemic was just a series of calculated risks they took together.

This risk, however, was worth the reward. Falling in love during the pandemic, putting up with the distance, the masks, the phone calls, and the initial awkwardness was all well worth it.

They sought solace in one another and were able to escape their worries surrounding the pandemic by maintaining an open channel of communication. Through moments of difficulty and times of joy, Tyler couldn't be more happy that this is what came of his pandemic experience.

“It gets to the point where you can’t see yourself without someone,” he shared, candidly, “and that's kind of where I'm at.”

Dennis

“There wasn’t much negativity as a result of the pandemic for me,” Dennis began. “I didn’t lose any friends or family to the coronavirus, so we did pretty well.”

However, these pandemic times did not come without difficulties.

“The worst thing that happened was probably the mandated distance from family members. I’m so family oriented,” he shared candidly. “We do a lot of things together, [but because of the pandemic] we couldn’t do those things.”

It soon became clear that his desire to keep in contact with his loved ones merely created an opportunity for new experiences with one another. With those he lived with, Dennis sought to bond over TV shows or nightly walks. With those from which he was separated, things like phone calls, texts, and even family Zoom parties sufficed. The love he had for his family simply took a different format.

Though he initially thought he was unaffected by living through the pandemic, Dennis soon found that he was more grateful for the small moments he may have up until then taken for granted.

Additionally, Dennis said that this experience has made him more cognisant of the realities we have always faced.

“I am aware of how fragile we are, of how easily we can become sick, and as a result, die,” he shared. With a fond yet unspoken appreciation, Dennis admitted with a smile, “I have a good life.”

Pandemic Love

Our concept of love in a pre-pandemic world was defined by hugs, kisses, and smiles shared across a room. Physical touch and proximity were so important and, in hindsight, taken for granted. However, knowing this now may not be a bad thing.

As Judith Butler shared, “one knows love somehow only when all one’s ideas are destroyed, and this becoming unhinged from what one knows is the paradigmatic sign of love,” (Popova). Love This suggests that we cannot know what love is and what it means to us until our definition of love is shattered.

We saw just this at the onset of the pandemic, as closeness was quite literally ripped from our grips, which required us to redefine what love could mean in pandemic times. Perhaps this challenge, accompanied by the ever-present threat of death, resulted in a more valuable connection between human beings.

Indeed, this is seen through many of the stories shared above. Tyler fell in love despite the inconvenience of physical distance, taking little risks as he became closer to who is now his partner. Alicia would have been more isolated had the pandemic not occurred, instead finding the company of her family after the birth of her child. Helen took on a new job that required her to care for those who were all too often neglected, developing a sort of strangerly love in the process. Pandemic love may not have been what we expected, but it shows us that even in the face of adversity, love perseveres.

In order to understand what it was like to be a human being during the pandemic, it is crucial to understand how people continued to love despite difficulty. We put on masks. We waved and blew kisses. We stood outside in the cold for fear of seeing each other indoors. We called, texted, and Zoom-ed to make our presence be felt even if it could not be touched. We laughed and cried when we were able to truly love in-person again. Though it may have taken on unconventional forms, the isolation as a result of the coronavirus made in-person reunions more valuable and also allowed for meaningful separation.

The separation, isolation, and death that resulted as a consequence of the pandemic caused great devastation throughout the world. However, perhaps this is what it took for us to love a little harder. The need to distance may have pulled us apart physically, but ironically, it brought us together in a new way that challenged us and required us to see love as more than what we once saw it to be.

We did not give up, even though that might have been easier. We did not put our relationships on hold in the face of danger; we clung to them. We needed one another to get through the pandemic and that is exactly what we did.

Love indeed took many new and perhaps unconventional forms under the lens of the global health crisis, forms we never expected it to, but this ability to adapt is what makes love so enduring.

Conclusion

From grand occasions to the most mundane routines, we can and should find stories of the human condition that are just as important as the numbers of sick, hospitalized, and dying individuals that inundate us to this day. We are more than a sample from which data should be extracted. There are stories to be told about hope and renewal, courage and strength, and they can only be found when we look past the numbers. My aim was to relay some of the stories so as to put forth an image of life, loss, and love that amounts to a survival of the human spirit.

The COVID-19 pandemic carries on. Its impacts will likely be felt for years, if not decades. The virus may stay with us, too. But understanding just how the coronavirus has helped us even as it has hurt us enables us to assess the “good” happenings of the past year. The pandemic has not only been about destruction in all aspects of life. When we were locked down, we learned to rebuild connections and communities in ways that cannot be destroyed by distance. We found ways to keep up rituals in trying circumstances. We established new routines. We braced for the cold with one another in the darkest winter months, sometimes huddled around outdoor fires and patio heaters, sometimes huddled around computer screens. We rediscovered what matters. As such, we figured out how to reimagine the intimate entwinements of life, loss, and love.

The stories shared above serve to define our experience during these pandemic times as uniquely human. They cannot be explained away by numbers, nor should they be. We can only begin to understand what it was truly like to live through this historic moment when we look through the eyes of those who were there.

I was sitting in my bedroom at home during my junior year of college when my mom texted me from the other telling me that my sister had tested positive for COVID-19. My heart sank and fears surrounding her health and the wellbeing of my high-risk father began to creep in. After my class had let out, I put on a mask and snuck upstairs to see her. We laughed and made jokes. The fears began to melt away for that sacred moment. She seemed ok. Despite the darkness of the virus lurking into my very home, we were happy.

The anxiety, however, continued throughout the night. I tossed and turned and called my partner to talk my fears over. Little did I realize that he was standing outside my window, ready to listen. My eyes filled with tears as I reached my hand to touch his through the window pane. Fear was overtaken by love in one fell swoop.

This complex moment, this moment of raw emotions and thoughts clashing inside one's head, of a horrendous occurrence accompanied by a moment of bliss. It's confusing and it's complicated and it's imperfect and it's real.

This is why I thought the stories of others needed to be told. They show us how the good and the bad were intimately intertwined during the coronavirus pandemic. These stories hold us accountable, encouraging us to see that using catch-all terms to describe human experience is simply not accurate.

There is always light to be found in the darkness.

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