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In Sickness and in Health in South Texas: Narratives of COVID's Impact

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### My COVID Experience in Retrospect

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In retrospect, at the start of the COVID pandemic, I did not take it as seriously as I should have. I recall whispers of an illness spreading and casually thinking to myself, “I don’t want to get sick” - I mean, who does, right? It felt like when I was in elementary school and three of my classmates came down with the flu at the same time and people would say, “there’s a bug going around”. My naiveté couldn’t allow me to fathom the impact this “bug” could have on my life, let alone the rest of the world. In grade school, they teach us about the Spanish Flu and the Bubonic Plague, but that was then and this is now. This was the year 2020, *surely* we have advanced enough technology and systems in place to prevent these sort of things, right? I suppose not. Since then, I’ve had many more feelings surrounding the last two and half years aside from confusion - anger, relief, even some joy mixed in, and subsequently the guilt that comes with that.

In my ignorance to the severity of the situation, I spent the early days of the pandemic enjoying some time off. It felt somewhat liberating to essentially pause life, to be able to connect with my roommates more, and have more leisure time. I cooked more than I’ve ever cooked in my life and watched far too much Netflix, all the while gradually watching the number of casualties exponentially increase. It hit a point where it wasn’t “fun” anymore. As crass as this may sound, when the numbers are low and you don’t know anyone that has been personally affected, it’s easy to remove yourself from the affected population. When someone tells you that X number of people are killed by a shark attack every year or X amount of people get struck by lightning, we seldom step back to think about those people as individuals and how that even if X was one – only a single person ever was attacked by a shark or struck by lightning or passed from a virus, that it is still tragic. However, the number wasn’t one, and everyday it moved further and further from one; it wasn’t as easy to remove myself anymore.

This is when the guilt and confusion came in. I began second guessing all of my actions throughout the course of the pandemic and if I was doing anything to worsen the spread. Was I washing my hands enough? Should I not have interacted with my neighbors as closely as I did? Then, I began to transfer that judgement onto others. Despite not being 100% quarantined, social-distanced, or health-cognizant myself, I began judging others for not being more careful - particularly my friends that were still partying or refused to wear face coverings or denied the impact of COVID. I found myself on a high horse and projecting some of my internal feelings onto them, regarding my contributions to the progression of the pandemic. Admittedly, I have lost some friendships due to this, and while I can reconcile that in some instances, maybe our values didn’t align and the dissolution of the relationships were probably for the best, in most cases, I still grieve the loss of those relationships and feel guilt for throwing stones in my glass house.

During this time, I was working at a ramen restaurant and although I did initially enjoy having some time off, I ultimately had bills to pay, so I was relieved when the restaurant was able to return to service. With that being said, it was difficult navigating the constant guideline changes for what restaurants were and were not allowed to do. Week by week, I was unsure of my earning capacity and even worse, unsure of how patrons would react to said changes. Just as we, the restaurant staff, had to adjust to the changes, so did the customers. I craved the stability and normalcy of my usual, everyday life – something I may have previously considered ordinary – and I'm sure so did the customers. With the overarching and individual struggles of living through a major pandemic in mind, unfortunately some diners did not treat me or my coworkers very well. The poor treatment, compounded with the fear of getting sick due to high exposure, the pressure of keeping others safe, and the inconsistent pay structure, led me to ultimately decide to leave the service industry. While I am now able to view the experience through the lens of grace and compassion, it admittedly took a toll on my mental health at the time.

Additionally, I was a part-time student at the time. After years of self-hindrance and self-doubt (this was three years after graduating college), I was proud of myself for finally taking the steps to apply for optometry school; this included retaking courses to better my grade point average. In the beginning of the school year, my gained momentum resulted in high marks. However, in the interest of our health and safety, the school announced that the in-person lecture courses, with which teaching styles I was already familiar, would be asynchronous. I had previously taken online classes and figured it wouldn't be much different. It turns out that I grossly underestimated the impact that a sudden transition would have on my ability to effectively learn. My grades began to drop and with it came my self-confidence. Some days I wasn't sure if my mental health was impacting my grades or vice versa. Looking back, it was probably some combination thereof, but with that being said, I ended the semester with B's. Was it what I was expecting at the start of the semester? No, but I pushed through and finished and as the story goes, I made it out on the other side, now as an optometry student.