



Lifestyle Lockdown

Imagine 10 or 20 years from now, telling our grandchildren and great-grandchildren about the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. What will we say?

For many of us, we will first think of the great tragedy.

We will recall the trauma and mourn the loss of life. We will remember how we faced the burdens of being separated from loved ones and, for some, isolated entirely from the outside world. We will grieve the long-anticipated milestones that will never be reached and the embrace of those lost forever.

Some of us will share an Orwellian version, one of partisan divides and conspiracy theories, fake news, and shifting predictions. We could speak of stranded travelers, dystopian policies, and standing in seemingly endless lines because each person had to be six feet apart. We could tell how every day brought some new anxiety-provoking development—how people worried about themselves, their families, and their livelihoods.

Those lucky enough to emerge on the other side of this crisis emotionally and physically intact might share the silver-lining version. They could say that 2020 was the year we met the unique character Joe Exotic, rediscovered sidewalk chalk, vegetable gardening, home-baked bread, and family dinners at home.

We will tell them about drive-in church services, livestreamed concerts, virtual happy hours via Zoom and FaceTime, and the previously absurd prospect of doing corporate work at home in pajamas for weeks on end. We will tell them about teacher car parades, virtual proms, and teddy bear window scavenger hunts.



Whichever version becomes most pronounced in our memories, what is certain is that we will not soon forget the year of COVID-19. In fact, many of us are just beginning to grapple with the challenges of an uninvited new normal.

Alone, Together

Measures to suppress the spread of coronavirus profoundly changed our lives—in ways good and bad. For many of us, stay-at-home orders gave us back our commute time. Gone were the distractions of group activities. Gifts of newfound time offered the freedom to plant a garden, read those books on the nightstand, explore hobbies, study a language, or learn to play banjo.

That freedom also marked the loss of the in-person communion of school or work environments—and of life rituals such as graduations and weddings.

“The comfort, predictability, and familiarity of my routine is gone due to the pandemic,” wrote human resources consultant Kevin Yates in a recent LinkedIn essay. “I used to travel to our offices in Menlo Park, New York City, and Austin. Hugs, handshakes, and fist bumps were how we’d greet each other.”

“We worked shoulder to shoulder in conference rooms. We ate lunch together and talked about our families, our projects, or whatever came up in conversation. We laughed together. We brainstormed together. We looked for answers to the hard stuff together. I don’t do any of that now,” Yates wrote during the initial outbreak. “The bond and connection I had through physical proximity is gone due to the pandemic. No, I’m not okay.”

Humans are social creatures. We need that bond even more in times of duress. “At a moment of profound dread and uncertainty, people are being cut off from soothing human contact,” wrote Ed Yong, a staff science writer at *The Atlantic*. “Hugs, handshakes, and other social rituals are now tinged with danger.”

Humans Are Wonderfully Adaptive

“People are reaching out to form new types of social bonds across the divide of spaces,” said Caela O’Connell, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “A lot of those ways are digital, which of course has limitations. A virtual hug doesn’t have the same warmth and biofeedback of an actual hug, but it goes a long way compared to no hug at all.”

As COVID-19 locked down travel and in-person gatherings, we adopted visual remote tools to work and socialize. “Rather than ‘social distancing,’ we should be framing this as physical distancing that includes a lot of social connection,” explains O’Connell.



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Caela O’Connell

Will we see a wholesale shift to remote work? Not necessarily. Some love it, while others confirmed that they never want to work from home again. Granted, a pandemic is not an ideal time to assess the options, said O’Connell.

“None of this was a very good natural experiment for what working at home actually entails,” says O’Connell. “As parents, we are trying to provide childcare while doing our jobs, and our jobs are not the same as they were. The dynamic acrobatics of this is like extreme parenting and extreme working, not a good example of the work-at-home experience.”

Extreme Parenting: K-12 Edition

With schools closed, K-12 students became home-based learners. Parents became educators and facilitators—roles for which most had little preparation.



“The burden right now on parents with school-age children is a very high one,” said O’Connell, who was homeschooled until college and is working from home with her three-year-old

son, who is home from his shuttered preschool. “Parents are trying to replicate a formal model from traditional education institutions, yet the actual practice of homeschooling is very different.”

“There’s a subtle expectation that parents must find creative ways to handle this on their own,” says Chloë Cooney, writer and advocate for global health and human issues. “My inbox, social media feeds, and countertops are filled with creative ideas for educating and caring for your kids.”

“Workbooks, games, creative projects and experiments, virtual yoga, virtual doodling, virtual zoo visits, virtual everything,” says Cooney. “I honestly am too tired and stretched thin to read the suggestions, let alone try them. The few I have tried have been met with astounding and fierce rejection by my son.”

Businesses Pivot and Press On

After only four weeks under restrictions, small businesses were already struggling with the economic impacts. By late March, one-third of businesses surveyed by the news site WalletHub had already laid off workers, and another 36 percent planned to do so, while 35 percent feared the closure of their businesses.

Others pivoted on what they do best and adapted to a new order.

For example, IL Palio, a AAA Four Diamond restaurant, offered patrons the option to cook alongside executive chef Adam Rose from the comfort of their kitchen. The Chapel Hill, North Carolina, landmark is offering meal kits and a live, online class with Rose, as well as curbside pickup from a special dinner takeout menu.

Closed as nonessential businesses, local day spas are teaming up with their nearby wedding and event venues to host American Red Cross blood drives. And with grocery store shelves stripped nearly bare of meat, bars and restaurants across the country became grocers, offering produce, bread, meat, canned goods, wine, cases of beer, toilet paper, and other disposables—some with free local delivery to seniors.

Silver Linings

The pandemic response—and the surreal slowdown of life as we know it—produced some positive side effects. Time opened up for idle conversation, neighborhood strolls, and quieter living, at least for those of us not working in essential services. Families are playing backyard games instead of dashing to organized practices and leagues. People are making art, music, and memories.

In urban areas around the world, air pollution is measurably reduced. People in the northern Indian state of Punjab are in awe of the sight of the Himalayan mountain range, now visible from more than 100 miles away for the first time in decades.



And with no tourists around, animals at the shuttered Yosemite National Park are making the most of the extra space. *CNN Travel* reported bears have been spotted out and about at Yosemite a lot more frequently than would be considered typical for this time of year.

The Ironic Benefits of Epidemics

“The effects of epidemics extend beyond the moments in which they occur,” wrote Katherine A. Foss, author of the forthcoming book *Constructing an Outbreak: Epidemics in Media and Collective Memory*.

“Crisis sparks action and response. Many infrastructure improvements and healthy behaviors we consider normal today are the result of past health campaigns that responded to devastating outbreaks,” writes Foss.

For example, thanks to epidemics of tuberculosis, typhoid, and cholera in the 1800s and early 1900s, we no longer spit in public places, leave deceased cart horses in the streets, or empty chamber pots out of windows. Just as the effects of September 11 are so embedded in our lives that we scarcely recall the previous normal, COVID-19 will transform our culture and practices.

An Optimistic Perspective

As we all navigate this extraordinary human moment together, musician Lukas Nelson put his Facebook page to work spreading hope and good vibes. He features Plant a Seed days, solicits fans’ stories about what makes them smile, and hosts regular “Quarantunes” jam sessions and upbeat talks with his famous dad, Willie.

“At the very least in these troubled days, the quality time spent with family has been a great blessing,” Nelson posted. “These are some of the most important times in our lives, and we would never have stopped to really soak them in were we not forced to.”

Nelson’s points resonate. People of every age should take this time to cultivate the garden that is family and friends and the budding joy those people bring.

Savor the moments we have together today. Take care to see the lessons behind every new challenge. Use the opportunities set in front of you to find new forms of gratitude and perhaps even an inner strength not yet discovered.

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