

I am a 19 year old female college student from Alabama. I live in a stable home with two parents and my sister. My neighborhood trees are blooming with the air of spring and the sun shines most days. The front porch of my childhood home has been one of my favored resting spaces throughout my life, and has proved to be a sacred space even now. All of these characteristics and environments have impacted my personal experience of this pandemic.

As billions of people face the adjustments, hardships, and battles of coronavirus, billions of unique experiences of it are also born. A fraction of the multitude fight on the front lines of this medical crisis. Others brainstorm weighty decisions that will impact millions of people. Some decide the fate of small businesses, others are laid off. Some are forced to return to abusive or toxic homes while others enjoy more time with new born children or newly married spouses. Each of us face this pandemic with a variety of different backgrounds, home lives, financial statuses, and mental healths. Each of us go to war daily with different enemies: depression, isolation, painful relationships, homelessness, or the virus itself. While some experiences of this pandemic are definitely more extreme than others, each is valid. Each story written during this time is true, and each is worthy to be told.

While I am only a college student, and I do not directly face extreme poverty or sickness in my own life, my experience of the pandemic is still significant. My story is not meant to be the same as my neighbor's. Part of my own acceptance of this new normal included accepting that my role right now is not the same as heroes who fight in hospitals every day. Right now, for this season, I am called to be at home. And that is my story. I am not intending to state that I am going through the same amount of distress that some have who are facing this virus directly, but I do believe that every person has been changed by it in some way, and if every college-aged student were to be ashamed of the supposed "smallness" of our experiences, then this very-real side of the story would never be told.

The first moments that the virus entered my thoughts were in January upon my arrival to school after Winter Break. I vaguely remember it coming up in conversation among my friends and I, usually in a casual and joking manner. We never believed it

could be as serious as it is now. I generally pushed it out of my mind and tried to believe it would be “taken care of” and would never become an issue for my area. The next time that the virus became a real concern was before Spring Break. There was murmur around the student body that some professors were giving caution that students should take home books over the break while other professors dismissed any possibility of a disruption to class. As a friend planned to travel to London with the school choir, we discussed the possibility of her trip being cancelled. At this time, the full weight of the pandemic had not settled into my understanding.

My friends and I went on our Spring Break trip as planned. At this time no schools or businesses had yet closed. We went to Disney World and stayed at a friend’s house in Orlando. We were cautious to use hand sanitizer and wash our hands frequently, but our time together was mostly energetic, playful, and not consumed with worry about the virus. During our third and final day we stood in line for the Peter Pan ride for three hours. (We know this is a tragically long time to wait for a children’s ride but we didn’t have much else to do.) The beginning of the three hours was entirely carefree. Over time, we began to worry about the increasing number of cases in the United States. About an hour into the wait we began to hear rumors of schools closing. We desperately tried to dissociate from the news but our hearts were burdened with worry. More and more schools closed by the minute. We tried to think of all the reasons our school would not close, brainstorming argument after another of why it would all work out and we would quickly be back in our dorms. Surrounded by unassuming children whose only cares were the Peter Pan paintings on the wall, our lives began to change before our eyes.

The next morning we all boarded separate flights to disperse across the country. The airport was completely normal: no masks, no gloves, no eyes filled with the fear of human touch. Still not having processed the weight of the virus, it was still a joke. When we all separated, my friends and I gave no long and sentimental goodbyes. The parting was marked by a, “See ya later!” Finally my mother picked me up from the airport and drove me home. Upon pulling into my driveway, I received an email from the Dean of the school notifying me that we would not be returning to campus as planned and we would begin online classes in a week. There was no final decision

about moving out or if we would be able to return at all in the semester. The entrance to my house was a tear filled one. My mind raced with all the things planned for the upcoming week. Months of planning flew out the window. I was supposed to be placed as a YoungLife leader, something I had been training for the entire school year. My friend was supposed to soon perform in the musical which she had been laboring over for the past two months. My sorority was supposed to have a formal and I was supposed to be dancing in a campus-wide fundraising event. I couldn't stop obsessing over all of the "supposed to's".

My family and I decided that I should take my scheduled flight back to school to retrieve most of my items since we had no idea when I would be able to go back. During this time I was able to say goodbye to close friends and come to terms with leaving the campus that had become home to me. Being on a deserted campus felt like being in a dystopian movie. Some international students were able to remain living in the dorms because of their circumstances. While in the lobby of a dorm, I overheard one boy as he pleaded with a Residential Assistant. One of his documentation forms was invalid and he needed a place to live rather than going back to Italy where his family urged him to stay away. I couldn't begin to understand his feeling of wandering and of being without a home. My fear began to rise and I couldn't stomach getting on another plane. The ride to school was marked by people awkwardly scurrying around attempting to maintain distance from one another. It was unnatural and disheartening. Everyone felt afraid, genuinely afraid. I pondered what it was like when people used to not be threatened by touching one another. Because this plane ride opened my eyes to the change in our society that would never revert to normal, I opted to ride home with a friend who lives near my hometown.

I returned home and promptly entered the beginning stages of grief: shock, denial, emotional outbursts, and anger. The anger pointed me away from spending time in prayer. All my life I have clung to God as a Savior and rock, but my anger sent me into isolation. I spent my hours walking, wondering if I would ever go back to school and crying at the drop of a hat. My entire world had shifted. Not only was I sent home and unable to finish my second semester of college, but I wasn't sure if my larger world would ever be the same either. It felt like we got news of things shutting down

every second: high schools, restaurants, daycares, local businesses. The anger turned into fear and panic. Some nights I couldn't sleep because of news stories on social media. It seemed as if everyone around me was desperately trying to grasp for what is true. This was the first time in my life that I genuinely did not know what the next day would look like.

I waited for religious leaders to usher out good news or encouragement. I knew that public figures would feel the pressure and soon make statements on the pandemic and how to cope, and I hoped their words would give me the power to finally find my own. My panic turned into isolation, a word all of us have found a new meaning for. I received the news that our school would not return to campus at all this semester. I felt numb as I logged into class zoom calls that were full of hopeless faces and professors telling us to stay well and communicate with them. The effort it takes to open my phone and call a friend became a loftier one. Isolating doubts filled my head: Do they want me to call? Am I burdening them with my struggles? Is there any point in sharing my sorrow?

I believe these newfound struggles can be marked as "Re-Entry" Troubles in the stages of grief. I noticed that new troubles became an everyday normal. These adjustments included discovering the fluidity of time when it is all spent in one space, navigating how to properly communicate with family members to avoid conflict, and learning how to internalize the ever-changing atmosphere. I wrestled with the ideals of body image, productivity, and toxic positivity that society has ingrained upon my mind. My eyes were opened to the ways I idolize being in control of my own story, my success, and my surroundings. I went through a time of wresting with and then altering expectations of what it looks like to be successful on a daily basis. I began to count very small things as success, as joy.

I searched for any scrap of joy I could find. I spent a lot of time sitting on my front porch. I began to see the good in sitting around a dinner table with my family again. I began to rejoice in small pieces of good news found on social media. I found sweetness in the sound of birds around my house and blessings in the peacefulness of a long walk. I logged into prayer meetings with people from my campus ministry every morning to attain a sense of consistency. I attended weekly worship zoom calls and

bible studies with familiar faces. I set phone call “dates” with friends from school. I painted, journaled, read, listened and loved. Looking back I can now see that I attained new relationships, new strengths, and new patterns — all stages of grieving.

While this season is definitely not over, I am beginning to see hope. I have found patterns and a new normal. I am encouraged by the ways individuals across the world use creative means to love one another. For example, I celebrated my birthday on March 26. Without my knowledge, my close friend encouraged people in my social sphere at school to write me letters. The morning of my birthday, I went onto the porch to find a stack of colorful handwritten letters from across the country to celebrate me. I know it will prove to be one of my most memorable birthdays of my lifetime. This is only one example of how the pandemic has impacted my personal story. I say this to emphasize that there is still good. There are zoom call on which celebrities surprise their fans and life-changing messages are told. There are google forms that give people a means to verbalize their needs so that others can meet those needs. I think it is no coincidence that this global change is happening during the spring — a time of newness, and change, and transformation. There are new paintings and new songs and new relationships. There is much needed introspection and reflection happening. There is forgiveness and reconciliation. There are neighborhood trees blooming and days on which the sun is shining.

We will be different after this, but I look forward to seeing the difference. Maybe the difference will be in how fully we live, how selflessly we give, how deeply we appreciate, and how powerfully we love. Maybe change was due.