My COVID-19 Story: Peace, division, and the paradoxical balance of the two.
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The first time I heard the term 'COVID-19' was from my cab driver in Chicago on the weekend of February 8th, 2020. If I'm honest, I thought he was crazy and over-paranoid when he talked about our nation shutting down. I assumed he was also someone that had a bunker somewhere under the streets. Oh, how little did I know then.

When our nation shut down, I worked at Starbucks as a barista. I continued to work at my store throughout the entirety of the pandemic. I woke up early every morning and continued to go to work. During the pandemic, Starbucks took away in-café seating and then they closed the café entirely. They purchased storage pods to remove some of our indoor furniture, so that when our café was open for indoor seating, we could make room for social distancing. Throughout the pandemic, Starbucks closely followed the CDC's recommendations and local regulations. If someone in our store tested positive for COVID-19, the entire store had to close for 24 hours for professional sanitation. In addition, any person that the infected person worked with while they were infected, they also had to quarantine for 10 days. Even though I had to quarantine roughly

5-7 times, I never once contracted the virus personally. Because I was never the cause of any quarantines, Starbucks graciously paid me during each of my quarantines. Starbucks went above and beyond to support all partners (employees) during the pandemic, including offering 20 free counseling sessions per year through Lyra. Unfortunately, the pandemic made the work environment very challenging when handling customers. Starbucks required all partners to go through de-escalation trainings because interactions with customers would sometimes make partners feel intimidated, ridiculed, and humiliated. Through it all, there was a tension. Even though the pandemic brought out some nasty responses, there was also a bond that grew between the partners and customers that simply desired human connection and love.

The pandemic caused quite the division between the church and state. I am thankful to be a member of a Christian church that simply followed the governor's recommendations for large religious gatherings. During the spring and summer of 2020, my church went online only. Luckily, my church already had a large online congregation, so there was no "learning curve" to transition to having church online. In fall of 2020 when my church did start to open its doors again, the church posted signage requiring masks and distanced chairs to help keep people safe. Unfortunately, many "anti-mask" attenders of the church left when they closed and then again, even more left when they required masks upon return. It was hurtful to see such division. However, I am very thankful that during this time, my church hosted a large Good Friday Zoom session where we were able to partake in communion. Communion is a practice of the Christian faith that I have done for years, but never knew how to do for myself. During the pandemic, I learned how to receive communion for myself and guide others through. That is a beautiful gift in itself.

Even though our world turned upside-down, I was thankful for the peace, stillness, and solitude. Even though my hours at work declined slightly, I was taking online classes at ASU. Between the two, I really didn't feel that my life changed a ton. However, my social life was depleted. With the extra time, I picked up watercolor painting as a hobby, I became more active by doing yoga, kayaking, and running, and had many video chats with friends and groups of people. While all these things helped, I still felt very lonely. I was often anxious as our nation was nearly split into two. There were protests and riots that went through my city that damaged many businesses, many of which we local. As my city came together to clean up and board up windows while the riots continued, artists expressed themselves by painting on the boarded-up windows. Like my photo of my coffee next to the boarded-up windows that were painted with the word "peace" in many different languages, it felt paradoxical. How could something, such as a riot, be so hateful and cause grief, but at the same time, bring peace and unity? I was perplexed and very much confused. Furthermore, 2020 was a presidential election year. I couldn't get on social media without every other advertisement being sponsored by a presidential candidate. I became overwhelmed as both candidates seemed to only care about saving face and ruining each other's face than focusing the campaign on the citizens. About a month before the election, I took a 40-day hiatus from all social media accounts. My mental health needed the distance from all the hate and division.

Overall, I am still processing the pandemic and all that surfaced because of it. During the pandemic, I did a lot of soul-searching and was able to clean out all the ghosts in my closets. It was very much a time of healing and growth for me. However, that is not true for everyone. For

others, it was a time of pain and brokenness. It makes sense that many people are turning to therapy to figure out what happened and to get help in finding the beauty that was in 2020. I did, too. As we continue to grow and develop as a nation, my hope is that people will learn that we can hold both pain in one hand and joy in the other. It's a hard, but beautiful paradoxical balance of the two.