

Expecting the Unexpected

By Grayson R. Harmon '22

March 12, 2020. The middle of Hampden-Sydney College's 2020 Spring Break. Two days away from my birthday on March 14th. H-SC's President Larry Stimpert emailed the entire community stating that we would be extending our 2020 Spring Break for another week. This was a plan nobody argued against, I'm sure even the faculty and staff were in support of an extended period of time off. What did this mean for me? It meant I could fully "enjoy" my birthday weekend without having to go to class on Monday. And what did I do? I enjoyed my birthday weekend to the fullest and wondered what I was going to do during the extra week we had off from classes. I did the same things that I did during our regularly scheduled Spring Break. I hung out with my friends, got to spend time with family, and even went to the beach for a few days. I thought to myself "This is pretty cool; I could get used to this." Unfortunately, on March 20, 2020, my thoughts towards the extended break and my comfortability with it became a reality.

March 20, 2020. I was hit with yet another email from President Stimpert, this time reading "Today, I write to share with you the disappointing news that we will complete the spring semester through remote instruction." I will be honest, despite this news, I still thought that my life for the foreseeable future wouldn't be so bad. I had been following global and American news and I knew that COVID had reached American soil, but there was no way that it would ever reach the rest of America. It would never reach the east coast. It would never reach Virginia. It would never reach the small, rural county of Dinwiddie, Virginia. And surely, it would never reach anyone close to me. It could never impact me. And as the story goes, "expect the unexpected."

Expecting the unexpected is a concept that has bewildered me for quite some time now, and it surely did a number on me during 2020 as I navigated my way through restrictions, historical events, and through life as a whole. How can you expect something that you have no knowledge of? How do you prepare for this – thing? The answer is: you can't. You can't control what life will throw at you, but you can control one thing: what you throw at life. Difficulties, problems, and hardships come in all shapes and sizes, and at all times, whether you expect it or not, which was arguably what 2020 was based on.

It wasn't until I was sitting on an exercise machine at Gold's Gym until I truly had this realization. Actor Tom Hanks had just tested positive for the Coronavirus, the National Basketball Association (NBA) season had been paused, and a worldwide panic came upon us. A sense of urgency came upon me as I thought about what I could do to stay safe during this time, but I was following suit with the rest of the world. I was masking up, maintaining social distancing, and washing my hands frequently. Yeah, in a sense, I was worried at what life was going to throw at me, but I was thrilled to see what I was going to throw at it. I knew that with this break, no matter how long it would last, I would be able to hang out with my buddies, go to the gym more frequently than normal, and have free nights to do anything I wanted to instead of working on homework in H-SC's Walter M. Bortz

III Library. With these thoughts in mind, I was excited to experience life outside of college for a while, no matter how long it might've lasted.

Thinking back to the initially extended Spring Break, the same thought once again crossed my mind as we got deeper into the pandemic, "This is pretty cool; I could get used to this." My days were now filled with online lectures, Spanish oral exams that were conducted through a computer screen, and a type of learning that would dictate how students all over the world, of all ages, would be able to learn. Online school was especially hard for me because I am the type of learner who prefers to have the hard-copy of an assignment in front of me, not on a bright screen that professors force me to stare at for hours on end. Along with this, professors also expected more out of me, which in my opinion, was mostly attributed to the amount of "free time" I had during the day. Loads and loads of assignments that were surely exceeding the amount of work we would see if we were in the "normal" in-person classes that we paid our money for. But I guess they were right, who wouldn't want to spend five hours studying rather than hitting the soccer field with my friends?

Not only was school different, but so was my mindset. I now walked and lived with the notion that I need to capitalize on these months, these weeks, these days, and even these minutes with those around me. Being able to spend time with friends and family was different now sure, but I had a greater appreciation for those surrounding me. It did not take me a long time to figure out one thing: this break was a huge opportunity that I could either capitalize on, or completely miss out on. I preferred anything but the latter.

As time went on in 2020, I saw the impacts that COVID had on our daily lives and our own well-being. We could conversate with others but only through a mask. We could shop at retail stores but only with a mask and social distancing. We could talk with our elder relatives but only with a mask, social distancing, and by valuing their safety over ours, respectively. Seeing grandparents, loved ones, and those we hold near and dear to our hearts suffer for an entire year was worrisome and frustrating. It is difficult seeing my loving grandparents smile at me through a window at an assisted living home. It is difficult for me to watch my closest friends and family go through heartbreak at the hands of a virus. It is difficult for me to reflect on the year 2020 because the reflection I see shows nothing but pain and suffering, as I am sure it does for many people across the globe, in America, and on this Hampden-Sydney College campus. It was undoubtedly a tough year for us all.

What follows a thunderstorm? What clears up a cloudy day? What makes us feel warm inside? Sunshine. Sunshine is the light that leads us out of the dark. It allows us to see the good in things that we may find bad. It allows us to look at life from a brand-new perspective. And it allows us to outweigh the bad with the good. Yes, 2020 was a difficult year for us all, nobody can deny that, but what is it that we can take away from this past year? What did this global pandemic open our eyes to?

Through online classes I was able to appreciate the opportunity to continue learning during the pandemic, in whatever medium presented itself. Through visiting with family, no matter how long or in whatever setting, I was able to love them even more. Through restrictions that limited what I was able to do with my friends, I valued their friendship and companionship even more as we went on wild adventures and just enjoyed each other's company. With some hesitation, I believe 2020 was one of the best years of my life because I was able to love, appreciate, and grow in ways I never knew were possible, albeit given the cards I was dealt. Loving became easier because I realized how fragile a life was, no matter the age, gender, or ethnicity was involved. An appreciation for the "simpler" things in life, like merely waking up or having the ability to run outside, allowed me to be thankful for every day I spent on earth because nothing is promised, especially during the pandemic. Growth, was perhaps the most important aspect of my 2020. I grew in ways I never thought I would; emotionally, mentally, socially, and physically. The aforementioned aspects of my 2020 are truly what made one of the darkest years of life one of the brightest in my eyes. Love, appreciation, and growth defined my COVID experience.

From a personal standpoint, I grew close with friends that I hadn't been very close with before. I was able to connect with family members I only see every so often. I got to experience things solely based on having an adventurous mind as a result of the restrictions and lockdowns seen all across America. For example, family vacation to the Outer Banks in North Carolina was one of the best I have had in a long time because we all knew how precious our moments together were. My friends and I started planning the vacations and adventures that we would be going on in the future because the pandemic allowed us to hang out together more than usual, opening our eyes to the fact that we had not been as close to one another as we should have been.

Across the globe, and across America, and across the Hampden-Sydney community, everyone as a whole built up a greater appreciation for life and was able to slow things down and take deep breaths. Although social gatherings were surely different and emphasized safety, they were arguably the most enjoyable times we had seen in a long time, and they definitely allowed us to appreciate each other's company.

This pandemic surely brought pain, but there is no doubt it highlighted certain aspects of our daily lives that we perhaps had never thought of or might have come to rely on over the last year. I believe that the most important aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic that we should take away is the fact that much of our lives are taken for granted, and that expecting the unexpected should be something that we should embrace, and something that we should be willing to encounter. Before this time in our lives, we were reliant on the "What's next?" mentality, granted some of us may still be, but 2020 surely opened my eyes to living in the moment and not taking time with myself, family, and friends for granted.