

What It Took and What I Learned

By Jake A. Blankinship '21

This time last year I was in Nashville, Tennessee. I drove eleven straight hours from where I live in a car packed with four of my friends, gas station snacks, and scratch off tickets that gave the car a dwindled sense of hope as none of them were winners – perhaps foreshadowing the year to come. I had not been back to the town of country music since I was a baby. Revisiting the place where I was born was on my bucket list. I learned early on in life to not build expectations for anything. However, I had been dreaming of this day for a long time. Partly because of it being my birthplace, partly because of the reputation for the party scene, and partly because I never went on vacation as a child. We either arrived at eleven at night or midnight. The time change was very confusing for the back half of the ride. However, the differentiation was only important to us because the state stopped selling alcohol at midnight. Funnily enough with as big of a deal as it was to us at the time, I don't even recall whether we made in time that night to indulge in any spirits. We were to stay there for one week, and it was during this week that we saw the world retract back into itself. However, for now we were excited. Life was great.

In the beginning we had nothing but fun. We went to karaoke bars and I unironically sang One Direction songs at a wedding party. I sold a singular cigarette for twenty dollars to an older rich man outside of a club who did not want to be bothered going to the corner store himself, and I rode a mechanical bull so well you would have never guessed I left Tennessee when I was a baby. Yet, reality was looming. We saw the changes coming. Events were cancelled one by one –most notably for four touring college students who were sporting a slight buzz throughout the majority of the day was the SEC basketball tournament. Other tourists who had almost seemingly made the trip exclusively to ride a ten-man bicycle while also chugging alcohol cancelled their rides. The country music hall of fame was emptier and emptier every day we stayed. My friends and I spent a good bulk of our trip staying in our hotel watching a television show called *Love is Blind* which was simultaneously mind-numbing, and the most exhilarating television show I have ever seen. Life was already changing. And so, we packed our bags and went back home as I drove another tobacco fueled eleven-hour drive back to Virginia. However, these changes are not mentioned in a somber tone. If anything, we were thrilled. Our colleges cancelled classes for weeks. We returned home to our friend's college house in Virginia and had day jobs in videogames and were working the night shift as a U.S National beer pong team. Life was good.

This feeling continued on for some time. Even as classes switched to online classes it didn't seem to get in our way much. Classes were far more palatable online with a sports game in the background and a drink in your hand. We continued living in this bubble. March came and went, April soon followed, and before we knew it, we were in May. We looked up and realized we had just gone on a four-month bender. The likes previously reserved for famous actors and musicians (often followed by twice as many months in a rehabilitation facility). It was here that a strange feeling began to come over us. The feeling of shirking a responsibility and instead doing something else – only on a much larger scale. It wasn't our fault. There was nothing to do. No classes to attend in person. No jobs to

go to in lockdown. We didn't ask for this, no we were just making the best out of a bad situation. Yeah, that's what it was. However, the feeling still lingered. Life was uneasy.

The Summer came. Perhaps it was here that we first saw what the most personal effects of the Virus begin to take hold. We realized what the Virus had taken from us. Like a mermaid on a faraway rock the Virus promised us missed school, missed work, free money from the government, and it delivered. Say what you want about the Coronavirus, but it keeps its promises. But it tricked us too. It lured us to steer our ship directly into the rock it was seducing us from, and we crashed – we crashed hard. Entire months went by. Loved ones had scares with the Coronavirus. People I knew passed away. Towns were reduced to buildings. There were no longer businesses or homes or churches or schools, but just concrete slabs and wood. They were devoid of any life or meaning. For some the Virus took their lives, for others it took their purpose, their meaning. But it took something from all of us. Life was miserable.

Later that Summer I started working at a grocery store. I worked the night shift. I soon started carrying papers saying I was employed and going to work because curfews were put into place. I went to work and went straight home every day. I did not leave my house unless it was to buy groceries for my family. The longer the Virus was present the more and more it took from us. However, it became progressively worse. In the beginning the pandemic took tangible things. We could no longer go to events, hang out with our friends, go to our jobs and our schools. But the pandemic was playing the long game. It came for our hope. Everything else was just a cherry on top. And with each passing moment this became more and more clear. We were losing hope. Life was hopeless.

Fast forward to today and it would appear some of that hope has been regained. Vaccines have been made, and most people should be vaccinated before the end of the year. Schools and jobs have resumed with somewhat regularity. Life is getting back on track. Yet, I fear so many people are ready to forget the past due to how terrible it made them feel that they are willing to throw out the lessons it taught us. So, what did the pandemic teach us? What did we learn about ourselves from this? Life was not meant to be forgotten.

I learned a lot not only about myself but about other people as well. I learned my first inclination when faced with such harsh reality is to create a bubble. To block out the world and to live life by our own rules. It is more fun that way after all. This was also the first inclination of my friends and, I'm willing to bet, you as well. This isn't to put blame on anyone either. After all, this is how we are programmed. We control everything in our lives. If we don't like the news, we turn it off, if we don't like someone messaging us, we block them, if we don't like a photo, we posted we delete it. Our lives are built around controlling them. Its seldom that something comes along that we cannot control. It is even more seldom that something uncontrollable comes along that is so omnipresent across the globe. Why wouldn't we retreat into our own worlds? But that's not life. Life is not dictated by our fantasy worlds.

Why is this important? Why did I bring up the elephant in the room that deep down we are all terrified of the uncontrollability of the world? In short, because if we acknowledge that we are able to comprehend the lesson of the pandemic. I recognize the world doesn't go my way. I also recognize everything I took for granted before the pandemic. Nowadays you hear this phrase at the water cooler at your work or the counter at a Starbucks as you adjust your mask back over your nose. However, there are two ways of interpreting this phrase. The surface level claim is everywhere. "I took for granted the bars, and the restaurants, and not wearing masks". But deeper than that there is something else. We took for granted a life of hope. As we move further and further, we regain that hope. And with any luck we will recognize that and hold onto that hope, and not let it go. Life moves too fast. Life is hopeful.