

A Sense-less Existence

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In February 2021, I contracted COVID-19. As a young and otherwise healthy college senior, I was frustrated by the forced interruption of my final semester of college yet almost happy to “get it over with.” While I knew my stint with the virus would not be fun, I was tired of living in avoidance for the past year. Certainly, the famed virus elicits visceral emotions in most people, from fear at the prospect of being infected with something so new and threatening, to anger at the prospect of being controlled and influenced over something that is hardly worse than the common cold. Yet, no matter who you are, you have some sort of strong feelings about COVID-19 or the impacts it has had. Really, I did not fear the virus, but I loathed it for the things it had taken from me: a trip to Alaska to do academic research over the summer, my final season as a college athlete, and numerous small and seemingly insignificant experiences that I will never know. These things are ultimately insignificant, but their potential value is immeasurable. Mostly, I resented COVID for the time it had taken from me, and the time it was about to take.

Despite your opinions of the danger, or lack thereof, from this virus, infection or exposure to the it means a period of what we have come to call quarantine. A once irrelevant word to most people, one that simply did not apply to our daily lives, this word now strikes fear and anxiety in most for its promise of extended separation, isolation, and absence. In January, I spent fourteen days in quarantine because someone I knew contracted the virus. This time, I would spend ten days (a seemingly arbitrary number fluctuating in necessity depending on who you ask) in isolation. I was alone and apart from the world. While some carriers of the virus suffer from its many effects for weeks or even months, others never show any sign of carrying the illness. I was somewhere in the middle; at first, I experience body aches, chills, fatigue, and congestion. Either way, I was going to be locked up for at least ten days.

While in quarantine, I attended classes over zoom (or at least listened in while others attended), I was separated from my friends (forced to interact with their daily experiences through a screen), and I ate meals provided to me by the lovingly branded *Moans* (our campus dining hall). In this time, I found a new appreciation for the usual dining hall fare from my days of freedom. While it was fun to watch the little golf cart, loaded down with meals, going through its delivery route, these quarantine meals left something to be desired. I was delivered meals of room temperature pasta in lump form, soggy vegetables from the excessive condensation forming in the Styrofoam box every meal was packaged in, and a somehow stale roll; or maybe I would get a cold and over cooked piece of chicken served alongside a puddle of collard greens and again a nice stale roll. I would always to my best to eat these meals, thankful for the effort and consideration that was put into them, but I rarely finished. The only consistent edibility was the boxed salads, the simple turkey and cheese sandwiches, and the cookies that were included with each meal—oh, and water. Each day I received different meals, but they were really all the same: cold, wet, and less than ideal.

So, about halfway through my ten-day sentence—on day four, or maybe six—I grew especially tired of these meals. I decided I would order myself some take-out: something new, something different, something to change things up. Heck, I was bored and alone, I deserved it. Taking full advantage of this opportunity at some foreign food, I ordered a burger with the works: fried egg, avocado, bacon, fig jam, a thick beef patty, all on buttery Texas toast and served with fries. It was going to be big, it was going to be messy, and it was going to be good. Anxiously, I awaited the meal's arrival unable to fight off thoughts of the glorious burger I was about to eat: the sweet fig jam contrasting the savory bacon and the salty avocado, the runny egg and greasy burger, the crispy fries topped with ketchup. It was going to be so good.

When the meal finally arrived, the anticipation was killing me, and I dug in without hesitation; I picked up the massive burger, dripping with runny egg yolk and just enough buttery grease to make my mouth water, and took my much anticipated first bite. My hands were covered in egg yolk and avocado, and my mouth was filled with...well, nothing. I mean, yes, there was burger and Texas toast, and fig jam, and bacon, and avocado, and egg in there, but as far as my tongue could tell, there was nothing actually in there. Ten-thousand taste buds, and not one of them picked up a thing—tell me how that works. Confused, I swallowed, took a sip of water and tried again, but once again, there was nothing but the feeling of mush and the slight crunch of toast and bacon. As the initial shock of nothingness started to pass, I came to the realization that I had lost my ability to taste. Distraught and disappointed, I continued with my nothingness meal, only finishing half of the burger, and I retired with overwhelming feelings of emptiness and longing.

If you google the symptoms of COVID-19, one of the first and most prominent results you will see is the loss of taste or smell. It is a rare phenomenon and a telling symptom that many people experience while infected with the virus. While you can experience a fever, chills, congestion, fatigue, or headaches with many other illnesses, the loss of taste and smell is almost entirely unique to COVID-19. When you hear someone has lost their ability to taste or smell, it is a safe bet that they will be receiving a positive test in the near future. But despite this, in my experience, this is one of the least considered symptoms from COVID-19. We hear people talk about their battles with COVID-19 and we think how miserable it must be to have a high fever and chills, how lonely it is to quarantine all alone, how scary it is to have trouble breathing. But we rarely think much about losing our ability to taste and smell because we simply do not think about these senses very often.

In our day-to-day life, we are almost unaware of our taste and smell. Sure, we taste and smell things almost every waking minute of our lives, but it is very rare that we actually take note of what we are sensing. Usually, it is only when we taste or smell something especially good or especially bad that we consciously process the information that our nose or tongue is constantly collecting. When that information is bad, there is almost no way to avoid it short of masking it with another taste or smell, but even that can backfire by fusing to make something even worse. These senses are like breathing. For ninety-nine percent of our lives, these functions operate on autopilot. Our body naturally performs them and our brains reap the benefits. It is not until these things have attention drawn to them that we start thinking about them, and it is soon after that we forget about them again.

Although, when we lose these senses for any extended period of time, the effects are jarring. While we have all likely experienced anosmia (the total or partial loss of smell) through congestion, and a resulting loss of taste to some extent, I assure you this sort of existence is totally foreign. Unable to taste the sweet joy of chocolate, the sour bite of lemon, or the savory kiss of a good piece of meat, it is an existence without any pleasure in eating. Sure, you can still feel the texture and temperature of food, these senses become more prominent than ever, but these senses do not give us the satisfying experience we crave from our food. Many times during this period of sense-less existence, I would jump at the notion of taste-like feelings only to find the feeling of a different temperature or texture in my mouth.

Over the next week, I sought out spicy foods and textures and temperatures that would stimulate my other oral senses. My nose was a lost cause. Yet, as I tried to keep myself in good health, the act of eating never filled my desire. The days passed, and so did my other symptoms but not my ability to taste and smell. As I neared my much-anticipated release date, I found myself wondering when, if ever, my senses would return. I had heard horror stories of people who never got their senses back, or people who went weeks and months after their infection without them. One friend told me her parents had been COVID-free for a full year and they still say many things taste different than before—not quite wrong, but not quite right.

Fortunately, I am not one of those horror stories. Soon after my release from isolation, I started to regain my ability to taste and smell things. And while I would love to say that there was a glorious moment of rediscovery where my senses all of a sudden came back while I was eating a burger with fried egg, avocado, bacon, fig jam, and buttery Texas toast; the truth is I barely noticed their return. Whether it was a sudden flip of the switch that I totally missed, or a gradual recovery too slow to notice, I really have no idea. Honestly, I am not entirely sure these sensations are not all in my head. Whatever the answer may be, I have made what feels like a full recovery. Now, I think a little more about the things I eat and how they taste, and sometimes I will stop to inhale and take note of what I smell, just to see what is around. But soon, my body will reengage its autopilot, and I will forget all about these senses—that is, until something else draws attention back to them.