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Volume Up, Cameras On: Zooming in on COVID-19

Co-Editor's Introduction to "I Think You're Muted": Voices from the Coronavirus Pandemic

At the time of *Survive and Thrive's* previous volume's publication date—December 2020—we were “in the grips of a pandemic,”¹ hanging much of our hope on the forthcoming development of a vaccine. America's death toll had not yet reached 200,000 lives lost. Now, fully one year after much of the world went into their initial lockdowns, few would say that the pandemic is holding us hostage in quite the same way. Indeed, much has changed. We hoped for a vaccine in 2020; today, three FDA-approved options are available to adults across the nation. Ahead of predictions, anyone sixteen and older, regardless of underlying health conditions, is eligible for a vaccine in every state. These factors and a new, more COVID-aggressive presidential administration has helped push the daily national average of vaccine distribution beyond three million people. Our long-hoped-for goals are on the horizon.

And yet, the pandemic is not over. Mask-wearing continues to be an ideological controversy. New variants of the virus, particularly B.1.1.7, threaten to add many more victims to the death toll, which now registers at more than half a million lives lost nationwide. Like the variants, cases of vaccine hesitancy are helping the virus persist; in counties where hesitancy is particularly high, some vaccinations are going unused at the same time that the lines in other counties are distressingly long. Certainly, we have not arrived at “after” just yet. Even so, we can acknowledge the distance we have come since the pandemic began. This special issue of *Survive and Thrive* served as an invitation for people to reflect on that space—the space between COVID's beginning and now, where we still are not quite sure when or how “normal” will come into focus. These reflections have much to teach us, though the lessons are ongoing. How might we better navigate future crisis communication from political representatives, media outlets, or scientific pundits? What measures are most appropriate in cost/benefit analyses for human well-being, like those inherent in the dilemma of in-person versus online schooling for young children? Which pressure points—like race, nationalism, or economic instability—can stir the tides of social (dis)unity to mobilize the masses? The answers to these and other questions are needed and necessary, perhaps for a very near future.

¹ Katz, Steven B. and Black, Suzanne. "Editors' Note to Vol 5: Issue 1: On Publishing *Survive and Thrive: Journal of Medical Humanities and Narrative Medicine* During the 2020 Global Pandemic," *Survive & Thrive: A Journal for Medical Humanities and Narrative as Medicine*, 2020, Vol. 5. Iss. 1, Article 1.

As a scholar with a career interest in environmental rhetoric, I am struck by the parallels between COVID-19 and climate change, and, perhaps more interestingly, our responses to each. In fact, when listed out, one might marvel at the similarities between these two cases. Both, for example, pose a grave threat to human health, well-being, and economic prosperity. Fortunately, smart adaptations can reduce (though not eliminate) the harms experienced by either. The failure to use what we know from science, however, leads to harms that could have been avoided.² On this note, Dr. Deborah L. Birx, the coronavirus response coordinator under the Trump administration, suggested in a televised interview with CNN that, had the Trump administration acted more sagaciously, hundreds of thousands of American lives could have been saved. “There were about 100,000 deaths that came from that original surge,” Birx stated. “All the rest of them, in my mind, could have been mitigated or decreased substantially.”³ To be clear, “all the rest of them” comes to approximately 450,000 potentially avoidable deaths. For now, this stark death toll is one notable, distinguishing difference between COVID and climate change.

The pandemic was acute, with a swift onset that posed immediate harm. COVID’s health impacts changed the world drastically in a matter of weeks. Even so, efforts toward mitigating these impacts have been rewarded with viable solutions—namely, through vaccinations—in less than one year. Damages from climate change, on the other hand, are likely to be longer lasting, and, ultimately, larger in magnitude in terms of its effects.⁴ Presently, the estimates for climate change-related deaths range widely; the World Health Organization suggests that the number might be close to 150,000 annually,⁵ but that in the coming decade this number may climb to 250,000 or higher.⁶ Still, we have a longer planning horizon to deal with for climate change, which means more time to adapt. Furthermore, one of the lessons we have learned definitively from COVID is that the adaptation process is incredibly important, maybe even more important than the plan. When in crisis, the way in which we adapt shapes the outcome, and that is largely what this issue, “‘I Think You’re Muted’: Voices from the Coronavirus Pandemic,” seeks to explore: adaptation.

This issue received more submissions than any other in the journal’s history. Humbly, we acknowledge the many factors that may have contributed to this fact. First and foremost, everyone was affected to varying degrees by the pandemic, and our pool of submitting authors reflects that diversity in ethnicity, age, occupation, gender, and political affiliation. The voices you will read in this issue are hurting, grieving, and hoping. They are angry, sorrowful,

² Polasky, Stephen. “Climate Change Impacts and Adaptations: Coastal Systems.” Policy and Science of Global Environmental Change, 30 March 2021, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. Lecture.

³ Sheryl Gay Stolberg. “Birx Lashes Trump’s Pandemic Response, Citing Needless Deaths.” *The New York Times*, 2021.

⁴ Polasky, “Climate Change.”

⁵ “Climate Change.” *The Health and Environment Linkages Initiative (HELI)*, World Health Organization, 2021, www.who.int/heli/risks/climate/climatechange/en/.

⁶ “Climate Change and Health.” *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, 1 Feb. 2018, www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health.

guilt-ridden, and frustrated. All of our submissions should be approached with the reader's discretion, because each of our authors experienced losses that are indicative of the harrowing nature of the pandemic, politics, protests, and/or privations of the last year or so. We invite you to share in their stories and lessons appropriate to your comfort level.

The submissions for this issue are arranged thematically into four sections, though many of the manuscripts interact with topics that could place them in more than one category. First, we highlight those narratives which explore life generally under COVID-19. Again, the range in these submissions is vast. Daisy Wallace opens our issue with a poem which considers how one might use the seemingly abundant volume of time afforded to some during lockdown. Before lockdown, Wallace notes that "life was a rushing current." Now, one must consider how to "not count the minutes ticking by." Similarly, Grant M. Lattanzi highlights the phenomenon of "Blursday," in which days and routines blend together, making way for the rise of the online social world to redirect the temporal structure of a quarantined society. In an autobiographical essay, Jeannine M. Pitas narrates her three-month stay with elderly parents in Buffalo, which involves a piece of eggplant, political divides, and a poignant goodbye. "Mixed Bag" by Mary Vermillion considers the implications of leaving one's home for a long-term care center during COVID. Sally R. Palmer uses mindfulness techniques in "Constellating Grief" to lead readers through layers of grief experiences in relation to the pandemic. Daniel García Bonilla and Emiliano Guaraldo Rodríguez offer readers a personal reflection on the ways pandemic restrictions altered ritualized mourning practices for a *velorio*, a fundamental part of funerary rites in Mexico. Marie A. Mater elucidates the communicative barriers she faced as a "Lone Caregiver" during a no-visitor policy enacted by Texas Medical Center, while C. McLeod brings readers into an immunocompromised home in which every day has always consisted of excessive hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing. Lastly, through her work as a hospice chaplain in retirement communities, Melissa Kreider shows how loneliness and isolation proved to be as menacing for the elderly as COVID-19.

In our next section, the submissions explore issues of social justice. The Black Lives Matter movement, the death of George Floyd and other Black Americans, and awakenings to or grappling with racial injustices are strongly present, such as in "I Never Wanted This" by Catherine O. Fox or "I Can Breathe" by Keshia Morant Williams. Other pieces, like those from Madalen M. Kokich and Madeline JM Johnson, consider how social justice appears in educational settings through personalized experiences for a student and an instructor respectively. A. J. Layon, a practicing physician with experience in war zones, and Mary N. Layoun, an activist and scholar within community "conflict zones," jointly author an essay which uses reflections from Walter Benjamin to explore the dialogic between death, space, and time. Theresa A. Donofrio wrestles with the devaluation of care labor, an issue highlighted repeatedly by media outlets during the pandemic, and considers how working from home mandates may affect women's roles in the workforce. Finally, Melanie B. Richards and Mini F.

Perreault present a photo essay to showcase the findings from interviews and the social media accounts of Appalachian women who sewed homemade masks for themselves, their families, and their communities during the initial waves of the pandemic.

The third section of this journal focuses on academics' experiences in higher education during COVID. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, Mouton et al. share personal and professional moments with colleagues (and now readers) to cope during the pandemic. Laura Mills presents a series of short poems featuring the life of an academic on maternity leave with her first child, while her husband serves as a frontline worker. Concerns over social isolation, the disintegration of the self, and (un)productivity are issues considered in Joseph Patrick Richards' "Life and Lemons." Farrell et al. present a "braided" narration of their sabbatical experiences, punctured with loss, isolation, and frustration—but also support, camaraderie, and adaptation. In "Academia During the Pandemic," Scott Koski writes from an adjunct's perspective to explore whether university policies and procedures, disguised as a concern for public health in the time of COVID, may ultimately result in discriminatory hiring practices. Using an epistolary approach, Erin Lord Kunz records the challenges of herding 18 year olds online while parenting a two year old and ten-month baby during quarantine. E. Cassandra Dame-Griff and April Herndon explore the complex intersections of marginalization bodies and pedagogy, where bodies taken out of view and on to the screen lay bare the restrictive and performative nature of in-person teaching. Samantha Allen Wright takes readers, hour by hour, through a typical pandemic Monday which weaves personal and pedagogical reflections. Emily Abellon closes this section with another piece in epistolary style that seeks to balance a doctoral workload, motherhood, social justice, and personal well-being.

Lastly, we highlight the ways in which COVID has altered the learning experience for students in and out of the classroom. Many of these pieces are written from the instructors or professors who creatively adapted course content to meet the demands brought on by the novel virus. One piece, that by Coby et al., shows how an entire department used COVID as an opportunity to remap classroom approaches. In "Stories from the Middle," Noah C. Leinen juxtaposes the experiences of three Resident Advisors assigned with enforcing mask wearing and social distancing requirements in the residence halls of Bethel University, St. Paul during Fall 2020. "Pandemic Learning" by Beth M. Saxvik Boyens considers how the spatial challenges of COVID-19 have altered and scattered learning communities before funneling them back into virtual settings. Using Author Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller*, Ting Man Tsao argues for the importance of compassion, an undervalued pedagogical practice pre-COVID, in his work with illness narratives in the classroom. Julie Gard presents a "hybrid" essay, featuring excerpts of student work from an in-person creative writing course from Fall 2020. Concluding this section is work from Megan N. Bell, who considers facets of mediated learning environments, such as that experienced over Zoom, the platform which served as the inspiration for this special issue's title.

The narratives shared in this issue allow readers to commiserate over experiences that may have mirrored their own, to empathize with emotions they can only guess at, or simply to listen to and learn from one another in this historic moment of crisis. We thank our authors for sharing their vulnerabilities with a wider audience, and we hope that in sharing our stories, we can respond and adapt in ways that will shape our shared future.

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