

THROUGH . *A Wandering Mind in a Not Normal Time*

MY PANDEMIC JOURNALS — (SAMPLE SET)

dave buckhout

From March 18 - July 4, 2020, I kept two running journals documenting the initial wave of the pandemic. What started as tense topical rants and past-present weave-togethers spun out through the vacuum of those early days, evolved into deep-dive cross-examinations of myself, my home country, and humanity. Throwing my lived experience and those I was in contact with into a thought-blender overflowing with daily headlines, scientific articles, and as much historical

background as I could lay my hands on, I began to hone in on definitive themes to go with each day. There was much redundancy, the days and themes often recursive and repetitive. But, those were often redundant, often recursive, repetitive days. That said, there was plenty of unique mulling too. For this was all new and it was blowing the doors off all that I did know. As if for the first time, I could see just how interconnected all things were. I saw with clear eyes what the pandemic was laying bare in our national lives, how an epic crisis and the tidal weather of America's lurching response to it was dialing into sharp relief just how f-d up our "normal" had really been. It was clear there was much work to do. It was also crystal clear that what I was documenting was a pivot-point instant, a moment that was historical just as soon as it hit the page. Entries that start off wandering about the whirling immediacy of the moment widen in aperture and coalesce into a set of daily rallying cries for how we push through.

What follows is a select set from the 70+ entries that make up the entire collection, pieces that amble about the disorientation of the moment, the roaring lack of cohesion, the individual acts of compassion and bravery, and the historical thunder that snapped into focus all those small clips of joy hiding in plain view. I don't know that I found or provided much in the way of answers to the questions posed in the course of writing these entries. But then, concrete answers seemed less the point—less the charge—than documenting an extraordinary moment while trying to keep my head and move towards a better version of myself.

Concussed . March 25, 2020

It struck me that this was the first time in my entire life when I could look out into the world around me, my immediate plain and far off vistas, and not with complete confidence count out the darker scenarios from materializing. I did not grow up in a war-torn country or a remote poor country. I knew nothing of places where *anything* can happen. I could hardly conjure up what a coup attempt must be like, of what guerrilla style battles in the streets or ethnic cleansing directed by those in charge, of what that must be like. What was it like to live through a complete salt-in-water dissolve of political institutions, a wipe-out outbreak of disease catalyzing a spiral breakdown of society? I never had any reason to war game out such doom-and-gloom scenarios in my corner of the world, in these United States. Nuclear armageddon? Sure. I was of a vintage to have known that as a foreground possibility. But even that had rendered itself remote to my still-gelling brain, something Americans had (it seemed) just learned to live with—like

commuter smog, gender roles, old racist uncles. But I knew nothing of societal dislocation that could pull apart the fabric of nations, cultures. And to be sure, all of that was highly improbable now. We would more than likely muddle through. *But that it was possible. That it could not be ruled out, completely.*

This was all unspooling across my brain waves in the wake of days having rained down like a flurry of blows. Ah, that purple flash disorientation before coming-to, the hazy ring-light drift back into consciousness. Ya, I know that product line of disorientation well, had suffered more concussions than I (or my poor brain) care to remember: collisions in sports with opposing players and at least two thrown baseballs, bike accidents (as in many), having once been kicked in the head (for real). Any long-term worry about CTE seemed remote. But I was no stranger to having your "bell rung," that warrior wave-away descriptor football announcers very quietly dropped from their on-air lexicon a few years back . . . *How many fingers am I holding up? You're fine, Buckhout. Now get back out there!*

And yet a familiarity with head trauma, if minor, provided me nothing to go on this go-round. This was all new: a purple flash of circumstances. The roar of events had been the dealer of blows. I went a good deal of March 25, 2020, not even sure what day of the week it was. The head-smacking wash over of so many pang-pained days, one on another on another on . . . serving up a disorientation foreign as to origin, but all too recognizable in its "bell ringing."

Wednesday. It was a Wednesday. I had to look it up. So fluid the moment, rushing in with dam-break speed, the circumstances and events fantastical but for their exceptional reality, their blowing away of the boundaries of predictable existence. Wednesday, usually a day that would find me swimming at the YMCA. Closed for two weeks now, that had been the first realization in

my own routine that Wuhan and Italy were coming, that they were here, a fellow Y member having tested positive for C19 on March 11. I had been at the Y on March 11: a Wednesday. It was shut down the next day when the positive test became known. It was real, the day it had been declared: *a fucking pandemic*.

My bleary-eyed stumble about days (staying up too late, poor sleep, too many bourbons). It had me wandering about that Wednesday, which might as well have been Monday, or Friday, or a day without a label but only the grey dawn to gloam-of-dusk progression of forces larger than we vulnerable little life forms, backstopped as it all was by the choral improvisation of songbirds moving on with their Spring. They went about their way as if just another Spring day demanding that full-throated songs be sung. This, as all of humanity settled in for a siege.

I was not able to shake the blur that day, the mental and physical haze like a floater but in both eyes. Stepping through the progression of a concussion: the purple flash instant (let's call it March 11), stunned in the immediate aftershock, the actual physical shock, the concussed soup of thoughts, groggy, that damned unshakeable blur and low brain ache originating from somewhere deep-lobed. Grey matter settles slowly after being smashed about: that most sensitive of organs, the cloak-over shroud slowly dissipating and angling down before coming to rest within a low background hum. Ya, I knew what a concussion felt like. This felt like that.

And that, at least in part because of this: *that anything could happen*, that for the very first time in my entire life nothing was off the table.

The resulting measures will attempt to sustain workers and businesses in place as a vast swath of the American economy shuts down under shelter-in-place and quarantine orders, the hope that the economy can rebound quickly once the pandemic ends . . .

This national concussion, puzzling over its long-term effects. Some piece of damage must be sustained, a lump of dead damaged brain tissue forever dormant. This, the out-of-the-blue eye-searing hum, the momentary vertigo and confusion, that telltale dazed look: "where . . . am I?" This would be all the scar we would need by which to remember all the fun we'd had during our pandemic year. That deep-lobed ache suddenly beginning to swell. Another nameless day picking up where the last had imperceptibly left off. . . .

Likely, no. *But that it was possible.*



I, Killer . April 24, 2020

Who do we as a society feel is deserving of an economic bailout? Small businesses are left to wonder as they struggle to hold on . . . Wearing a mask is mainly a tactic for protecting your community, not just yourself . . . Now that experts posit the virus having arrived earlier than anyone originally thought, many Americans are asking: "Did I have it?"

The head-smack realization that you could be an asymptomatic carrier, unknowing spreader of a voracious lung-smothering virus. That you could have been a walking weapon, C19 on you—*in you*—for a month or more, and had no idea, no symptoms, feeling just fine. That is a sick twisted killer, if I can personify an indifferent novel germ. So cunning, using our sociable nature against us, script-flipping strength into weakness in using our desire for close proximity and instinctual gathering and our fluent AI talent for inaccurately gauging risk—using all of this against us. We,

against ourselves . . . which did not sound far-fetched. Humans work against other humans in the competition for resources, wealth, stature, power, authority, each and every bloody day. But this was different. The simple acts of talking, touching, hugging, breathing, turned on us, turning us on each other, biologically. Maybe it's just as well. We had been turning on each other tribally for millennia now. How could we be surprised that a cold efficient killer had simply jumped on the bandwagon? It is just an increment or two more cold, a touch more efficient way to thin the human herd; but for individuals stepping up, to mitigate for the sake of others not yourself.

Asymptomatic. That morning, I had wandered through other ways in which I could have been an anonymous killer. I mean, a virus turning us into unsuspecting unknowing reapers is some cold shit, a gold standard (if a rusted out shot-through gilding). But just knowing that I could have been spreading the disease, could have been killing others I do not know and will never properly meet; going about my way, feeling fine. Likely, no. Possible, yes. . . . But, how else had I flat-lined instants of human interaction across this life? How had I murdered moments, floated in-and-out of scenes as a simmering indifferent killer of moods, "good days," or positive vibes? How often had my impatience, my short-fuse remarks thrown out as off-handed alkaline barbs—shitty little word grenades—gone on to ruin a person's mood, their day, a general outlook for one or many? I could not classify myself as a super-spreader of such things, but on occasion I had torn off the mask of decency, let lapse the extension of general dignity to my fellow human, and indulged in the sugar-fat high of selfish venting. I had spread *that* disease, viral vectors of negativity. How often had a middle-finger fury tossed out in a traffic altercation dragged down an already crappy moment to an even more retrograde one, an even shittier "worse"?

It is a trait I had worked hard to wrangle across my years: a public temper so ultimately useless. Unrestrained, it is the sure sign of a petty ego; and if only because it is so easy. It requires no work to be an asshole, only that momentary lapse into the unrestrained shitty-ness of id. . . . I am almost never pushed to that point in a public space anymore, age having snapped such stark and irrelevant spleen-vents into the sharp relief that I am not adding, but detracting—injecting a harmful negativity into the world that only maims. (Those traffic "furies"? Perhaps some work to do there, still.) And yet, there is no doubt in my head: having committed such killer acts across my years, having perpetuated occasional situational murder on those I do not know and would never properly meet. Yes, I have pushed negativity out into the world because I was momentarily inconvenienced, inadvertently (and most often unintentionally) interrupted, denied but a few seconds of unswerving self-absorbed id-fulfillment.

How often had I infected someone's good mood with bad, killed a breathe-easy day? How often had I spread a minor malice, rained all over someone's parade? How often had I been a killer?



A Big Wealth . May 8, 2020

An anvil sitting on my chest . . . what it's like to have COVID-19. — David Hammer

That morning, the ceaseless flow of news, the hyper-drive of information, dread, hope, despair, data, data . . . *doom*. . . . There was more to drop into the journal than I could possibly get down, more to monitor than could possibly be processed, more that I felt compelled to document than could possibly be committed pen-to-paper prior to hand cramps interrupting the manic moment. And perhaps that was for the better, because there was the Spring—*that amazing cool weather Spring*. Years had come and gone since we had seen anything like such a Spring here, the steady drudge march of global warming seeping more and more Summer into May, April even. But the irony: this, the most fossil-fuel-free Spring we are likely to see for a decade (and that, only if we wised up and greened up, *now*), so many cars off the road, so few planes in the air; even the

volume of trains seemed less than was usual. And those clear crystalline blue skies, one day after another after . . . This was what could be. Here is what must be, the other (*right, that other*) existential crisis already here too.

And the phoebes had successfully launched four chicks into our world, our well-wooded suburban sanctuary. So lucky, so very fortunate, an undervalued stock in the portfolio, this small "w" wealth making itself known as we sheltered in place. To have the wealth of home and space. Our space never did feel confining back in *before times*, a squat 1950s proto-ranch pad, a plenty big enough footprint for the two of us, a large yard for "urban" (half-acre+), more of an expanse than the typical urban property. The whole back half of it a contiguous run of forest intersecting with all of our neighbors' back yards and stretching the entire length of the street to its entrance, about a half-mile of wooded sanctuary. Our neighbors and their houses more spread out than the modern close-pack postage stamp developments. Yes, here was a specific "wealth," small in the narrow measurements of our monetary and size-obsessed culture, but enormous in our world, massive, in fact. A big wealth.

And ours was of a dozen contiguous neighborhoods of the same basic design that lined the eastern outskirts of what was still considered "in-town," urban Atlanta. A spatial Valhalla, a precious gem during a moment of reduced worlds, confinement, humanity under siege. It would reorient my take on "success," an expectation that I had so often marred via unrealistic financial expectations, a "success" that I had long simmered over not having achieved (so often limited in means, treading the waters of downturns personal and national, some induced, some far beyond our control). But then, it was so clear. Here we were all along: wealthy.

All the years spent carefully tending the quality of our lives at the notable expense of quantity in our lives was right then paying off. We knew how to live big with a little. And here, that well-honed skill was paying dividends hand-over-fist when we needed it most, a most trying time. And we had had trying times: 2004 - 2007, the causes: a medical crisis, a long-simmering post-medical pharmacological rehab, financial, unexpected deaths / 2010 - 2011, the causes: a relapse into post-medical pharmacological, crises of confidence (as in multiple) / 2015 - 2017, the cause: financial, purely. Personal crisis years all, too many in too short a time. We would often (and still do) joke about our "crisis veteran" bonafides, of how masterful we were (really, taken to an art form) at fixing the metaphorical flat tires, having spent so many years up on a jack along life's road shoulders, hazards blinking. And yet through all of those small years of living, having learned to size up, make "small" as big as possible. When life narrows, constricting your field-of-view, we had learned over the years to go big in our imagination, to live there if the situation required it.

And yet, we could now see that across all those trying years and all of their trying Springs the waxwings had returned to feast on our full-fruit mulberry trees, nonetheless. Our wooded sanctuary had delivered all along. It was delivering now when we needed it most, flocks of cedar waxwings under a cyan-deep clarity, those ringing blue skies. Even our on-property blackberry vines had produced like never before (12 mason jars of jam the end yield). All of these fortunate turns, this fortune, this wealth. It was with us all along. Here was our net worth in a windfall regardless of what any damned bank felt entitled to assess, deep-vault reserves pulling us through in the face of a viral killer running humanity down.

Most of our extended human community was responding well, pulling together, helping others, masking up, stepping through. But a lot were not. The nation in general seemed and felt rudderless, adrift. Thousands dying by the week, by the day, the hardness, the unrelenting real. Locally, the fitful, fraught, and (not unsurprising, if dispiriting) ideologically-driven "reopening" was underway and in earnest. I was willing to test a loosening of the small pod lifestyle that our recent days had demanded . . . *quarantine, shelter-in-place, slow the spread* . . . but there was no way in hell I was going out anywhere for long, especially in an enclosed space. Worry hung over it all; and if only because so many were claiming there was nothing to really worry about and it was overblown and we needed to open up everything now . . . *Are you an epidemiologist? No? Then maybe you should shut the* . . . Being turned on each other, instead of being turned into one dominant civic force with one goal in mind: defeat the virus in order to save lives, the economy, our national soul. Devastating, infuriating, it looked precisely like defeat before we even had a chance to succeed. The worry, the sleeplessness, the one-too-many nighttime bourbons. . . . But we had that Spring, that amazing cool clean Spring. The towhees and the crows and the cardinals all nesting close, the aroma of honeysuckle seasoning the opiate air. Easy cool breezes. That.

And we had our little slice of this world, this big little life of ours in our home, having cultivated a very specific type of wealth: that of space and surroundings. We had invested and tended that crop for all of our years. Inside all of our lean years, it was often the only thing we had. But we did. We had it all along, the foundational wealth of space. It made grousing (about anything) in the midst of that devastating present seem petty, selfish. Many—*as in many*—had nothing . . . *Don't forget to be nice* . . . a pandemic having made life so small for us all. All the restrictions on movement and travel and social / economic interaction, of going anywhere. All of

this having revealed to us, under those blue marble high-cirrus skies, just how big our space and surroundings were, just how wealthy we were. We were realizing something that down-deep we must have known, if not having framed just so: of how very rich we were, of how very rich we had been all along.



(I Was) With Hope . June 11, 2020

The coronavirus is hitting societies that regarded deadly epidemics as things of the past, like whale bone corsets and bowler hats. — Charles Mann

The coronavirus caused a spike of 5.83x the normal mortality rate in New York City this April. That was only outdone by Bergamo, Italy, this March @ 6.67x. The only worse single month spike in U.S. history occurred in Philadelphia: October 1918 @ 7.27x — Vox

The future, what's next . . . it's wide open. — Marc Maron

The confluence of two heavy rivers of chance and historical reckoning—mind-melting, still. A historic disruptor of the sad sack status quo. And what seemed likely? That might not be the most

significant occurrence, that those colliding forces would cause an even larger tectonic shift, a collision so monumental, so long-haul in its grinding, that the underwater earthquakes it unleashed would bring a tsunami of societal change.

What had poured out into the streets was the result of THE can having been kicked down the road until there was no more road left . . . *Streets once silenced by the coronavirus outbreak are filled with the cacophony of collective action . . . (There is) a far more representative cross-section of America out protesting in the streets than in the 1960s* * Justice for all. Not just all property-holding white men of means, but for ALL. An oft-used phrase I had heard a lot across those early months fell in most succinctly here: *It only took a pandemic*.

It was THE thing that we had proven unable to approach in a way that pointed at thorough lasting change, one in favor of the ALL, not the few. Steps had been taken, for sure. Some steps had been rescinded. There were more and more attempts at the rescinding. The heat that the "race thing" generated, the tribal, racist flare-ups, having been mainly fought to a draw in recent times. Obama was rapidly followed by The Tea Party, white people using taxation as a stand-in for the true animating factor: a slip of unchallenged white privilege; Obama, seemingly, the ultimate violation. Boston patriots were not upset about the taxes, but the autocratic reality that allowed those taxes to be levied against them without any say in the matter. It was the king, not the taxes. But that was apparently lost to those who could only focus on property as a means by which to measure personal quality; for the mind numb irony of those modern day play-acting "patriots" across 2009 and 2010 etc. etc. was this: It was Obama, not the taxes. And all the proof we need? Tariq Rice, Sandra Bland, Philondo Castille. Colin Kaepernick did not take a knee to diss the military, or to denigrate sacrifice. The military does not own the national anthem. But

understanding the nuance of a brave act of, at first, solitary protest was not the point. Kaepernick was met with a storm of vitriol that only tribal hate can subsidize. Protests against the public executions of blacks for minor offenses (or none at all) were being met with a police presence indistinguishable from the United States Fifth Army . . . *Blacks cited by overwhelming majorities for minor moving violations. Blacks overwhelmingly populating prisons as a percentage of ethnicity totals in America. . . .* And these protests, being met with the riot gear vitriol of law and order, of protecting property. (Three-fifths of a human?) This was not so much about law, as it was about order. It was about position. It was about the knowing your "place."

Though we could look back over the past sixty years and see much to support the "moral arc bending" in the right direction, of late the call to justice for all and the tribal fury it drew in response had it all sputtering to a draw. But then, it only took a pandemic. And I was with hope. Could Can Kick Road finally be in the rear view? From my "travel notebook" that mid-June day, this: *Through the devastating dislocation, thin lines of hope. Through the shitty sediment of our many, now obvious, national flaws having been churned up into a cloudy roil by this pandemic—our current state of mass dysfunction—thin rays of what was possible. Reset, redo, rebuild. This was our charge. Now we knew and there was no longer any excuse. A better U.S. A better us.*

U.S. Cases — 2,015,692 / U.S. Deaths — 112,311

* Headlines: The Washington Post



This Present Sea . June 27, 2020

The reality of this pandemic is that nothing is definitely safe, and nothing will definitely give you a bad case of COVID-19 . . . We almost always exist in grey areas now.

— James Hamblin

A vast ocean of fathomless present. That is how it seemed. That was not a new sensation, but was still a most observable trait. In a row boat, a simple pair of oars, no land in sight. This sea did not seem necessarily angry or forbidding; more tepid, rolling, endless. There was so little motion it made it hard to gauge what was happening, at all. Were we turning a corner? Well, no. One thing was obvious, things were getting worse. But how much worse? Was this the end of the "wash back" of Memorial Day weekend? Probably not. Hope wanted this to be so, even as reality wanted to shout: no, no, and not by a long shot. In a boat on a horizonless sea. If only to beat the

fatigue of inaction—*the quarantine blues*—rowing in circles, around and around and . . . rowing in circles preferable to the brain-numbing evaluation of a contour-less void, this grey sea.

And again, there was no immediate and obvious malevolence on which to fixate, just a fucking microbe beyond the ability to size up with the naked eye, but for its watershed effects. And that lack of a discernible enemy, the invisibility, the world as same-seeming as it had ever been to the naked eye; this, though we knew—though we all should have damned well known—that it was not the same, not by a long shot. It was a real we had to sense as much as feel, though we dared not touch it, or breath it in too deep. Suspended in mid-air, an uncertain gravity having rewritten the rules of physics and mortality: the malevolent tick-off statistics, the infected, the irreversible death. Those remained the same, as true as they had ever been.

This sea of the present had spread out beyond all visible horizons. Deal with the virus. Deal with the new normal. Carry on, keeping calm. Row in circles if you must. Continue on. An unknown like anything most of the world had faced in a century. The horrid face of Ebola and SARS and HIV had been limited in scope to those caught in its whirling malevolence. But this was global. A great global unknown . . . *It's a virus we don't know enough about.* . . . And yet, there were those attempting to lay claim, grasping at overarching truths, proclaiming those truths as certainties—these people all the more coming off as people we should not be listening to. A healthy skepticism queried those who claimed to know all. For they, like we, still did not know shit. We would have to row through this non-storming grey in circles, if need be, awhile yet.

All that, even though it seemed more obvious than at any point since I had first put ink to page back on March 18, that though this be a fathomless present, a grey void, we already had the ability to move through—and always did. We just had to scale up, be as big as the void is wide.

Answer the listless roll-along drone of an invisible killer in our midst with constant motion. Move, do so relentlessly towards bigger better versions of our previous selves. To sweep away the ideological sludge that had turned our mechanisms for complex government into some nihilistic cult of ideas. To redress 400+ years of economic and societal privilege having fallen on the backs of the brown and the black and the "other." Restore a galvanizing sense of equitable reward for work, and do this by revoking the hall-of-mirrors distortion that was rewarding wealth above all else. We did not have to agree. To agree was not the point and never was the point. But we did need not devolve on ideological religion in which each side casts the other as arch-angel v. demon. We need not face-plant into a talking-point oblivion, a carnival of chaos capitalizing on the fury of extremes. There was work to do. It was work worth doing.

If this was the beginning of a national reset, a reboot, a retooling (and if it was not, then shame on us), then what now? At present, there was grey sea. A boat. A pair of simple oars. And yet, quite suddenly, here on June 27, that did not seem to me like nothing. We were three months into a state of suspended animation. The world at a glance still seemed very much as it always had. But the world, we knew, had been upended by what we could not see. I was *still* hammering on hope, leaning on the playbill of "better" . . . *Coming soon, if only via Zoom, to a screen near you.*

If this next act was a great remaking, then we would have to straighten our course, and soon. Where were the lines to be drawn? George Washington was a slaveholder. We need not tear down the Washington Monument, but we must deal with the fact that the symbolic father of our country held human beings in bondage. "We hold these truths to be self-evident. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men." Indeed. How did we forget that? At what

point did we dismiss the act of democratic governing as important? Why did we forget that? "We must historicize more, memorialize less." Statues are not history. Statues are an interpretation of history most often told long after the fact to clear the way for nostalgia. Instead of letting statues prolong half-truths, if not flat false myth, how about we tear down those that symbolize the many having chosen the wrong side of history and reckon with that history, as painful and ugly and vile as that might be? This would all require a thick skin and mettle, at the same time requiring equal doses of civility and modesty—all of those things and more. We would have to widen the aperture, greatly. Did we have it in us as a people? Did I have it in me?

Circles. In circles. This listless, often listing grey void. It had done us one solid, having revealed from its obscure oceanic depths all the foundational cracks, all of the quiet relentless suffering, that all of our modern grasping at greatness was as void as this grey sea was obscure. It had been a mirage of enlightened progress in its best moments, a mockery in its worst. But that we now knew. *That was not nothing.* And that listless present, as lethargic as it seemed, was passing through rays that hinted this tragic mess would not be in vain, that deep systemic bedrock change was possible, and possibly inevitable.

This grey, this present sea might yet reveal sun-soaked horizons in what was next to be. We just had to be willing to see it for its long game. And if that meant I needed to row in circles for some time yet to come, if only to keep up strength / fortitude, then so be it. I still believed with all that I had in this country, this world. It would, it could, seem a relentless slog-through journey yet to go. But there it was, in a spot-lit corner of my brain: *In Union, Strength.*

