

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

MY PANDEMIC JOURNALS — (A SELECTION)

dave buckhout

From March 18 - July 4, 2020, I kept two running journals documenting the initial wave of the C19 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.*



New York City . April 8, 2020

My entire family tree comes out of, or somehow loops through the greater New York City area. The original Buckhout—*Jan Boeckhout*—arrived from Holland in the 1660s. After five years an indentured servant, his debt for the travel to this new world settled, he was free; a state of living enjoyed by all of his descendants since, free to roam and live as they would, though most stayed close. Buckhout is a common name on the New York militia muster rolls during the French and Indian War, North America's theatre of the larger Seven Year's War between France and England. We took up in Westchester and further north in Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow when those were rural landscapes. Great-great uncles were lauded far and wide for championship ice boat designs (think long sleek sailboats on truck-length skates) back when that was a thing in the late 1800s. My grandfather and my many great aunts and uncles grew up in the Hackensack area, just over the Hudson. The Dutch, English, French, Welsh, all white ethnic tribes that took up in the greater

New York area, their strands are stitched tight into my DNA. Two generations ago, my maternal grandfather, a Reed, came down to Brooklyn from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to try his hand at music (trombone, specifically) and for the more steady sturdier outcome of a good school. He stayed, "met a gal," as he liked to say, and raised a family of Reeds. My Mom, my Dad, both natives; my ancestral roots recursive and deep, a root structure that wraps ever tighter around many an ancestor in the ground. I have attended more than one family funeral out on the Island, there being no more visceral human connection to land than death. Knowing of those who lived in a place, died in a place, and were buried in that place, creates a steel-cable bond to that place. To those free and lucky enough to have and value family, free and lucky enough in their ancestral history to know at least something of that history, it is all part of a larger gift: a lineage. There are more Buckhouts buried in and around the greater New York City area than anywhere else, by orders of magnitude. I am of the first full generation of Buckhouts to consider an entire life lived beyond America's original national capital as not a rare thing. It was a big deal that my father and uncle moved off, though a part of them was, and will always be, there still. Over three centuries of Buckhouts lie in the ground in and around New York City. I have never lived in New York City. But I am from New York City if I am from anywhere at all.

The death toll for that day in New York was 779. All of them dead at the hands of a single thing, a microscopic creation bent on mortal violence. An eyewitness said the streets were empty and completely silent but for the non-ending wail of ambulance sirens. I rarely pray. I prayed for New York that day as if it were my own. And then I prayed for all, knowing that was all I had.



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.



Now, Greatness? . June 5, 2020

Did my own generation—GENERATION X—fail to move the needle? Did we accomplish much? If no, it did not seem for lack of desire; but only because for all our youthful railing against the systems and the institutions, we did seem go along with them all in the end.

— Note to Self

The Great Influenza of 1918-1920, coupled with Allied victory in World War I, was an immense seismic rocking of the world order, and America's "order" within it. And in its wake this country did two things: took firm hold of its place at the table of global power—*and*—fell into the most overtly xenophobic moment in the country's history beyond the nineteenth-century.

And here we were, this most unexpected twist: Was "our pandemic" setting up to roll out the exact opposite America as had bled out of "their pandemic," what can only be viewed by the

honest as the bloody racist-as-fuck 1920s? It was far too early to tell how this would end, the pandemic, the protests.

Systemic societal collapse into a bloodthirsty assertion of "order" (executed by "law" and lawlessness where it was more convenient) ran over the 1920s. A lockdown segregation, rampant lynching across the nation (not just in the South), and displays of white power super-spread hate and fear—it having achieved a peak on August 8, 1925, as some 30,000 fully-robed and hooded Klansmen came together in Washington, D.C., to march down Pennsylvania Avenue. I had recently come across images from that day. They are shocking, but mainly for their not being all that shocking. The rebirth of the KKK (its ceremonious rebirth having occurred atop Stone Mountain but a few miles down the road from where I sat pecking away at my keyboard), the cold murder wipeout of "Black Wall Street" in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the killing of blacks and browns without so much as a hint of consequence. Yes, we were decade on decade of progress away from that. But—*but*—if not all that probable, that some form of deep societal collapse was still, in our pandemic moment, possible . . . *We would most likely muddle through. But that it could not be ruled out, completely.* . . . Remote. Distant. Yet, for the first time in this fifty+ year life span, a thing.

Okay, there was that. But, how about seeing the cup as half-full: the more likely scenario being an inversion of the 1920s. America in 2020 was not America in 1920. We were better—*way better*. Still, we needed to get to better than this, *way better*. We were not "there" yet, not by a long shot. And here, this unexpected twist, result of a grotesque camera-phone-streamed death—a lynching—one having tapped into ALL the others that had proceeded it, all the others that were not caught on live-stream but had proceeded it, all the wretched past full of lynchings and

murder and "legal" law and order segregation, etc. etc., all the way back to August 1619, all of that: was all of that about to be buried for good, systemic change knocked into place by this moment and all the generations coming up behind me?

I thought long and hard that day about my generation's response, what we had been able to do. And what had we done? It seemed we had moved the needle towards better, somewhat, but for the wavering needle and its regression, its aggrieved revanchist backwards-to-the-future-ness, the lockstep brick-and-mortar systemic-ness still there, still firmly entrenched. And some of that was on some of us. If anything, we had grown too complacent once we could see complacency working in our favor. Systemic change was messy, unruly, occasionally lawless (while new laws are forming), and without order. But, again, it is always thus. It is John Lewis's "good trouble." It moves needles for good. And yet, had we, Gen X? It was hard to tell within all the public battles still raging after all these twenty or thirty years of my generation having had any manner of clout to deal the old order a blow; and in part for the lack of wanting to strike blows. But also for the inability to escape the still looming shadow of the generation directly proceeding our own, the raucous ideological and political field-salting that had come along with the Baby Boomers having never fully let go.

I felt a bold sense of regret for all of this, but stowed my tiny violin long enough to think: It is a time for the young to lead, and those older to follow. Guide, support, give wisdom if it was there to give; but mainly get the hell out of the way and fall in behind the lead ranks, those with the message, the mettle, and the bullhorn. Here was a moment for the young to change things and to do so now. Would it end in violence as it always had? As it did in 1992 and in 1968 and in the 1950s and in the 1920s and in the 1870s and the long tail violence that set its appalling course for

its eventual (now?) oblivion in August of 1619? Would this all end in the usual course rebuttal flying its blood-soaked banners of law and order? Or, would the waves of protesters right then flowing down and over American streets finally crest the institutional levees having held the racist program together for so very long? Would this go to the vote, or the gun?



Abstracted, Refracted . June 16, 2020 — *Bloomsday*

The abstraction of it all, that seems the most durable through-line.

— Note to Self

June 16, the day on which James Joyce's epic *Ulysses* takes place. Leopold Bloom. *Bloomsday*. A day to celebrate (or revile) that wandering, often infuriating, confusing, and more often than not surreal scrawling tome having been run out in the (then) lingering Dadaist style. A modernist disruptive intervention of staid repressed tradition, cards thrown into the air—*anarchy*. ("And I thought it was the U.K.!!") No past, no future, only a weird odd *now*. Having been published in 1922, the Great Influenza (let alone the historical wipeout of World War I) having just blown through, abstracted and upset the world into which that book fell, I could not help from my 2020

quarantine fire-tower but see this angle: Did the broken mirror refractions of that plague, that f-d up upset world, come out in the "wait, what was that?" ink-wash of *Ulysses*?

Bloomsday. Such a perfect observance for "our" pandemic moment, considering the great trundling word salad that is *Ulysses*. It was a book I put off reading for years, if only due to the lip-curl reactions of those I had known who had. At turns they had wanted to claim it the greatest literary work ever created—and—hurl the thing into a dumpster. But after stumbling across a stylish late '50s edition in a book shop one night about a decade ago in Charlottesville, Virginia, I decided to take the plunge. It was all of what everyone I had known who had read it had said: a phenomenal creative masterpiece and the most infuriating mess of absurd rolling rambling adjective piles I had ever read. . . . *And what of now? . . . A fantastical imagination run out as if just any everyday reality . . . It is without boundaries, without any real guidelines. . . .* I could not describe my reaction to reading *Ulysses* any better. I could hardly describe my pandemic experience any better. Unfamiliar, absurd, this COVID-19 world.

The rolling rambling disruption of all that was average, routine, normal, had required us to reframe how we thought and talked about the average, routine, and normal; just like they must have in 1918, 1919, 1920. "Are you all okay? No, for real?" It was as if I was learning a foreign language . . . *Este foarte ciudat* (or "this is very strange" for you non-Romanian speakers). . . . It was at the very least a new version of a known language—like cubism, Dada.

And yet, as I wandered about the newly defined circumference of public proximities, the newly distant way that, mask-muffled, we interacted with each other, the old phrases rarely used put onto the contemporary conveyor of the oft-used (*stay safe*), it hit me just how absurd *before times* had really been. Fissured and fractured, we had been carrying on a ridiculous dance in

which our ideological tribes could barely understand each other, had looked on at the absurdities of the other, treated those not "us" as unintelligible and other. That had been disorienting enough, a ridiculous thing to look back at longingly and call "normal." Sure, we had Spotify and Netflix and Zoom and 5G. But we were failing at decency, common purpose, camaraderie.

This here, the surreal whirl, *a fucking pandemic*, was just a more honest representation of an already upset world, refracted, not at all what it had seemed and anything but average, routine, normal. Here I was actually measuring out the length of time a roll of toilet paper would last (by dating the previous empty roll, if you must know), evaluating our meager cache and projecting out how many days left until we were onto leftover gift wrap. And the while, we Americans continued as before to publicly hate each others' guts over guns and, or God and, or LGBTQ, living inside the hot gusting selfishness of a clown car executive branch intent on fiddling while democracy and an independent press burned, young blacks being executed in their drivers' seats for failing to properly signal or an untreated mental illness made untreatable by another long raging and now fentanyl-laced epidemic—outrage, outrage, outrage, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner . . . that had been normal? That we had so thoroughly normalized a so thoroughly abstracted real?

We had all forgotten what a fucked up mess we had made of things. Modern American life had been an abstraction of normal all along. It "only took a pandemic" to see it.

