

**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 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 ground. 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?



*Unknown* . May 14, 2020

*Returning the favor: The country of Ireland has sent along a seven-figure donation to Navajo and Hopi families to help them get through the COVID-19 pandemic . . . (this) came in gratitude for a donation by the Choctaw Nation to the Irish more than 170 years ago, when Ireland was starving in the 1845-1849 Great Potato Famine. — National Geographic*

Here was humankind at its best. Gracious unsolicited aid for others in their time of need. This, while . . . *Top infectious disease specialist, Anthony Fauci, warned a congressional panel that the nation did not in any measurable way have the spread of the virus under control and that reopening regular close-quarter activity too quickly and without a phased plan would risk an outbreak that, in his words: "you may not be able to control." Many Americans were already ignoring this advice.*

It had been a forgettable time. The only thing I was pulling from all of this was just how much work we had to do, just how rickety and careless and insular were the foundational aspects

of a country supposedly "great." And this, on top of how far we had to go as a species, generally, in leveraging the innate goodness of human potential to offset the instinctual flaws of human nature. At least that much was now crystal clear. Still, despite all the work to be done, and with not a moment to lose, I just wanted to forget all of what had come down too, looking around for a century-sized broom and carpet under which to sweep it all. And so, it struck me that the fleet sprinting scrawl spilling out that morning across the final pages of the first (of two) journals I set aside to document this most abnormal time, ran over, under, and through thoughts leaping out from a piece titled: "Why Are There Almost No Memorials to the Flu of 1918?"

The first thing this piece prompted was recollection of a day trip taken decades ago, back when Kerri & I were still dating. It was October of 1997, and we were traipsing away an Autumn afternoon in the sprawling *Westview Cemetery*, what had in the early twentieth-century hung along the western outskirts of the city of Atlanta. No longer the outskirts (the city and suburbs having enveloped it long ago and now rippling far beyond the plot in all directions), nor as renowned or visited as the famous in-city destination: *Oakland Cemetery*, *Westview* was in its way more impressive; and if only for its grand sweep. And on that warm Fall day in '97, we found ourselves lost for hours wandering through—minds and thoughts wandering too.

But it was only in exiting that the visual from that day was fixed in my head. We passed by the "Receiving Tomb (or Vault)," a low sloping structure that seems designed to blend into the surrounding landscape. Here, in an era prior to refrigeration, unpaved roads often washed out in bad weather, and the building of the cemetery's solemn if beautiful mausoleum (still in use), the bodies of the dead were temporarily interred awaiting burial. That was fascinating enough, to be transported a century back to how those "way back when" had to deal with, in so practical a way,

the most common human fact aside from life itself. To traipse unwittingly across something so telling about where we were and where we have come and gone since, that would have been enough. But what stuck, was framed and hung in a back room of the "mind archives" for some unforeseen future recollection (or, as chance would have it: pandemic), was a stone-etched history fixed near the tomb's long ago closed entrance. It stated in "in memorium" terms of the Receiving Tomb's role during the Great Influenza, of how an overwhelmed city was forced to deal with the heartsickness and the grim logistical calculus of mass graves resulting from the lack of resources to handle mass death on such a scale. Here was a sidebar walk-right-past-it memorial to the thousands on thousands of Atlantans who had perished in the Great Influenza during its 1918-19 peak in the States. It was the only memorial I knew of in the city and the only one of any kind that I remember having seen anywhere; and even this seemed more a mention than really memorializing anything. It was right out in the open, as undeniable as the history of "that" pandemic itself. But still, it felt like a discovery. In plain sight, yet unknown—as if nothing that really needed to be noticed or remembered.

David Segal's article on the dearth of Great Influenza memorials had itself appeared in an out-of-the-way section, a read-right-past-it part of an e-news edition of *The New York Times*. But it caught my eye, if only because it was such an obvious question that no one seemed to be asking—let alone have an answer for. Segal wrote: "The flu ravaged civilization for nearly three agonizing years . . . But soon after . . . And for decades after, the pandemic somehow vanished from the public imagination." There was a lot in that, and there were a lot of reasons why this was the case, not the least of which being this: Allied victory over the Central Powers in the First World War was the much more admirable and sought after kind of transcendent history we in the

west, and America specifically, prefer. That plus the mentioned cytokine storm of mass death, the mass dying of the youth of America—especially those jammed together in military camps (that virus having selected to hit those with healthy overreacting immune systems to deadly effect)—struck down in droves by a damned flu bug. That just did not sidle up to the masculine tale male egos could accept as the narrative for a strong nation getting stronger. If not the soldiery and youth of the era itself, the patriarchy was not about to abide in such a down-look historical headline. Best to keep it out of view. Best to keep it out of the papers; this the very reason it was called "The Spanish Flu" in the first place, WWI neutral Spain having been the only country not openly censoring the worldwide firestorm of influenza in its newspapers. (The widely accepted 1918 origin source for the Great Influenza now pegs it to farm pigs in west Kansas, and not of avian origin in Spain; i.e. U.S. soldiers likely brought it with them to Europe, where it rapidly swept out across the world.)

Yet, as a newly-minted pandemic veteran I now held a certain qualification to claim what was likely the most significant reason: Why would anyone have wanted to remember the Great Influenza? Death by global plague is forgettable. Why would anyone need to remember such a thing? . . . The ink had not even dried on the page before I regretted the line, realizing the fallacy and, really, the lack of respect in such a statement. For that momentary lapse transported me to another graveyard visit a few years before our day out at *Westview*, a plot of Earth that has taken on something of a sacred site for me down through the years. It drops all the reason I would ever need to know why we should remember such things, such stricken times and the humans—*individuals living lives*—that were struck down within it . . .

In my hometown of Tolland, Connecticut, there is a cemetery still in use whose original "ye olde burying ground" dates to colonial times. That old section is one of the hundreds of such plots scattered across the northeast—from York, Maine, to Copp's Hill in Boston's North End, to Tarrytown (Sleepy Hollow), New York—and up and down the Atlantic coast. It goes to a time when life and death were much more visceral, the expectation of security (be it financial or basic food stores) not known. It was a time of unpredictable hardness weathered by people heartier than we are today. It was also a time of constant rolling epidemic, if not outright plague.

And so, there I found myself: September 1994, having come home for the wedding of high school friends, and finding myself with a morning to kill before catching a flight back to Atlanta. With not much thought to it, I decided to head down to the cemetery off Cider Mill Road. When I got there, I aimed arrow-straight not just for the old burying ground, but a particular headstone in the back. To this day I cannot say what it was that drew me to it; but it did, and I did not ignore the mental cue. A cocked heavily-weathered silver-stone design typical of the era, the lettering was barely legible. I sat down in front of it and slowly worked out the death tale carved into its face (the description of a soul's final days etched into their tombstone "fashionable" in the day). Here was Sergeant—the 1770s abbreviated spelling: "Serj."—Elisha Benton who, having joined the nascent Continental forces, had been captured at the disastrous Battle of Brooklyn. Fought on August 27, 1776, George Washington had come close to losing the whole damned war right there, his Continentals outnumbered, outgeneraled, and nearly captured en masse by a huge British flanking force. Like many others, Elisha was sentenced ("captivated" as it read on the headstone) to a British prison ship anchored in New York City harbor. A barbaric state of filth and pestilence was standard for these ships, even the young and strong no match for

the diseases that floated about and poisoned their hulls. Appalling as these hellholes were, even worse: once a prisoner contracted what we now know to be a bacterial or viral infection, they were dumped on land and left to their own devices to find their way home, or die—or both. Serj. Elisha Benton fell into the later column. Having contracted smallpox aboard the prison ship, the rolling epidemic of all colonial and early America, he was "exchanged" and somehow made it all the way back home, 150 miles give or take—and during winter no less—to Tolland. He died on January 21, 1777, at the age of 29.

That moment was such a bright electric instant that it has imprinted itself along with the more revelatory experiences of my life. In that moment, the first hints of Fall ringing the canopy, I recall a momentary state of shock from the weight of that tale, the random circumstances that had ferried me to that moment and that headstone. And though I would quickly learn that Elisha was actually buried elsewhere (likely due to "the pox"), and that this was only a memorial within the family plot, that stone has nonetheless become a regular pilgrimage for me whenever I find myself in my hometown. It reminds me each and every time to *not forget*, to remember, to memorialize; that though situations around living and dying can run hard, tragic, unbearable, they are in the end about individuals, humans who once lived just like me—and you.

Serj. Elisha Benton lived and died tragically like thousands in those times. Millions of first peoples contracted smallpox and flus and all manner of bugs that close-packed Europeans had developed an immunity to, a mass die-off (estimates approach 80-90%) that from 1492-onward almost wiped them clean from both American continents. Malaria, yellow fever, typhoid, TB, epidemics all, killers of humans and upsetters of human "normalcy," millions having lived through their various spikes, millions dying tragically. Millions lived through 1918 and 1919 and

the larger worldwide wave in 1920, millions of others dying tragically. Thousands on thousands were being infected and were dying here and now. Who were we, the living—*still*—to forget about them? Who were we to forget such a thing if we gave a shit about anything at all?





*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.*

