

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 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.



Sow Bravery . April 25, 2020

Get on with it, if only to attenuate time's weight.

— Note to Self

A fantastic article read that morning high-lit an online group of bored Russians under lockdown recreating famous classic works of art with whatever costumes and props they had on hand . . . *frozen dumplings were used as skulls, loose ducts as accessories, bubble wrap for Elizabethan ruffles* . . . this + smartphone cameras and a gravely needed parody had been pumped out into our light-starved troubled world: *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, *The Discobulus of Myron of Eluetherae*, *The Demon Seated*, and Frida Kahlo's *The Broken Column*, all attempted expertly; amateurs expertly venting off self-isolation. Parody, self-deprecation, humor (gallows, of course), all of these were to be vital tactics in seeing this thing through.

But that day I would mostly remember for a saying, one offered with hope, resolutely, and in an outsized way considering the delivery device. My wife's best friend had given her a fun gift in the form of a cheap handheld marquee sign, a slide-in alphabet of letters, numbers, some emoji characters thrown in. It must have cost all of \$7, but had held an outsized megaphone in our house. The daily morning ritual of a new saying or announcement in step with anniversaries, the seasonal drift of the year, event reminders, a funny thing said, or just general snap-into-the-moment sayings. This morning: Saturday April 25, the marquee read: "Sow Bravery." I found it hard to believe that the off-handed brilliance of acted out parodied art could be outdone in the course of that day's "mental balancing," things by which to soften the doomscroll working the body with its repeated blows, something—*anything*—that was not at all that. But there I was, taking it in one letter at a time; taking it in deep.

Here was a sign of our times, or more accurately: a sign for our times. Stand up. Get to it, and do so every damned day. No exceptions, not now. The simple act of living was resistance enough, a superhero shield against the urge to go dark in the face of the smothering loom-scroll of days. So small a thing, a simple saying on a cheap handheld marquee; this saying, alongside the vegetable pickers and delivery van deliverers, and the mail folks and grocery store clerks, and all those restaurant workers trying to hold on, hold on, holding on by their fingernails via the (glad to see) lengthening of take-out queues, selling back-stock as if twenty-first century dry good stores; and the transit workers and tree crews and fiber stringers and automotive and bike repair shops, and all of those selflessly giving their days and all of their courageous bravery—*all of it all*—to the stricken, the fallen, the diseased then suffocating and dying in ICUs across the

country, the world. In light of that list, it seemed a very small thing. But it also, somehow, seemed giant . . .

Sow Bravery

If small, essential. And if only to support those "essentials" in all that they were doing, to do so in whatever meager way I could. Honor their sacrifice by getting up each day, taking a deep breath, and going to it undeterred, resolute, ready.

Sow bravery. Save the world.



A Sporting Chance . May 5, 2020

There was the jarring scene of sports stadiums around the world standing empty—Barcelona, Juventus, Nice, Leipzig, Liverpool, Karachi, New Delhi, Tokyo, Inchon, Melbourne, Auckland, Guadalajara and Mexico City, Rio and Sao Paulo and all of South America (in anticipation of Copas Libertadores), Dallas and Oklahoma City and Milwaukee, Montreal and Winnipeg, New York City, San Diego . . . Atlanta—standing still, caverns of spare silence lacking the requisite chanting and roaring crowds distracted from the worries and gripes and pressures, that brief fanatic investment in something other than "normal / usual" things. The spectacle of sport, of athletes doing things that you are not supposed to be able to do, but doing it as a matter of course, making it look effortless. The time poured into their craft, the dedication and zero-in-focus of committing fully, sacrificing as any of us do for our work-a-day lives. But that their work is to play, its demands on another level of dedication.

Of course sports matter. In sport we could see the whole of the human frame play out in brief electric clips: the wild mood swings, the droning dull, the ups-and-downs and all around compressed into three or four or five hour events, series, tournaments. Fortunes twisting and turning, rearing and rending, reminding us what we already know: that for all of our talents we can achieve great things / that for all of our talents they can fail us in pivotal moments / that for all of our talents we can win, lose, draw, and yet still have to get back in the game, regardless of outcome. The lived life is the ultimate arena, filled of expected success, unexpected heartbreak, the average mundane, where some breaks go your way, and some don't—just like in sport.

And here, these great crowd-centric centers of modern civilization, no longer the barbaric coliseums of antiquity (if we may for a moment forget the reality of broken bones, torn cartilage, hooligan riots, and CTE), these cross-ethnic, cross-racial, cross-nationality stadia of competitive spirit that we look to, the world over, to distract us from the normal, the mundane, the heartbreak—all of it unavailable. These places designed for the average non-athlete to blow off steam and be entertained, taken away like all other close-distance rituals; proximity, sociability, gathering in our tribes, those things that define the human experience: *suspended until further notice*.

And not only were we without the distraction of sport . . . *Liga MX Season has been suspended. Indian Premier League Cricket is in jeopardy. NBA and NHL seasons will remain on hold until summer . . .* we were reminded of the thing we could all use distracting from each and every day in the jarring jolting scenes of these empty stadiums being transformed into drive-thru testing centers, field hospitals, temporary morgues. Basketball and hockey arenas, baseball and cricket fields, football and "futbol" stadiums—big ones—silenced by a pathogen, emptied of the

screaming chanting roaring by tens of thousands, repurposed in real-time as was all of life on Earth in this time of plague.

All of that early May day I could not shake loose one recollection in particular: Major League Baseball, having been set to open the 2020 season on March 26, at that time suspending the season's opening day for two weeks—you know, as a precaution . . . *Reality has the innate ability to be more than you think it will be.*

It was a time to prepare for the long haul, sport like life being suspended until further notice. And in the way that sport brings us together to cheer and jeer and mock (but ideally without the wars and the bloodshed and the military coups d'état that otherwise go with tribal interaction), the way it brings us to these live stages to live out the microcosms of victory, defeat, and draw that life tosses out each and every day by way of a drama put on by actors at the top of their game, if we were to have even a remote chance of coming through—knocked around a bit, but hanging together—our only chance was to come together. But . . . Would we? Could we?

(Talk) around reopening often draws a distinction between 'the vulnerable' and everybody else, as if our strength were not defined by our willingness to stand together. — Amy Davidson Sorkin

Postscript: ESPN would go on to air a handful of Korean Baseball Organization games over the first few weeks of May here in the States. South Korea had to that point been able to control their outbreaks, the KBO regular season starting only five weeks late. Stands empty, no high-fiving or

spitting allowed, it was, nonetheless, sport. With a 5:30a US ET start time, we were up in time on May 7 to catch most of Doosan vs. the LG Twins. Doosan was dominant, winning 9-3, and sweeping a three-game series. *Go Bears!*



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.*

