

Who Will You Be After Quarantine?

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What did you do during your time in quarantine? Did you check in with family and friends? Did you stay at home and achieve something? Did you donate food to the hungry or run errands for the elderly and immunocompromised?

I imagine these are questions I might receive in the future. Presently, these questions make me feel sharply aware of my own privilege. And as such, I try to be intentional with my time. It is seductively easy to do nothing. In one of his Netflix stand-up comedy specials, John Mulaney thanked his audience for coming and joked, “it is so much easier *not* to do things, than to do them. That you would do anything is totally remarkable. Percentagewise, it is 100% easier not to do things than to do them.” His hyperbolically oversimplified lines have become a real point of contemplation during my quarantine.

It truly is easier to do nothing. However, one of the “somethings” I decided to act upon while in quarantine is to spend more time *asking questions*. I believe that we each live in a veritable echo chamber with networks of people who reinforce our own ideas. In an attempt to break out of my own chamber, I decided to conduct interviews with people of different age groups and backgrounds from across the world to hear how they are dealing with the virus. This small project informed me of real-life experience and connected me not only with old friends and distant relatives, but with people whom I have never met. Among the interviewees were religious and political leaders, students and teachers, doctors and coronavirus patients, and employed and unemployed workers.

I asked people about their average day and the way they stay connected to the world. One question I posed was, “What have you found most difficult or inconvenient?”

A nine-year-old explained that she struggled over math problems without her daily in-person instruction. Meanwhile, an 18-year-old discussed his poor Wi-Fi connection in rural Brazil and his subsequent frustration with online classes. A high school teacher explained the difficulties of teaching class online. She noted that “it is extremely challenging to not have organic conversations. Technology fails in a lot of ways.” An international student, who remained on campus long after students left, said, “trying to get home has been hardest. Most people who went back to China did so within the first week after school got shut down.” She explained her inability to return to Wuhan—affordable airplane tickets were scarce, and the Chinese government implemented new policies which prevented her return home.

Others shared health issues as their primary hardship. One interviewee explained that her grandmother was about to pass away, and her family would be unable to hold a funeral. She said, “I feel lucky that I got to say goodbye before things got bad.” A 21-year-old, who tested positive for the virus, said, “when I was sick, it was awful. People like to say that if you’re young it’s not a concern. People say that to feel comfortable. But I’m a relatively healthy 21-year-old, and I ended up in the hospital because I got really, really sick.”

Many college students lamented over losing their rites of passage. One explained that “college is a liminal space and to have that space ripped away makes the transition all the more difficult because all of the sudden you’re just in the real world.”

A 24-year-old told me that the most difficult aspect of quarantine is earning money to live. She explained, “I work in the theater industry and that’s been shut down completely, but bills are still collected.” She is one of over 30 million unemployed Americans, many of whom do not know where their next meal is coming from. Some wonder whether their jobs will ever return.

A gynecologist explained, “the most difficult part is providing care without seeing the patient, without proper PPE and, of course, the fear of bringing something home to the family.” She added, “a more interesting question might be what has changed. Now we wear a mask—sometimes two—at all times. Some hospitals allow no visitors and make women labor alone. Many NYC patients are fleeing the city and looking for care in New Jersey or Philly with doctors that don’t know them. There are no elective surgeries. Patients cannot get mammograms or other testing. Some people can’t even get surgery for possible cancer.”

One 53-year-old expressed his frustration with the U.S. government. He said, “it is difficult to deal with the sense that a lot of this was preventable. Our leaders were supposed to think about this stuff and the loss of life saddens me.” Another 53-year-old said, “it is difficult to go on walks, which are essentially illegal now in Italy. I have to wake up extremely early to walk because you can only leave the house for food shopping or medical emergencies. You can also walk within 200 meters of the house with a dog or a child under about ten years old in my region.”

A 75-year-old explained that non-socialization was hardest for her; “I’m used to socializing every day and the isolation is very hard to deal with. I know it’s the right thing but it’s difficult. I’m also afraid to go into stores at my age. Shopping has become hard.”

While my interviewees reported vastly different experiences—the aforementioned only representing a small fraction—I was able to deduce some generally shared sentiments. Firstly, I sensed that all respondents believe our lives will be permanently altered in some capacity. Some even feel that the pandemic will repair and renew our social fabric. Secondly, positive outlook and motivation levels of many people are waning. However, many realize that this is not the time to beat themselves up due to lack of motivation. Thirdly, I sensed that there is no playbook that works for everyone during these times. Feelings of stress and restlessness pervaded all of my discussions. Lastly, I recognized that this was the first time, in a long time, that many have paused for introspection. Toward the end of each interview, many respondents reflected, realizing that they are quite extroverted or introverted beings. We had conversations about focusing on what is in our control and finding comfort in the unknown. Some spent the last few minutes of our phone call pondering the inconsequential nature of their individual lives.

The interview process gave me the opportunity to self-reflect as well. After conducting my first few interviews, I felt energized to speak with more people. What started as a check-in with six relatives quickly became nearly a fifty-person project. I felt moved hearing stories of friends reconnecting, siblings mending relationships, and families sitting down for meals together.

The process reaffirmed that I am someone who yearns for human interaction. I realize that keeping in touch with friends and family and performing good deeds help me stay fulfilled and feel less helpless. This project gave me much-needed distance from fear-mongering headlines, and it brought me closer to *real life* experience.

While forced domesticity certainly hampers plans and jolts many out of their comfort zones, it presents us with a moment to pause and ask questions. I imagine historians will document “life before the pandemic” and “life after the pandemic.” Of course, it is easy to do nothing and change nothing. It is easy to accept life for what it is and accept your thoughts and beliefs for what they are. But perhaps this quarantine is a unique opportunity to reflect upon “life before” and decide who you want to be in “life after.”