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2021

In Depth Assignment

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HCOM 434- 01

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April 21, 2021

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In the beginning of the pandemic, I found myself floundering. Like everyone else, I was terrified and lost. I was fortunate enough to be safe, healthy, and secure in my living situation. There were millions of people who were not so lucky. I felt tremendously guilty about that. There were people out in the world suffering, and my biggest worry was that I wouldn't be able to leave my house for a couple weeks. Logically I know that the suffering of others does not negate the stress that I was under, but it did not ease the feelings of cowardice and repulsion I had for myself. I felt like I couldn't humor ideas of *my* suffering, in any capacity, lest I look and feel like the celebrities who spelled out 'We're all in this together' with their yachts. Their naive hearts were in the right place, but it didn't land with *regular people* like they may have hoped. My house was not consumed by the wildfires. My family and friends were all safe and healthy. I did not lose my job. I could afford to pay rent. I always had enough food to eat. I was still going to school. I really felt I had nothing to complain about. I felt my privilege in every sense of the word. Now, I look back at those intrusive thoughts and I wish I had been more patient with myself.

At first, we all thought this would be a short pause to our 'real lives.' That we would stay home for two weeks, then resume our daily grind. I was petrified of the idea of staying home, I think that is because I knew I would find myself stuck in my thoughts that I had been ignoring and suppressing for too long. On some level I knew that I was not happy, and I knew that my lifestyle was not sustainable. Knowing this and facing it felt very different. I wasn't depressed or anything, *not anymore*, but I was not living a fulfilling life.

The first couple months of the lockdown, I tried to throw myself into different projects. I was worried that if I decelerated, I would lose all of my momentum. As it turns out, losing

momentum is exactly what I needed to do. As my world slowed, I took a hard look around and found that I wasn't happy with what I saw. I was exhausted. I was stressed. I was unhealthy. I was lonely- not because I had a lack of people who loved me or dedicated time to me. No, it was because in my need for constant progress, I had isolated myself. My blinders had been put on, and I didn't see what I was missing.

I always thought that I was able to live in the moment. I thought that my family and friends were my whole world. It was only once all of my distractions had been stripped away that I realized that I was wrong. I didn't prioritize them, or myself. Not really. I slipped them into my meticulously planned schedule, in moments I didn't have other responsibilities. I could only 'live in the moment,' when I carved out time to do so. I would occasionally plan an hour for "self care" here and there. Sometimes that was the only thing that kept me going. On Monday mornings, I would find myself thinking 'I make it until Friday at 9 PM, I can have a moment to myself.' *What a way to live.*

For so long, my priorities have been skewed. I valued myself based on my achievements and successes. I always thought, if I hustled now, I could relax and be happy later. I would work myself to exhaustion, until I reached my goal… then I would set a new one. I would work on days I was so sick I could hardly get out of bed. I would work on holidays. I would work when important life events were happening beyond the doors of whatever minimum wage job I was employed at that year. Before the pandemic if you weren't "hustling" it was embarrassing. If you were not overworked, you were considered an outlier. Nearly everyone I knew bought into the idea that idle time was wasted time. Time for fun, relaxation, or mental health came dead last. There was work, school, and social obligations- filling nearly every waking hour. I would wake at 6 AM, and my day would be jammed packed until 10 or 11 at least. Walking or driving lunches became the norm, as did changing from my work uniform to street clothes in any available bathroom stall at school. We were expected to 'suck it up' so to speak whenever we were ill. A month or two before the pandemic started, I remember feeling beyond horrible, but instead of

calling in to work I stopped at Target on my way. I bought DayQuil, Vitamin C, Vitamin D, Emergen-C, Gatorade, and painkillers.... and inhaled it all before my shift. It all sat in my turning stomach, but at least I felt numb. Instead of honoring my body and my needs, I dulled my senses to get through the shift. I put on makeup and a smile so no one would know anything was wrong. The worst part? I didn't think anything of it. I was miserable, but I was doing what was expected of me. Eleven months later, I would not dream of doing something like that.

Now I wonder how our perception of health will change after the pandemic. I assume that masks will become a regular part of our lives. But deeper than that, I wonder if our mindset will change. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I was left alone with my thoughts. While I could escape in schoolwork, and the internet, I had more time on my hands to think. At first it was scary. So many thoughts and feelings that I had been pushing down came to the surface... but after a while I didn't mind so much. I felt more in tune with myself than ever before. When every waking hour wasn't filled with things to do and people to see, I found that I paid more attention to myself and my own needs. I don't want to lose that relationship that I finally have with myself, but I worry that once the pandemic is over that things will go back to the way they were. I know that I will try to lead a more intentional life from here on out, but I don't know if society will do the same. I think many people miss the numbness of the hustle, and while I understand that draw I fear going back to it. Perhaps if the pandemic had ended sooner, I would have returned to life as it was without thinking much about it. But now, after so long, I think this is my 'new normal.' *Man, I used to hate that phrase.*

When the lockdown started, I began to have dreams of my past. I could not fathom a reason this would be happening. Every night, I was having dreams that were more flashbacks than anything else. At first, I would wake up and try to shake my memories. Then, after some time, I began to write them out. It seemed like the only way I could get them off my mind. As I wrote, I felt lighter and lighter. Like I was able to unburden my mind and my heart of these memories. Not all of them were good, and not all of them were bad. But they definitely helped

me to better understand myself. By remembering who I was and how I felt, I was able to find myself again. For years I had felt lost. I felt like I had been putting on a show for everyone. By writing my stories out, I was able to compare how I felt and thought, versus how I acted. I saw a pattern of me putting my own needs and wants aside, to appease others- to be the perfect version of myself I thought people wanted me to be. By finding this common thread in my history, I realized that I needed to change. I needed to honor myself. My needs, my wants, my feelings, my intuition. Most of the times where I thought my life was going wrong, were times I silenced my inner voice and did what I thought other people wanted me to do. I know the lockdown had something to do with this revelation. If I had not been stuck in my own thoughts, something I had avoided for a majority of my life, I never would have realized this. If I had stayed in the numbness of the grind and the charade, I never would have found myself. When I was able to take a step back, I could see my life from a new perspective. I began to make choices for myself, not to please other people. I realized I was in love with my roommate, and that I probably had been for quite some time. I applied to graduate school in Scotland, a dream that I always thought would be out of reach. Soon, I will graduate and move to Scotland with the love of my life to pursue a dream I never really let myself believe could come true. I feel more confident, healthier, and happier than I have ever been. I am closer to my loved ones and myself. I know now that I need to find a balance between different aspects of my life, and that life is not all about progress. I try to take it easier on myself. I try to be patient when I struggle, and accept that as long as I am doing my best I should be satisfied.

This class discusses how we envision "The After." When I consider this question, I think of it on a large scale as well as a small one. I think the world needs some major changes, just like I did. We need to take a look around to really take stock in the state of things. We need to make choices because they are the right thing to do, not because they fit the status quo. Our status quo is going to run everyone right into the ground. We are exhausted. We are stressed. We are unhealthy. We are lonely- not because we have a lack of people who love and care for

another. No. It is because we have put on our blinders, and have continued on a destructive path. We are killing our planet and our people. The only way we can fix this is by working together to honor our planet and all of its creatures. When we listen to the voices of the people, we will see that our dreams of a better future might be achievable afterall.