

A Quarantine Vent

For my American Studies methods class, an option for our final project is to compile and upload some kind of log of quarantine for the archives. I've never been good at keeping up with journaling, and looking back at the past month and a half, the best I could come up with was my food diary. As I reminisced about all the meals I had eaten, I came to the realization that a food diary may be the best chronicle of what was going on in my head.

Food is an important part of everybody's life, but for me, the stakes are a little higher. A year and a half ago, during the winter break of 2018, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a chronic condition of inflammation in the digestive tract. After giving me a colonoscopy I wasn't expecting for another 3 decades, a friendly doctor told me that moving forward, my options were to choose between an immunosuppressant that increased my risk of cancer, or an immunosuppressant that caused regular nausea/vomiting.

The real kicker is that these medical professionals claimed that diet had no affect on inflammation. Disregarding Crohns, this is bullshit. Anybody who has eaten beans knows that food has everything to do with gut inflammation. They're called the magical fruit for a reason. So, deciding I didn't have much to lose, I turned down both of the offered treatment plans, and embarked on an all-natural journey to get more in tune with my body. What that really meant was diarrhea, hours upon hours of stomach cramps, and learning to listen to what my farts really had to say. Yeah, no matter which way you cut it, Crohn's is a pretty gross disease.

The next semester at Macalester was a rollercoaster. Swinging between a strict diet of Cafe Mac green beans with undercooked rice, and saturating my gut with Hamm's and vending machine snacks every weekend, I was having a hard time finding the balance that would keep me healthy. I certainly never reached that balance during the school year, but the summer was looking hopeful.

Although most college students go home for their first summer, I had decided I would stay in the Twin Cities. I'd always been told I was mature beyond my years, and between getting a colonoscopy at 18 and the hemorrhoids that regularly came knocking on my back door, I was really taking that to heart. On my quest for independence I sought complete autonomy over my diet, a stress-free space, and a healthy supply of the most anti-inflammatory weed on the Minnesota market. A week in, I was actually doing alright. I was cooking good food for myself, and I'd even finally found a mattress to sleep on. Things were honestly looking up. But then something new happened: I got depressed.

I still don't really know how to describe my struggles with mental health, but what is most pertinent to this story is self control, which promptly disappeared from my repertoire of adulting skills. Yeah, real mature of me. As you might imagine, this had major implications for a Crohn's patient, especially as I moved back into a space of high stress as Sophomore year

started. Although I tried to take extra measures to care for myself, including cooking for myself in the dorm kitchen and going on the commuter meal plan, my efforts ended up only making it worse. More responsibility = more opportunity for failure. On top of this I also decided to fill my schedule with STEM classes, which I very quickly found was a bad idea. When all was said and done, I had earned my first C, skipped my first(and second, third, etc) class, and eaten my weight in instant pot lentils and rice.

And that brings us to winter break 2019-2020, happy anus-versary to me. This clearly has nothing to do with quarantine yet, but the exposition is key here folks! Stick with me, we've almost made it. That time off from school was a blessing. It was a high point for my social and creative capacities. I was spending time with people I loved, creating art with many of them, and for the first time I released some music of my own to the world(peep the [soundcloud](#)). In just a month I had cultivated a positive attitude and found fulfillment in areas that for months only held failure and frustration. I was really proud, and really hopeful, too. I was so excited to go back to school and do it right this time, but for the whole drive up to Macalester, I couldn't shake this sense of dread that had begun to settle in my stomach(this is why they say listen to your gut). I was back in the space that had seen me at my worst, and I couldn't help but be painfully aware of my potential to return there.

I stayed strong for the first few weeks, throwing myself into my readings and enjoying a schedule full of courses that I cared about, but a familiar numbness gradually crept into my routine. Amidst the bustle of the college environment, I slowly stopped caring again, slipping back into depression. My self control slipped away too, and I began accumulating a substantial bill at the Wallace laundry room vending machine. As the semester passed me by, I dug myself into a deeper and deeper academic hole, and several conflicts with people close to me had me finding a new rock bottom every time I thought it couldn't get any worse.

Then the pandemic hit the US.

I had gone home for Spring break, and with the announcement of school closure, that's where I would stay for the next several months.

I watched the endless stream of news and personal stories about what the pandemic was taking from people, and the disastrous consequences of quarantine on the lives of so many people. Privilege creates a strange distance from the rest of the world. Quarantine is a matter of life or death for millions of people, and I was back home under my parents roof with plenty of food and financial security for the foreseeable future. I want to say that this awareness motivated me, but ultimately it made me feel useless. I was still deep in depression.

Everybody was talking about "returning to normal". I kept trying to wrap my head around what "normal" looked like for me. Going back to school? Deepening the rut of bad habits I had accumulated and scraping my way to the end of this disgraceful semester? I just felt adrift. I had no vision of the future, nothing to ground myself. With online classes, my academic responsibilities seemed more distant than ever.

My parents quickly caught on that something was up, and were incredibly accommodating of my diet and giving me space. This is where I began recording my meals in a journal. For the first few weeks I almost exclusively ate oatmeal for breakfast, cooked vegetables and rice for dinner, and leftovers for lunch the next day. It's no surprise to me that I failed to keep a real quarantine journal during this time, as I spoke very little and spent the vast majority of my time curled up in my bed watching tv. However, the food journal exposes more than just how depressing my diet really is. It shows a cycle.

I would hold strong to my diet for maybe a week, and then, without fail, I would slip up. This didn't just mean eating something bad for me, it meant overindulging over the course of the whole day, because once I broke the seal the day was ruined, so why not enjoy what I could right? Mind you, for me overindulging means eating like four pieces of buttered toast and maybe a couple bites of ice cream if I'm feeling real bad, but regardless, the effects were always the same. I would temporarily satisfy the urges that had been building over the week, and immediately be totally overcome with shame for my lack of control. Then, I would wait the rest of day out until whatever I had eaten worked its way into my small intestine, where it would inevitably trigger inflammation, sometimes confining me to my bed for hours. After the episode passed and I had received a painful reminder of why I stick to a diet, that's exactly what I'd do until my craving overpowered my self worth again and so on.

The obvious elements at play here are self control, shame, and the same general lack of care for myself that I'd been grappling with for close to a year at this point. Descartes was on one when he said the mind and the body were separate. It's really impossible to understand my physical and mental struggles independently of one another. Even together they don't make much sense, but while I'm delving into Crohn's, I may as well give some insight into my head.

I am constantly questioning if what I'm dealing with is a valid issue, or if I've just created problems where there are none because, bottom line, I'm lazy, irresponsible, and weak. But maybe that is just a product of how critical I can be of myself. OR maybe the cycle is a construct of my subconscious to keep me from reaching my true potential, and conquering it is the true test of my will, and my symbolic emergence into adulthood. Or maybe I've never had great self control around food because there was never any junk food in my house growing up so I would overindulge any chance that I got, which would never have been a huge problem if I hadn't developed Crohn's disease as a punishment for my greed.

Thought patterns like these almost always end up affirming the most negative, fearful perspective on things. The anxiety it cultivates settles in my gut, manifesting in physical pain, and perpetuating the cycle of losing hope and giving into fear.

I know I probably sound dramatic as hell, but one thing I have learned is I can't shut it all off. Sometimes you just gotta breathe through it and remember that you were happy at one point and you will be happy again. Knowing myself means knowing my cycles, knowing how to care for myself when I'm down, and not forgetting myself when I'm up. I haven't broken the cycle, but I've gotten better. I started playing my horn again lately, I'm slowly but surely tying up loose

ends from the semester. Every few days I still might lose all hope, and that might last for another week, but I always come around eventually. I'm not sure anybody was ever meant to read these words, and I apologize for using the Macalester archives as a venting space, but I hope you got something out of this.

The future is uncertain as ever. I'm moving to the twin cities in a few weeks. I think another shot at cooking for myself and having my own space might be more successful now that I've learned a thing or two about my needs. I might not go back to school just yet. Taking a leave of absence and focusing on health and music while saving up some money sounds like an especially good idea to me right now. I hope wherever you are reading this, you are safe and healthy, and if you're in the middle of something too, best of luck. Don't forget to love yourself a little. :*