

Reflections on a COVID year: When inner turmoil mirrors the outside

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As the resurgence of Covid-19 catches wind, my mind reminisces about an experience in Spring 2020. One morning I woke up to the smell of bacon frying and the sound of eggs cracking. The bare brown tree outside my window was finally lush and green, bent with the weight of its foliage. I rushed downstairs at 6:30am to find my flatmate Jaimie cooking breakfast, with her pink iPad resting on another kitchen slab, playing reruns of Gilmore Girls. She flipped the eggs and coughed, blitzed an onion in the food processor and coughed, turned around coughing and ran the blender, still coughing. Suddenly, my senses became alarmed to the sound of her healing lungs.

I rushed back up to my room, gripped by fear and compelled to type out a text requesting her to wear a mask while using the shared spaces (bathroom, kitchen, corridors, backyard and porch). She responded with: "I have survived COVID. I am not a threat. Don't single me out in the house. If you're scared, you wear the mask." Jaimie is a medical assistant who also volunteered to help at the local hospital with COVID-19 patients. Outwardly, the other flatmates commended her for the nobility; inside, everyone saw it as the precursor for future conflict. I felt worry stir in my stomach.

The sourness of texts which followed created a temporary rift between the two of us. We didn't cross each other's paths in the house, did not look each other in the eye, didn't use the kitchen at the same time. The tremor wasn't felt between the two of us alone but between all the flatmates: Lisa, Pharo, Jaimie, Rachel, Samara and I. Rifts turned to quarrels.

Both spring and illness were blooming outside my old, weary house, rented by the room to six different women. Inside was supposed to be safer. But that wasn't necessarily true for those in a co-housing situation. An old house, sheltering a student, a couple, a medical assistant, a fashionista, and a retiree, all under one roof, was equivalent to a pressure cooker on high flame. Outside was hot with disease, inside the air was heavy with the weight of discord.

Photographs agglomerated on social media showed me what the outside looked like: lone surgical masks on the sidewalk piling up among the fallen maple flurries, bleary red-eyed doctors in protective gear pushing carts, and empty shelves in supermarkets.

Inside my house, women were rationing toilet paper, smoking in the backyard, petting and sheltering a stray cat and its kittens. All our plans deferred, our lives halted. Our hands, usually assets, were now probable bearers of illness. A shift in perception. When the only thing we could fully rely on was distance, how do you survive in co-housing?

Allow your mind to trace back to spring of this year. Consider for a moment how rapidly things changed from March 22, 2020. How it has revealed our behavior in the face of pressure. How does one survive these vast differences which were otherwise neatly veiled by the busy routines of our lives, but now perversely exposed?

Our bridging agent, in this case the landlord, laid out the obvious: we all wanted to live peacefully. Was there any other choice? Ultimately, Jaimie and I resolved our fight, more or less, and we all started cooking together and even cultivated our backyard together. The existential anxiety which had taken over all the housemates due to COVID-19 was overcome only through compassion.

During this transitional time, the fear of the outside which had possessed us gave us the push we needed to surround ourselves with a freer, happier space inside our houses and even our mind. Amidst the challenges, all that mattered was to create, with all of our abilities, a place which feels safer, kinder, and more connected, and we did.