



## Dear Universe

SCOTT TINLEY

Dear Universe:

I woke up this morning at the crack of nine and focused on the flattening curve of my over-rested spine. From the far shore of the living room, the TV rang the day's stats—another dozen here, another thousand there—real people suffering and profiting and striving and living and dying. Just making the most of the least.

Life as we knew it was not.

The conditions that pre-existed mostly in the minds of thinker/planner types—the deep theorists who considered heavily a world that the rest chose not to think about—had come to their fruitful end. *Pre-existing conditions* now meant everything from bank relationships to hypertension to ICU proximity. All the while, network pundits chirped away from their ideological nests while the country's best pens had gone strangely silent. Where to now, Joan Didion? John Stewart?

We have simultaneously entered a world of medical catch phrases and global focus. Are you asymptomatic or a super spreader? Are you an index patient subject to contact tracing or on lockdown due to immunosuppression? Not since 1941 has Earth been so single-minded in its attempt to solve the ultimate transcendent challenge; all the while staying together/apart. Humans are now asked to act humane. Though from a refugee camp called home. Modern society has taught us to live apart and to live together. But the oh-so-close tease of virtuality—like a grandchild's cry when Facetime kisses fail—worsens the longing for real lips. It is as Camus suggested within the narrative of his 1948 epic, *The Plague*, the utter absurdity of life—the conflict between our quest for existential meaning and the universe's silent answer.

This is without argument, the golden age of the internet and the perfect excuse for declining hygiene. Accelerated relational effects have reached hyper-space. “I thought that I (enter human emotion here—love, hate, tolerance, ambiguity et al.) until the fifth week of watching your dark roots fail to find lightness and levity.” But with the stroke of a key we greedily consume each other's real-time virtual image like some cyber-sex deviant from a dime store novel. And nobody but Bill Gates saw it coming.

And in the rents and seams are the comforts: animals returning to claim modern villages lost to fear and quarantine, 80's styled, steel-framed bicycles being hauled to repair shops in mass. “Can you fix this flat? Oil that chain? Anything but another day of my wife's Zumba classes and the kid's Zoom lesson on fractions.”

And what about air quality being the best in decades; the Earth cackling in

delight as the echoes of feigned regret ping from the pundits.

What have we learned from COVID-19? What more can we expect to hit us like a falling brick or a whisper on the wind? Where to now St. Peter?

I'm so afraid.

But fear, as someone pointed out, *turns men into coyotes, poisons their heart*. That week when the number of dead Americans from COVID had surpassed the number killed in the Vietnam War hurt me. The universe had done in ten weeks what war had accomplished in ten years.

I fear that we will have learned little; that eighteen months or eighteen years from now, stuck in newer return-to-normal traffic, we will miss those family walks through the neighborhoods, toilet paper hoarding jokes, talking with anyone who will listen not for the sake of talking or listening but just to feel the deep comfort of F2F communication. I fear that we will return to egregious consumption, will forget to smile and wave, will forget to wash our hands . . . pray before bed.

I wonder about how our leaders will be remembered, of whether the rigor of science and hard-earned veracity will be run roughshod once again by the shallow and the trite. And I fear a winter rebound like waking up from a bad dream and being afraid to fall asleep again. Use common sense, we are told, stay the hell away from each other not because you are mean but because you are kind. The final paragraph in Camus' *The Plague* recalls protagonist, Dr. Rieux' observation of a joyous town who is claiming victory over the pandemic.

"As he listened to cries of joy rising from the town . . . Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled . . . perhaps the day would come again for the bane and enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats and send them forth to die in a happy city."

So, we take both refuge and folly in President Trump's accidental existential claim that, "it will all just disappear one day."

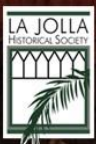
And what to make of the protesting hordes, the packed churches and beaches and basements justified under constitutional rights and basic human liberties? I remember a grade school Civics teacher explaining to my sixth grade cohorts that in a liberal democratic republic, freedom only extended to the point where it affected someone else's freedom. Smoking on airplanes and farting in elevators were the samples she used.

So much brilliance and ignorance forced to the surface not by lack of precedence but by levels of preparedness. What South Korea or Sweden did right or Italy or New York did wrong are mute points. Until it happens again.

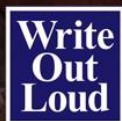
That once bitten cliché.

Still, I take refuge in the thought that in my lifetime, never before have so many brilliant men and women around the planet cleared their desks for one singular cause grounded in hopefulness. And in the wake of their efforts will come discoveries never considered part of the COVID crisis. Cures and ideas and notions and goodness and in the small forgotten faces . . . more hope. And on the other side, figures in Washington or Wisconsin will take credit. *They did something, dammit*. It doesn't matter what, but there was healing in just raging at the unseen enemy. Like the Vietcong and Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

I'm sorry universe.



Public  
Library



San Diego Writers.  Ink