

Voices of the Pandemic: Claire Howard

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By: Daisy Leepson

Finding a sense of self and purpose amidst chaos



The day after I got home from college, I remember I baked a banana bread in my sister in law's kitchen.

It felt so healing for me to be able to turn all of the confusion that had just happened into an activity that brought me peace. Because I have a lot more time in my apartment at school than I usually would, I've been doing a lot of cooking, so my roommates and I have family dinner together every night, and we all cook very elaborate meals. Like tomorrow, I'm making beef stroganoff, which is a traditional Russian dish. We sit around and enjoy that as a little community, and we can share with each other. It is very comforting and very healing.

Posed portrait of Claire Howard. Photographed by Daisy Leepson.

I've honestly never really been worried about this sickness itself, which may be a little bit misguided. I think I've always been afraid of the effects of quarantining—things like isolation, loneliness, and mental health. My biggest fear of this pandemic is that it would take away many things that I love.

I've realized about myself, especially in the past couple of years, that I'm somebody who hates being in one place. It makes me feel stuck. It makes me feel uninspired. I work best constantly being exposed to new ideas, and I think it's been really hard for me to adjust to a lifestyle where I have to do the same thing over and over, but I believe that there have been ways to make up for that. We have this amazing technology where we do still get to connect with people. One way to

look at it is that instead of only being able to connect with the people who are physically here at my university, I can suddenly connect with anybody online. It is about taking the setbacks and not viewing them as setbacks, but viewing them as opportunities to do something you might not have been able to do before.

I spent my summer working on a farm in North Carolina. One of the things that it taught me was how strong I am. I never really thought of myself as somebody who would be good at manual labor or somebody who's physically strong. I remember one day we were cutting down pine trees and dragging them, and it was difficult manual labor, and I was able to do it. That was just something that was a bit of a self-confidence boost of “there's lots of different skills that I have, there's lots of different things in the world that I can do, and also that there's lots of different things in the world that I can enjoy.”

That was really important for my growth. I would never think of myself as being the type of person who would want to farm. But I loved it—I loved the idea that you can pour yourself into something that is very, very physical that's going to turn into something practical that benefits societies and other people. Food brings people together, and to be able to take part in creating food was a very special experience.

We've now realized that there's so much joy in everyday things like going to a coffee shop, sitting down to drink coffee, going to the grocery store, and knocking on your friend's door and talking to them. All these things that might have been mundane or things that we even complained about, we have realized that these are things that hold a lot of value and meaning for us and give our life a lot of joy. So I think I know after this is over, I certainly will want to savor those things more because I know what it feels like to live without them.

It's important to view this time not as waiting until we return to normalcy, but view this time as an opportunity to do something better. Trying desperately to do the same things but in a different capacity will only bring us a sense of missing out, so maybe this is a good time to try different things.