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“OUR 9/11”

How COVID-19 changed everything, again

I was 20 years old when the world ended. Now I'm 21, but I'd bet a million dollars I lived a lifetime that year.

It was March of 2020, and life was going great. I had finally found a groove. I had good friends, and I could still survive a call from home with grace and assurances that yes, I had not developed sudden alcoholism in the two weeks prior. The “Coronavirus” was just a world event far removed from Riverside, California. How could what appear to be some cases of severe cold in China ever reach the West Coast's perpetual sunshine?

It rained that day, harder than I've ever seen. It rained so hard that the exodus of hundreds of Smith Hall residents was impeded by light flooding at one of the entrances. I watched as my hallmates packed their bags and left, one by one. We laughed, we jumped in puddles, we got soaked and used former lawns as swimming pools. This strange deluge and even stranger news of a global pandemic was pushed lightly out of the way for the joy of experiencing nature. I didn't know it then, but the world would never be the same. Soon, I was alone with the rain.

The days blurred into weeks. The weeks into months. Living alone in a small apartment, time was an arbitrary measurement. Nothing changed anyways. I would go days without speaking before simply talking out loud to assure myself of my sanity. The digital world became almost as real as the physical. Soon, YouTube stars morphed into professors droning to unresponsive pixels. My universe became faceless, lifeless and even loveless.

But 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate had different plans for my lost life. Sitting in a warehouse at Beirut Port for six years, the improperly stored substance ignited, and the blast that resulted became the sixth largest non-nuclear explosion in history. Locked away in my Californian prison, the destroyed smokestacks at Beirut looked oddly familiar, as if they were Twin Towers falling, I called a dear friend of mine that day. I asked if he had seen the news. He had. And he, too, noticed the similarity to New York's catastrophe.

"You know," he said, "this (COVID) is kind of our 9/11."

There are some events that change the course of history. Columbus' arrival in North America and Hitler's invasion of Poland are just two of the many global events whose influence crosses borders. Sept. 11, 2001 is one of those events. While largely an American happening, without a doubt it defined the divide between East and West, and it certainly made international travel more difficult than before. In some ways, 9/11 set the tone for Generation Z — the current collegiate generation. It furthered the polarization of our politics and ramped up aggressive foreign policy. Even if we remember nothing about that moment, or were not even born, our lives were slightly shaped by it.

Yet for Generation X and the Boomer generation, 9/11 signified a major change in the world. My parents experienced the ease of international travel before 9/11. In fact, they were overseas during the event, learning only of the news from nearby friends. It was a shock to see everything change so quickly. Suddenly, leaving the United States was something to be feared, not enjoyed. An easy line through the airport became a harrowing ordeal governed by intimidating TSA agents. Stay at home, my extended family begged; it is not worth the risk.

This terrorist attack far, far away somehow personally affected my life and my family. COVID-19 changed everything once again, and I hazard I'm not the only one. We experienced the world before masks and hand sanitizer. We remember what it was like to leave home freely and



Above: Wreckage from the Beirut Port blast, still standing in 2021. **Left:** A homeless child wanders the streets of Beirut, gathering scraps of food from trash bins.

make friends with strangers. The next generation might not. For the foreseeable future, our world remains tainted by the threat of transmissible disease.

Dr. Amy Stumpf, professor of society and religion, said she agrees with this sentiment. She recalls how the United States changed in the aftermath of 9/11. Suddenly, Americans were stuck between two possibilities. Either you supported the war on terror; or you supported terrorism, Stumpf said. This permeated an entire society and eventually propelled the United States to make difficult military and societal decisions. Under new foreign policy, atrocities like torture and civilian killings were approved by high-ranking officials. A single day sent shockwaves through the next two decades. The coronavirus, while not nearly as violent, is repeating the history of change and destabilization.

"We have that similar false dichotomy," Stumpf says. "We either die of COVID or COVID is not real. It's all based on fear."

Yet Stumpf's diagnosis of the world is not so bleak. She retains hope that the shared experience of a global generation could achieve as much unification as dissolution.



“Maybe in a way, the masks actually increase our likeness. I don't know, but when all I can see is two eyes and a mask, you look a lot more like me than [before].”

- Dr. Amy Stumpf
(professor of society and religion)



Above: Peter, 52, poses in front of his busy barbershop. **Below:** An aerial view of mountainside settlements on the outskirts of Beirut -- one of the places Peter loves the most.

In a world where everyone's faces are obscured, perhaps it may be easier to converse with someone you may never have approached previously.

"Maybe in a way, the masks actually increase our likeness," Stumpf says. "I don't know, but when all I can see is two eyes and a mask, you look a lot more like me than [before]."

Maybe it was masks that gifted me such an affinity with the crisis in Beirut. Soon I heard news of more than 300,000 people left homeless by the Beirut blast. Suddenly there were people, real people, who were hurt. The world had not ended, I realized. It had simply changed. Life had not stopped. Certainly, it had not stopped for 300,000 people searching for a home. As the news cycle turned to the next world event, I found my heart returned to Lebanon. I desperately wanted to tell the story in Beirut.

In August I had my chance. Through a series of miraculous events and years-in-the-making relationships, I was offered the opportunity to interview five Beirut locals right in the heart of the city. With newfound passion, I accepted the job with manic fervor. I needed to walk the streets that had so compellingly called me in the year prior.

I stood at the edge of Beirut Port, looking out over the still-uncleared debris. It was not the looming wreckage that drew my eye, but the bubbling activity around it. The port was open for business. The crates still needed sorting, and the trucks weren't going to load themselves. The placid Mediterranean still laps gently against the concrete supports, unfazed by humanity's penchant for extinction. A few streets away, near a busy intersection, sits a smiling man.

"Take my picture!" he says, laughing happily. "Are you with CNN?"

This man, Peter, 52, runs his own barber shop, and has lived in Beirut nearly as long as he can remember. He remembers the blast clearly, as well as the tearful days in its aftermath. Two of his relatives were killed that day. That pain, combined with the stress of a small business owner in a collapsing economy makes for a difficult life. Peter doesn't care — he just wants to sit down and have coffee with passersby. As we talked, three individuals joined us, greeting Peter as if he was their dearest friend. We shared stories as if that cracked and crumbling concrete not a thousand yards away were just a bad dream.

"We are still the party," he said. "Lebanon is still the best in the Middle East!"

His unrelenting pride during pain was inspiring. How could a man who had lost so much remain so happy? Peter flipped through his camera roll, showing me beautiful landscapes and cityscapes alike. "This is Lebanon," he said with each image. I was reminded of a story my father once told me. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus calms a raging storm, saving the lives of his closest friends. My father talks about a man he once met in the far reaches of Southeast Asia who asked a poignant question.

"Jesus told his followers they would get to the other side," this man said. "Why didn't they just dance in the rain?"

I was never battered by wind, but my storm felt like a hurricane. I never felt the wetness of water, but I was drowning all the same. I'd guess I'm not the only one.

BBC News broadcasted an amazing sight the day after the explosion at Beirut Port. Thousands of Lebanese citizens, bolstered by youth and students, flocked to the spiritual downtown area of the city. For hours, they crowded together picking up broken glass, removing debris and cleaning blood from the street. I dream that one day, American college students would exhibit that same unity in the face of fear, and remember that the world is still alive and well, just wildly different than before. ♦





Beirut: Tourists explore the markets in and around the city as the day comes to an end.



Beirut: Colorful boats used to ferry tourists around the Mediterranean. Now, the tourists are few and the prices are high.