

Mary Hilliard

Honors Thesis Personal Reflection

I was fortunate to have an advisor, Ernest Morrell, who encouraged me to contextualize my research in contemporary times. I do not think he could have foreseen just how relevant Joan Didion's writing would be in the midst of a pandemic, but nonetheless, her work took on an entirely new significance as the semester unfolded as it did. He encouraged me to include my own thoughts about completing a thesis under such unprecedented circumstances in the final draft of my project, and in doing so, allowed me to make this thesis even more personal than it already felt. In my time as an English major at Notre Dame, I have come to think of reading as an exercise in empathy, a means of adopting a new perspective or understanding someone else's experience. Writing about Joan Didion went one step further and helped me understand myself.

"It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends." This line from Joan Didion's essay "Goodbye to All That" took on a whole new meaning when my time on Notre Dame's campus was cut short, a senior year robbed of significant lasts and sentimental reminiscing. With what felt like one foot in and one foot out of my time as a student, moving to online classes blurred the lines of senior year- made it hard to distinguish the ends.

Conclusion 2.0

Or: How I avoided my own existential crisis while writing about Joan Didion's

Sometimes you just have to laugh at the ironic timing of your life. For instance, today I found myself on the Wikipedia page for "Existential Crisis" in hopes of reminding myself what

the common definition of such a condition is, outside of the world of academia and mid-twentieth century French philosophy. Existential Crisis, in layman's terms: "moments when individuals question whether their lives have meaning, purpose, or value. It may be commonly, but not necessarily, tied to depression or inevitably negative speculations on purpose in life."

Underneath the headline, was an italicized notice:

For threats to the existence of humanity, see Global catastrophic risk.

I write this sequestered away in the bedroom of my family's home in Kansas City, instead of sitting through Viral Shakespeare (the irony, again) as mandated by my Google Calendar. If I don't laugh about writing about Joan Didion's existential dread while writing, I will surely surrender to my own.

On Wednesday, March 11th (a week ago, today, actually), the entire country and my whole life changed in a span of 12 hours. I found out I wouldn't be returning to classes in a few days' time after all, that my senior year of college would reach an abrupt, screeching halt—almost, except for the fact that I still have to finish my degree online. The World Health Organization declared a worldwide pandemic. Traveling to and from Europe was banned. Sports organizations scrambled left and right, first planning to proceed without fans, then cancelling events and suspending seasons altogether. Actor Tom Hanks, lauded among an industry with its own internal issues for all around being a good person, announced he and his wife contracted the virus.

Luckily, I was surrounded by some of my favorite people on my "senior spring break" in a sleepy, small town in Florida as new waves of information and drastic measures mimicked the gulf tides, crashing into me at a constant rate. We processed together, mourned what might have

been, called our families, rearranged travel plans, debated the best course of action. Forced to decide between isolating ourselves in Northeastern Indiana in “spring” among other young college students, or go back to our respective homes and stow away with our families, possibly to never see each other again. Homes that, for members of my friend group, included Seattle, San Francisco, and New York state. Families that included the immunocompromised and the elderly. Faced with deciding, with literally no way of knowing, how to best mitigate the risks of this invisible threat to keep both ourselves and our loved ones safe and healthy. With the underlying feeling that we only had one shot, because air travel was quickly becoming a precarious activity. I went through that day and the next navigating the waves of anxiety, fear, and disappointment and tried to enjoy the time I had left in the sun with my best friends. Thursday night, or Friday morning, depending on how you want to look at it, I lay awake, uncertain if the sore throat that I had had for literally two weeks before was the malicious virus. Running through possible symptoms and self-diagnosing myself, coming to terms with my own mortality as one who is prone to catastrophic and anxious thoughts might do in a situation such as this at 3 in the morning.

These anxious thoughts of impending doom for the global pandemic alternated with anxious thoughts about my upcoming senior thesis. As I am sure any of my fellow classmates or professors who have engaged in the world of academia can attest to, sometimes the prospect of an abstract, longform project does indeed feel equal to a global pandemic. I’m not saying it’s morally right, or even close to accurate, but we all fall into the trap of making our own problems into terrifying monstrosities.

However, it was not the process of completing the thesis that was causing me so much distress, to wake in the night and pace like a ghost, but rather the prospect of writing about Joan Didion's existential dread when I was so desperately trying to stay sane and not surrender to my own. Yes, as I paced back and forth in the rented bedroom, when I wasn't thinking about my breathing patterns, I thought of Joan, who has become a close companion of mine in the past 6 months.

I am not going to go so far as to say that this project saved me or my mental health by any means, but I will concede that diving into the murky and dreary depths of Joan Didion's consciousness has helped me contextualize my own.

Things are not significantly worse right now than they were in the 1960s, when every news story was about a serial killer or child abuse or an assassination or drug overdoses. In the moment, fifty years ago or now, it always feels as if humanity is vile in nature, that when given a choice to determine our lives, we commit atrocities against one another- as if the world is ending. But it didn't. And it doesn't. And it hasn't. Maybe that's my bleak attempt at a silver lining - despite a global pandemic and a polarized political body and a changing climate and getting a bad grade on that one midterm - the world keeps turning. This pandemic, eventually, will pass. And all I can do in the meantime is make the most of the situation. And if that means sitting with my good friend Joan in her own existential angst, so be it.

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