

Alex Schein:

"In these times," has been a handy turn of phrase in 2020, with varying adjectives you use to modify it, difficult, unique, strange. What started as a useful shorthand for the COVID-19 pandemic became used to describe worldwide protests and calls for racial justice.

This fall, the Omnia podcast goes beyond the shorthand, using COVID-19 as a platform for a six-episode series that explores the science, social science, and history that has shaped events in 2020. In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

The worldwide scale and scope of discontinuity, loss, and uncertainty has made the year of the pandemic like no other in recent memory. How are we processing this moment and how do we move forward? It's Episode Six, Beyond the COVID-19 Crisis.

Today, in our sixth and final installment of the season, we talked to three students who share how the COVID crisis has reshaped their undergraduate experience at Penn and their visions for the future. We also hear from a professor of English on the parallels between the traumas of the early 20th Century and our current challenges, and an expert in the science of resilience and coping with crisis.

A note on the interviews. These conversations all took place in early November, so you'll hear a few references to the uncertainty surrounding the results of the presidential election.

The spring semester of 2020 had just reached its halfway point when the pandemic changed life at Penn. Classes moved online, students returned home, plans for the rest of the spring, and then for the summer, fell by the wayside. And the campus community had to recreate itself online.

Omar Husni, a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences, takes us back to that moment in March when nearly everything changed.

Omar Husni:

So my name is Omar Husni. I am a third-year student in the College of Arts and Sciences, and I am studying medical anthropology, as well as health and societies, and my focus is really on global health. And so that's really what I'm interested in.

Right now, I am speaking to you from Elizabeth, New Jersey, and that's right up... It's north New Jersey, 20 minutes away from New York city. And so this is where I've been living for nearly 10 years. I was born and raised in Egypt. I lived in Chile for a bit, and then here we are in New Jersey.

David Muir:

Tonight, more than 1,300 people sickened in the US, at least 39 have died in this country. And that state of emergency here in New York City, the Mayor reporting a major jump in cases today, 95 confirmed cases, saying there could be 1000 in just a week.

Omar Husni:

So, when I started hearing about cases in New York City, and I was like, my gosh, I live in New Jersey, that's pretty close. Because a lot of people work in New York City and they live in New Jersey, and I'm in the north part of the state. And so I became worried about my parents because that's where they are. And despite me being in Philadelphia, I was still convinced it would not reach me. And the biggest concerns in my mind were academic, of course, as most college students are really worried about.

And then suddenly, I got this email, and all students got surprised with the news that we would be going remotely. So I immediately began packing my things and going back home. And it was a very, very, very fearful. And because my mother, she's an essential worker, I mean, before we even knew what an

essential worker really was, right? We had no choice but to just live by the fact that she had to continue working. And of course we practiced all the things that you were expected to practice, put on a mask, sanitize your hands, wash your hands, take a shower, leave your clothes by the door when you walk into the apartment, things like that. And literally just a few weeks later, she got COVID.

Alex Schein:

In the space of a few weeks, Omar's daily life transitioned from a familiar routine of classes, studies and activities, to difficult new circumstances, helping to care for a sick loved one in the midst of a pandemic that no one really understood.

Omar Husni:

I've never seen someone have such a bad fever as my mom did during those two weeks. It felt like it was like three weeks too because afterwards, when her fever subsided, she had no appetite, which led to fatigue. And because she had so much fatigue, she would never leave the bed.

And so, it was just the cascade of symptoms that built and led on to other things. And it just felt like an endless cycle of torture. I mean, at the time also, we didn't know much about COVID. This thing, we were like, "My gosh, you got it, you're done. They can't help you. They can't do anything. Ventilators won't help really." And so even when she got it, she was like, "Well, I'm not even going to go to the hospital. It's a war zone there." And the idea was you go to the hospital, and there's so many people that have COVID, that you risk all the people in your family who don't have it that get it, right? So there's collateral damage if you choose to go through the hospital with your family, and we didn't want to send her by herself.

And so, we ended up just staying here and just sitting it out. And mind you, all of this, I was taking five classes. And I believe we had midterms, and then things just flew by. Before you knew it, it was already final season, and that's when my dad got COVID.

Alex Schein:

Thankfully, both of his parents recovered from COVID, but as quarantine lingered on, the pandemic continued to have important consequences for Omar.

Omar Husni:

My summer was affected like almost all of the undergraduate students and faculty members. I was supposed to go to Guatemala and we were going to do an ethnographic study there and it was going to be a wonderful immersive experience. And then Guatemala cases were going up like crazy and the travel bans. And then I was home and I had to make sure that I made my time productively. I wanted to do something meaningful.

And all of this experience around COVID, it just highlighted the fact that in communities like mine, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, it's predominantly Hispanic, low income. And in communities like these, COVID was something that you got like many other diseases, and I'm talking infectious diseases like the flu, or something more severe, chronic. Like if you got arthritis or something, just common things that affect everybody. You wouldn't do anything about it, you just lived through it. And to have a pandemic happen where medical attention is so needed just highlighted the fact that access to care was something that I had to address somehow.

Alex Schein:

As a medical anthropology major, global access to healthcare was an issue that Omar had already been engaging with academically. His experiences with his family during the pandemic served to sharpen his interests and are guiding his current research.

Omar Husni:

In particular, I'm working with Sayre Health Center, which is in Cobbs Creek, West Philadelphia, and we're currently conducting a community health needs assessment, whereby we have this ethnographic approach rooted in medical anthropology. And we have conversations with locals from Cobbs Creek and we identify trends and needs and that informs care at Sayre health center. It is real life experiences that help you find out what it is you want to do. And there's no better judge than yourself in those experiences.

Alex Schein:

Over the past eight months, comparisons of the COVID pandemic with the 1918 outbreak of influenza have been ubiquitous. We explore the parallels between these two different areas, each marked by upheaval, loss and mourning with Paul Saint-Amour, chair of the English Department and the Walter and Leonore C. Annenberg Professor in the Humanities. Saint-Amour is a scholar of modernism, focusing on British literature of the 19th and 20th.

Paul Saint-Amour:

I think in recent years, partly because of the centenary of the First World War, we have been thinking a lot about the relationship between modernism and violence, modernism in conflict when you think about the First World War as this truly global phenomenon, but also one in which there are sort of newly technologized forms of mass killing, whether it's the increasing use of the machine gun or of poison gas or of aerial bombardment. And a lot of the modernist art that I think scholars and students and members of the general public have been interested in in recent years is art that is in some way registering the violence of that experience, the ways that it reverberates not only in the places where the war was being fought, but through the whole social fabric of the world.

It's so hard to compare this moment with all of its complexity to a moment that was equally complex let's say a hundred years ago, which would be the end of the First World War and the beginning of the inter-war period. But I think, like a lot of people, I've been thinking about the influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1919, which was partly incubated in the Western front. So there's a long history of the relationship between war and infectious diseases.

And I think we can think about COVID-19 as a version of that, insofar as zoonotic diseases, which is to say infectious diseases that cross from non-human animals into human populations do that at a higher rate when human beings have been effectively making war on wild space, on green space, on forests that they've been cutting down or making incursions on.

So I think there's a partial analogy there. I think with the Black Lives Matter movement returning to very high visibility this summer, I think a lot of us are thinking about Jim Crow and about the segregation of the US that was a very intense place in the period right after the First World War when African-American soldiers returned to the US and were reminded of the segregation in their home country after having fought for that country. And something similar happened to colonial troops who fought for, let's say, the British Empire on the Western front and on other fronts of the war, and then returned home to find that they were still living in colonies as members of subject populations.

So I think the long history of racism and colonialism is something that we still feel vibrating very loudly in our world and has me looping back to that moment a century ago.

Alex Schein:

Like the 1918 influenza epidemic and other pandemics past, COVID-19 has altered the circumstances in which we work through loss. Saint-Amour says he's found inspiration in how writers and artists of the early 20th Century address the problem of mourning and their lessons on moving beyond collective grief.

Paul Saint-Amour:

I do think one of the greatest losses during the pandemic has been the loss of the ability to mourn together. And I have now attended I would say four or five Zoom shivas or memorial services. So people being adaptive have figured out how to meet virtually to celebrate a life, but I don't think anyone believes that that is a replacement for being able to grieve as a group and to recognize a loss.

I think that we will have a backlog of mourning to do collectively and individually as a society once the pandemic is over. And I hope that we are able to do that in some way, rather than to just kind of declare bankruptcy and decide that those losses are in the past and that there's no going back to recognize them.

In Freud's work, there's this idea of working through a loss, such that by revisiting and renewing certain kinds of relationship to the lost object, you can actually reconfigure it in your psyche and, in a way, move on, withdraw some of your libidinal investments in it and move on to a future that is not overshadowed by loss. And the question of whether we ever actually fully worked through loss, especially a collective traumas, I think is a question that trauma studies continues to wrestle with.

For me, what is most appealing about some of the modernist writers that I have studied is that these are folks writing in the shadow of global disasters. Virginia Woolf, toward the end of her life, writes a piece called Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid, P-E-A-C-E. And it's about a year before she commits suicide and she is writing in her diary that she cannot imagine the same date rolling around a year later. The future has just become unimaginable to her. But in this essay, Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid, she writes what I take to be some of her most radically feminist work about how women will need to refuse the wrong kind of peace time, a peace time in which they are basically just asked to return to a kind of war and gender system where they play mostly the role of reproducing patriarchy and tyranny.

And so the idea that when the future seems darkest, rather than just surrendering, you can actually make some of your most steeply pitched demands on your fellow human beings and on yourself, that you can, again, rather than just lay down arms and curl up in the fetal position, imagine the world differently because the world of the present is collapsing.

Alex Schein:

As Saint-Amour sees it, the students around him are processing their COVID experience in a similar way, by forming a new vision of how the world should be.

Paul Saint-Amour:

What effect have I seen on my students during this time? I think it has intensified their resolve. It has tested their resilience. It has taken a heavy toll. And I think that they all know that, again, that continuity is a fiction, that we're not going to be going back to a world or a university, for that matter, that's identical with the one that most of us knew before this started, partly because things are simply going to change and partly because things have to change.

Alex Schein:

Prior to the pandemic, college senior Samira Mehta was already working actively on a path to bring about positive change in the world. In her sophomore year, the Daily Pennsylvanian's 34th Street Magazine described her as, "The student who's changing how we think about water at Penn." Samira co-founded the Penn chapter of Isla Urbana, a nonprofit organization that seeks to implement rainwater harvesting as a solution to Mexico's water crisis. She describes how the pandemic disrupted plans for an eventful spring.

Samira Mehta:

So my name is Samira Mehta. I'm a senior and I'm majoring in biochemistry and sub-matriculating in chemistry. I'm from Dallas, Texas, but right now I am in Philadelphia.

In the beginning of the pandemic, it was really such a shock to get that email and find out that we were not going to be returning to Penn after spring break. I just hadn't prepared myself to have to pick up everything and just go back home. So I think it was difficult because I especially had a lot of friends that went somewhere for spring break. So I had a friend that went back to see her family in New York. And I remember that we were leaving our physical chemistry class and I gave her a hug and I was like, "Oh, I'll see you in a week," and the next time I saw her was actually in like eight months.

So, there were a lot of really exciting things that were happening in March that I was sad to see canceled. One is, so I'm the co-founder and co-president of Isla Urbana at Penn. So for a little bit of background, we are the first college chapter of the Isla Urbana Foundation, which provides rainwater harvesting systems as a sustainable solution to the water crisis in Mexico. So some of the things that we do is, one, we fundraise for systems on campus, and then two, we also raise awareness about water scarcity issues on Penn's campus.

So, one of the things that we were planning for World Water Day in March was a Water Fest. So this was going to be our big event to kind of end the year in a large fundraising event. And then just lots of classes as well that I was very excited to be a part of, classes that I had been dreaming to take when I got to Penn. One class that I was really, really excited about was this existential despair class that I was taking. I had to apply for it and it was basically this class, like a seven and a half hour class that happened every Tuesday. And we would all get in a room and we would just read a book and then we would talk about it. And it was really one of the most wonderful classes that I've taken at Penn. And so it was definitely sad to also see that go remote.

Alex Schein:

For Samira, the disruption has presented another challenge, finding ways to take care of herself in the absence of activities and people that typically energize her.

Samira Mehta:

It was a very difficult transition. And I think that it was easy to slip into probably really unhealthy habits. Because even now, classes are all virtual. And so there's a lot of days when I just don't go outside and I have to force myself to go on a walk now.

I think one of the most difficult things about the transition has honestly just been taking care of myself and making sure that I am walking and reaching out to friends and still talking to people, because even intimate gatherings come with like a danger now.

Alex Schein:

Despite these difficulties, Samira finds that there are lessons to take away from the pandemic experience, that in a post-COVID world, we can and should do better.

Samira Mehta:

The idea of getting back to normal, I don't really think there is going to be a world that goes back to exactly the way it was even after a vaccine. We'll have gatherings again, concerts, that's something I'm definitely looking forward to is live music, but I think that we as a people and a society have changed from this quarantine period when we were forced to slow down, sit with ourselves and reflect. And I don't think that we should go back to the way things were.

For one, during this period, the whole world finally began to recognize and confront the systemic racism that's been discriminating against people of color for so long and we're finally beginning the work to address these issues.

I think also, we all remember seeing, as the world slowed down, the sky is clear in cities that have been filled with smog and toxic pollution for so many decades, including where I have family in Delhi, India. And to me, this just goes to show that breathable, healthy air can not only be achieved, but can also be achieved at a really rapid pace if we take dramatic action to reduce fossil fuel emissions. And even though it feels like we've been moving really slow on this climate crisis, we, as a society, clearly have the capacity to address it.

With the imminent threat of COVID, the whole world basically jumped into this rapid action to shut down and keep people safe. And if we do the same with this imminent threat of the climate crisis, we can actually effectively address the issue. And I think for me, how the world has responded in this period has just shown what we can do as a people and showed that we have the capacity to actually address the climate crisis. And I think my vision of a post-COVID world is one in which the climate crisis is treated as an imminent threat, just as COVID was.

Alex Schein:

Many common themes emerged in our conversations, but clearly there is no single COVID experience. The pandemic for some has been marked by tragic or catastrophic events. For others, it has been defined by the stresses of quarantine or the disruption of simple routines that give purpose and structure to day-to-day life.

For some insight on these problems, we spoke with Karen Reivich. She's an expert in the fields of resilience, depression prevention, and positive psychology, and is the director of training programs for the Penn Positive Psychology Center, where she has led resilience programs involving thousands of participants.

Karen Reivich:

There are features to what we're confronting today in our country, and in some ways, globally, that I do think make resilience and wellbeing particularly important. So certainly the pandemic and the degree of uncertainty and the degree of upheaval that it has created in our lives is probably, for many of us, unprecedented. And coupled with that, the lack of personal control we have over that landscape, that when there's a vaccine, unless you're working in that industry, but when there's a vaccine, and a lot of us work in organizations where decisions about how and where we're going to work, or we have children in schools, that the decisions about how and when they'll go back to school are outside our locus of control.

And so I think the enormity of the uncertainty is unprecedented for a lot of us, and that makes this particularly trying. And so asking and answering for yourself some very basic questions, like what keeps me whole? What can I do today that reminds me that I have within me the ability to respond effectively to all of this upheaval?

Alex Schein:

According to Reivich, many of us might not fully appreciate our own capacity for resilience.

Karen Reivich:

One of the things I think that's really important for us all to kind of remind ourselves is that resilience is the dominant response. I mean, all of us have had lives where there has been adversity and challenge and setback and failure. And right now, with what's going on in the world, we're seeing uncertainty and depletion at higher levels than most of us confront day-to-day historically.

But we are well-prepared to handle uncertainty and depletion, and every one of us has stories that we can tell of really difficult things that we've gone through, and that we've maintained our ability to persist, to problem-solve, sometimes just to endure the difficult time. And so I think that one of the things I just want to be really clear about is resilience is within each of us and we use it in big and small ways day in and day out.

Alex Schein:

Through her research and work with resilience training, Reivich has identified several keys to moving through crisis and loss, starting with connection and optimism.

Karen Reivich:

One of the foundational things we know from the science about resilience and wellbeing is that connection is at the bedrock, or is the bedrock. And connection means a number of things. So it's certainly relationships, which the virtual environment creates challenges, although I do believe we're all learning ways to navigate those challenges. But connection also means being connected to something larger than oneself, whether that be fighting for social justice, or a lot of us were involved in trying to get the person we believe should be the next president elected.

For me, one of the most important changes I've personally made during this time has been to, because I'm not on the road, is to spend vastly more time outside in nature, not on Zoom. Unless I have to be on Zoom, I do my work calls on the phone while walking, and that helps me to feel attached to something larger.

And so I'm saying all of that because I think if we broaden our understanding of what the bedrock is, connection, then absolutely there are challenges that we have to confront, how do you stay connected to other people through Zoom, but I think it also reminds us that there are so many other ways to have deep connection to a mission, to a purpose, to nature, to faith. And that maybe relationships are a little harder right now, but that doesn't mean there's not an opportunity to develop some of these other forms of connection which are so sustaining during times of chronic stress like what we're all confronting.

Second, and I mentioned this word already, is optimism. And the really important thing about optimism is it's a mindset that we can marshal when we need it. It does not mean plastering on a smiley face and pretending to be happy or pretending things are good when they're not. Optimism is a mindset of

opportunity. It's a mindset where we walk through the world using strategies that set us up for greater resilience and wellbeing.

Another really important thing about the mindset of optimism is that it's a mindset that drives us, and this is really important, to purposeful action. So right now, I think a lot of us are feeling depleted, and I liken it to sort of the opposite of The Wizard of Oz, where things were Technicolor, and now they're starting to feel monochromatic. And so apathy can set in. And optimism allows us and drives us to take purposeful action, action aligned with our goals and values. And when you engage in a way that's aligned with your goal or a value, you see yourself as having agency. You're demonstrating to yourself that you are a person of agency, which is the antidote to apathy and helplessness.

Alex Schein:

Reivich sees this link between an optimistic mindset and a feeling of empowerment to effect change as an important opportunity, both on the personal level, and in a broader social context.

Karen Reivich:

And I see that in my own 11th grade daughter. I see that in schools I've worked in in Oklahoma City where the student voice is one of acknowledging that things are hard and acknowledging that they are inheriting struggles that are painful and meaningful, but also a very deep belief that they can affect change through action.

And I do think that that's a critical aspect of resilience, which is, a few minutes ago, I talked about how things are outside of our control, and I just want to say not everything's outside of our control. When a vaccine is made, it might be outside of our control, but there are things that each of us can be doing each day where we do have influence, where we can impact change. And fighting for the things that you believe in, which has been happening a lot on college campuses around social justice issues. Putting your voice out there for your beliefs around the climate and whatever issues are important to you is not only good for affecting long-term change, but at an individual level, it's demonstrating to yourself that you have efficacy.

Alex Schein:

Reivich finds that there is power in the struggle to work through difficult times, and that by addressing pieces of a problem, we can come through to the other side with a better sense of our own strength, an ability to sustain ourselves.

Karen Reivich:

Often when we are struggling through something, it doesn't feel good. When I'm going through really difficult times and questioning who I am and my place in the world and how I handle something and having to confront something about my history or about my future that's difficult, it's not that I'm doing that with a smile on my face. And I might feel anxious and there's pain and suffering, but it's that I'm willing to look at the hard questions, that I'm willing to feel the sadness and the loss, and that those emotions don't prevent me from continuing to look inward or from continuing to struggle.

That's resilience. It's not not feeling those things. It's feeling afraid. It's feeling sad. It's feeling anxious. And with those emotions as part of it, continuing to do what you want to do to work your way through something.

Alex Schein:

Finally, we hear from college senior James Nycz, a political science major who is active in civic affairs, including serving as a poll worker in this year's election and holding a post in his hometown government. Unlike the other students we interviewed, Nycz's undergraduate experience has been dramatically altered by the pandemic.

James Nycz:

My name is James Nycz. I'm a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences, double majoring in political science and classical studies, and I'm actually in my hometown in Bucks County right now because I worked as a poll worker in the election, but I'm spending most of this semester in Philadelphia.

I have an interest in local politics and local history too. Last month, I got appointed to my local historical commission for my township. So I've just started on that. We're having our first meeting later in the month, but it's basically going to be the historical branch of the township government. So we handle anything that has to concern planning history events or doing any sorts of refurbishments, anything like that.

Alex Schein:

James absorbed the news of the transition to a virtual spring semester from a distance as part of a small cohort of students who are participating in the Penn and Washington Program, where students take classes, work in internships, and see firsthand how government works.

James Nycz:

I actually wasn't on campus in the spring. I was completing the Penn and Washington Program. So I was in D.C. And with this program, you work full-time during an internship, and then you take classes, political science classes at night.

I was working at the State Department. So it was very hectic because most of the students on campus had spring break when Penn announced no one come back, but our spring break was scheduled for later in the semester. So we were in the middle of classes and work and basically just normal school.

So, the day that it actually happened, I was sitting at work and I had a four hour meeting in the morning. And I'm getting all of these text messages and emails from the program director saying, "Class is canceled for tonight. We're going to try to figure out something later, just try to stay home," and then eventually it starts looking like we're going to have to try to do our jobs virtually and go home. And by the end of the day, I had to tell my boss that I wouldn't be able to come back in person because I'm going back to my home.

Alex Schein:

The uncertainty of the present moment magnifies the normal challenges of being a college senior, but James notes that this is not the first time his generation has had to absorb upheaval and uncertainty that's global in scale.

James Nycz:

I think for me and most of my friends, we're feeling like we can't plan for anything right now, that everything really is in flux. And we don't know what grad school applications will look like, how competitive those applications will be. We don't know what the job market will look like. We don't even know what, for example, the election might look like. We still don't know that.

So, there's just a lot of uncertainty in the air. And I think that most people are trying to deal with that in the ways that they can, but I think it's made us a lot more cautious about making choices right now, a lot more risk averse. And I think a lot of that comes from the uncertainty that students my age had growing up during things like 9/11 and the Great Recession, and now, graduating into a job market that's always in flux and a political situation and an economic situation and a public health situation that are all blowing up people's plans in their face.

But it's still, it's still pretty scary to not only have the regular uncertainty of what you're going to do with your life, but then to have the uncertainty of the entire world around you on top of that.

Alex Schein:

James' response to this current crisis, perhaps reflects lessons learned through his generations' brushes with uncertainty. In a world where security, safety, and opportunity can't be taken for granted, he sees the strength of his peers and the potential for positive change.

James Nycz:

I have a lot of hope in the young people of this country and I think that we have a lot to offer and that we also are willing to take our country into our own hands. And that's something that I want to be a part of and I want to make sure that young people are represented in the room when there's a township board meeting and maybe only 15% of the population is under the age of 30 in my township or something, but it should still be that someone under the age of 60 is sitting there listening and can chime in if they need to.

I think a lot of people are also hopeful for a post-COVID world where people start to recognize that things like public health and ensuring the safety and economic security of our communities is something that shouldn't just be prioritized during crises, that we need to prepare for crises in advance and we need to think about what's next. It might not be a pandemic that's next, but it might be a climate situation that's next. It might be some sort of natural disaster perhaps, or it could be some sort of financial undoing or collapse. And we need to think about these things and plan for them. I hope that that's the takeaway from the pandemic.

Alex Schein:

This wraps up our first season of In These Times. We'll be back in the spring with a new six-part series on racial injustice, where we'll dive deep into the protests, policy and Black lives and culture.

The Omnia podcast is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to Omar Husni, Samira Mehta, James Nycz, Paul Saint-Amour, and Karen Reivich.

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