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The Edge of Empathy

Edward Carrette
Purdue University

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The edge of empathy.

There is a global pandemic going on, but you wouldn't know it in our house. 4.5 million people have caught a deadly virus, but I'm sitting on a couch with my dogs. The country has seen shortages of food, but I'm eating better than ever. 30 million Americans are out of work, but I have more money than ever.

I know I should feel bad. People are dying. Jobs are being lost. And I do feel bad. Or at least I did. I checked the stats daily. I shared information I thought was useful. We stayed inside. We worried. But then the consequences never came for us...

My wife and I are both able to work from home. We have dogs, not children, so we don't have to homeschool. My wife went from a 90-minute daily commute in heavy traffic to a walk from the bedroom to the living room. I now work from my lounge chair next to my snoring animals. Under quarantine, our lives improved. We kept saying to ourselves, "this is awful, the government needs to do more!" But when our daily lives aren't awful, how long can you keep feeling that way? It is like we'd hit the end of our empathy. At some point the suffering of others becomes a concept, not a feeling.

But we still know it is bad out there.

We do our best to support. We've been eating out more often, supporting local restaurants. But even that sacrifice feels strange because it's something we've always loved doing. We wear masks everywhere we go, because we want to be part of the smart people who are helping. Are we helping? Is helping really this easy?

I mean sure, I miss my friends. I miss going to bars and concerts and parks. I have a job lined up that can't start until we can go back into the office, but is that my sacrifice? Is that all I've had to give up as the world stopped?

No one is blaming the virus on me. I'm an immigrant, but my home country has been relatively unaffected. My city hasn't had any lockdown protests, so we aren't really in any danger. The government gave us stimulus checks, which we donated and spent. And that is somehow our contribution?

Purdue is all online now. But my classes were all already online. So the emails from Purdue, so well-thought-out, well planned, so important, are meaningless to me. I want to feel involved, to help the university, but how do you force yourself to do that?

I'd always wondered what ordinary people felt like in times of great horror, like a world war. And I guess this is it. You just sit here. You enjoy things and then you feel guilty for enjoying them. In a way this virus has brought to a head the privileges I didn't know I had. Or I did know about them, but they were easier to ignore when there wasn't body count I could watch on CNN.

I hope the empathy comes back. Because once you reach its edge, the connection is gone. We might be all in this together, but it doesn't always feel like that.