

Nothing Matters Anymore (Except What Actually Does)

There's so much I did two months ago that seems ludicrous now.

By Damon Young

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I was committed to dying without ever learning the Electric Slide. You know how everyone has a *thing*, one of those random eccentricities people associate with you? I was the “guy who always sits during the Electric Slide.” Do you realize how resolute you must be, as a 41-year-old black American man, to attend decades worth of cookouts, birthday parties, game nights, family reunions and wedding receptions and *not* allow yourself to learn the World's Mildest Line Dance?

But on March 17, four days after my most recent visit to Sam's Club, three days after deciding not to take my 4-year-old daughter to her dance class and a day after Donald Trump first appeared even slightly aware of how dire the next several weeks would be, I electric slid all through my living room.

After vanquishing the slobbery of an *entire day home with the kids* (we also have a 15-month-old son), my wife and I wanted to make certain they were exhausted before bed. So she pulled up Spotify, found a line dancing playlist and danced with them. Ten minutes later, Beyonce's “Before I Let Go” came on, a rendition immediately shoehorned into the list of “songs black people do the Electric Slide to,” and she gestured toward me.

“Come on,” she said. “You're learning the Electric Slide tonight.”

“I can't!” I responded. “Not knowing it is my *thing*.”

“No one cares about that,” she said. “Or even knows.”

I'm fortunate to have both a job and a personality that allow social distancing to be manageable without a severe disruption in my day-to-day. And I'm privileged enough to be able to purchase whichever coronavirus-related provisions we need. (For now, at least.) Still, the whiplash of the past month has been more violent than we're collectively able to process.

Of course, there are the infinite cancellations, postponements and closings, and the aftershocks of this social and economic fissure are still vibrating. There's the mania of re-remembering, where your circadian daily rhythm is rattled by a perpetual flashing back to a thing you did or a way you felt a day or a week or a month ago, and you catechize yourself.

Was that weekend fever and nausea I had in late January really just because I ate a bad taco? Did I put myself and others at risk when I flew from Pittsburgh to Nashville — with a Washington connection outbound and a Charlotte connection inbound — to deliver a book talk in early March; an event where I signed more than 100 books and shook dozens of hands? Was that dumb and dangerous? (Better yet, *how* dumb and dangerous was that?)

And also there's the yawning mental health gorge, as an entire economy of stress alleviators — gyms, yoga studios, therapist's offices — are shuttered. (My go-tos when reducing anxiety are playing and watching basketball, neither of which are available now. I'm considering baking.)

The most formidable challenge, however, is existential. We just don't know enough of *anything* right now, and that knowledge gap is a neurosis mill — a milkman delivering fresh angsts and dreads to our doors each day. Of course, there are epidemiologists who communicate what they know about this virus and how we should protect ourselves, and it's paramount that we heed that advice.

But how are we supposed to *feel* now? How are we supposed to process this? How are we supposed to talk about this? Is levity even appropriate, and is it foolish to ask if levity is appropriate? How are we supposed to work and produce and create with this in and over our heads? When will this end, and who will we be when that happens? (*If it happens.*) No one alive has experienced this convergence of instantaneous mass communication and pandemic, where we *all* know that something unprecedented is coming, is happening, is *here*; but our evolved and invented methods of defense might be futile. Are we crashing or just market-correcting?

I don't know. Several days ago, I could say that no one I personally knew had fallen seriously ill from the coronavirus. I can no longer say that. And I know that many of us have had similarly abrupt shifts in how intimate the fallout has been. But I also know that, along with the exhaustive cleansing we're tasked with, a welcome byproduct of our post-coronavirus lives has been a massive culling of certain social and economic functions wrongly believed to be essential.

From now on, the answers to "Could this meeting just have been an email?" and "Could this email just have been a text?" will always be "Yes." Yes, this job *can* be done remotely. Yes, accommodations for special needs *can* be made. Yes, landlords and mortgage companies *can* afford to be a bit less stringent with their customers. Yes, there is extra money available.

And these epiphanies are mostly about the mundanities that impact our day-to-day.

There's so much that doesn't matter; so much I did just two months ago seems ludicrous now. (Brunch every Sunday? Really?) So many silly habits and desires and feuds and consumptions and relationships that aren't just bandwidth-consuming; they're bandwidth-*stealing*, snatching time and energy away from the people and things that matter.

And I'm reminded today of all those times I made that lonely and awkward walk to the bar when the Electric Slide came on, all because of a senseless and aggressively self-absorbed personal edict to be a drip.

I might have to run to the supermarket this weekend. We're low on milk, and my son is in a sweet potato phase. We need more sweet potatoes. So many sweet potatoes. I'm sure it'll be a ghost town today. The lines will be shorter, the aisles emptier, the few people there will be donned in masks and gloves and so I'll be in and out.

I've always hated the bustle and forced intimacy of a Sunday supermarket — packed with hundreds of people haggling, negotiating, bumping, sweating, exerting, assessing.

Well, at least I *thought* I did.

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