

OPTIMISM IN ISOLATION: ON REMEMBERING TO KEEP MOVING FORWARD AT OUR LOWEST POINTS

Hayes Converse, University of Texas at Austin

When the quarantine first settled, and it became apparent that most of us were going to be stuck in our homes for the foreseeable future, a lot of us thought the same thing: “at least now I should be able to catch up on all those shows and movies I missed when they first came out.” The degree to which this was actually possible varied greatly from person to person, but I also discovered to my surprise that investigating new media was not necessarily the escape I thought it would be: experiencing isolation as the new normal proved to be a potent factor that I had not considered.

Context is important when experiencing a story: not just the context in which the work was made, but also the context in which it is presented to the recipient. It is why we watch horror movies with the lights off, why we watch shows we are deeply invested in only once the kids are asleep, and why we do not (or at least should not) read nihilistic Twitter threads while in the midst of a depressive episode. Consuming media in a healthy fashion is as much about knowing what you bring to the table as it is about understanding the text itself. In isolation, with time blurring around us and our interactions with others limited, it can be surprisingly easy to lose our grasp on our own demons and let them run wild, coloring everything we experience. Thus, my first

real breakdown of the quarantine really snuck up on me.

It was five weeks into the isolation period. I was stone cold sober, decently well rested, and as far as I knew, not in any kind of vulnerable mental state. I thought I was adjusting to the new status quo relatively well, and had just finished watching what should have been an uplifting video essay centering on an acclaimed Superman story: “What’s So Funny About Truth, Justice, and the American Way?”

In that narrative, Superman’s morals are tested by a group of antiheroes, The Elite, who are willing to use lethal force and ignore all oversight. This approach proves to be both effective and popular. Amidst the grim, violent mood of comics in the nineties, the author asks, does Superman’s model of heroics still hold worth? Yes, the story argues, because to ask that some power outside of our control mete out justice according to their own moral compass is to abdicate responsibility to improve one’s own society, to give in to fear and allow oneself to exist at the whims of those with power. It is a good story, well told, and resonant even now, nearly 20 years on from its publication. That resonance was the problem for me.

I was incapable of stopping myself from drawing parallels between the world that had almost broken Superman on a fundamental

level and the present state of American society. Even before the pandemic, fear was an omnipresent and powerful force lurking in the back of many of our minds. I extended this thought backward in time: this is not a new phenomenon; rising above fear has historically been an exception rather than a rule. In fiction, it is a trait we ascribe to our strongest heroes; in life, we recognize bravery with high honors when shown in extreme conditions.

And yet, we have as a species largely failed to create societal systems that reduce fear and reward courage: it is both easier and more profitable to harness uncertainty and paranoia than it is to reward justice and progress. I know, academically, that societies have progressed despite this, that even though that progress is often painfully slow, globally we are becoming a more accepting, more equal, and more caring people.

But my own fears are not so easily assuaged. I look at my country and see how well the systems have been established and refined to oppress the populace, to take advantage of the underprivileged and disenfranchised, and to keep them that way, to encourage those with power to use it to promote injustice and dehumanize others. Just because things are getting better globally does not mean they are getting better here, and here the forces arrayed against progression toward a more just society are, without exaggeration, horrifying. My thoughts ground along this track, looking for historical precedent, looking for a reason to believe things would turn around. To my despair, I could not find one. Would there be a breaking point, an

upheaval, in my lifetime? Or would the systems currently in place continue to press the justice from society until the vast majority of people were living a desperate day-to-day existence, too fearful and exhausted to think of anything but preserving themselves?

If you are familiar with the typical ways in which depression and anxiety manifest, you might recognize my worries that America would descend into an irretrievable dystopian nightmare as a form of catastrophizing. I could see this even as I sat at my desk and wept for the next generation: the conclusions I was drawing were likely irrational, and our current circumstances were highly unusual. This knowledge did not help, however, for my true issue lay not with my expectations for the future, but my faith in humanity.

In my isolated state I had been becoming more jaded without even realizing it; the story of Superman just brought that fact into relief. The sharp dividing line between a hero of unbreakable principles and the normal people who are so willing to give in to fear highlighted for me the fallible nature of man. We are not Superman, I thought, we are nowhere close. We write such heroes because we wish to believe in such a fantasy. And if we are doomed to forever be a cruel and wicked people, what can I do? I do not, and will never, have the power to right systemic injustices.

Of course, I was taking the wrong point from the story, subconsciously confirming my own stresses and worries. Heroes are meant not just for escapism, but example: Superman exists to inspire his readers, not to tell them that they can never reach the

standard he represents. And yet, in my mind I had managed to contort a work whose stated moral was “never stop working for your dreams of a better world, even if the world would prefer an easy way out” into the thought that nothing would get better so maybe I should just lay down and rot. Mired as I was in grief at the time, I did not realize how badly I had misinterpreted the author’s intentions at the time, however, mired as I was in my grief.

I was cognizant enough to put together that this mindset was unhealthy, and that I needed a way out. If my perspective was warped, I could not trust myself to find that path, and would need some external reassurance. This, I figured, was precisely what friends were for, and I began composing a message asking for help. It would remain unsent that whole evening, as my brain sprung another trap on me: if I was having these thoughts, and my friends were all similarly quarantined and possibly in similar states of mind, would they not be vulnerable to memetic infection? Could I chance inducing this morose state in others? No, if I did I would regret it deeply. This was, of course, a fallacy, and I should have sought help immediately. Nevertheless, I would need to find my own way home.

My first attempt at this was to frame my current experiences in terms of the narrative structure I was most familiar with, the hero’s journey. It is a well-understood phenomenon that humans tend to see themselves as the protagonists of their own stories; if I contextualized my doubts and fears as merely a step in the course of an upward ascent, perhaps that would assuage them in the moment. And indeed, we appreciate

when our heroes question themselves, when they interrogate their reasons for fighting and come out all the stronger for it. This is, in fact, close to the existential point of “What’s So Funny About Truth, Justice, and the American Way?” Once again, however, the story failed to inspire me, as the same disconnect reared its head: real life is not fiction, and has no guarantee of a happy ending. I did not want my life to be a well-paced, satisfactory narrative with pitch-perfect dramatic tension, I wanted a reasonable hope that things would not continue to spiral downhill.

While not entirely successful, this line of thinking did at least let me know what exactly it was I needed to hear. I marshaled my thoughts in the direction of things that had comforted and inspired me before. Somewhat ironically, this meant casting my mind back to other media, media I was familiar with, media I had already analyzed to death and found meaning in. This, finally, was more successful, as it was much harder for my brain to re-process themes I had already internalized to suit my present sour outlook. There is a reason we go back to touchstones in times of crisis, be they faith, family, or marathons of *The Office*. Returning to a mental comfort zone through ritualized action or established patterns of behavior can be a good way to soothe an anxious mind, as it allows one to recall a more stable time, to receive a dose of normalcy in the midst of uncertainty. Indeed, in the age of streaming and media-on-demand the media that takes us there tends to be no further than a few keystrokes away. However, in emergencies, the familiar

coping mechanism of simply regressing to a comfort zone can be insufficient.

In my case, I recalled a relatively small, low-budget web series called RWBY that I have been a fan of since its inception. That show had recently featured a villain explicitly named The Apathy, which simply by existing drained the heroes of their will to go on what seemed like an impossible quest. When they realized what was happening, they set the monster ablaze, yanking their comrades from its grasp. Not exactly a subtle message, but media does not need to be subtle to be effective. Listening once again to that show's soundtrack, I recalled the themes and messages that had resonated with me at the time: to keep moving forward, and that optimism is never useless, because it gets good done when despair threatens to take hold. While it did not renew my faith in humanity, those memories provided an ideal I could believe in, one that wrenched me from my depressive spiral and allowed me to see that my perspective had become significantly warped. After that evening, I took care when picking up media with more serious themes, but with some rest and distance I was able to parse "What's So Funny About Truth, Justice, and the American Way" into the more positive message discussed above.

In an age of stress and worry, it is paramount that we know where our comfort zones are and are unashamed about returning to them when hope begins to waver. This is just as true in isolation, if not more so, and the reminders that familiar media brings can be an important part of that. I would like to stress, however, that this is not a complete solution, even if it worked

for me in this particular case: quarantine affects us all in different ways, and diagnosing the subtle (or even the larger) shifts in our mental state can be extremely difficult, as I discovered the hard way. A one-directional experience like watching a movie or reading a book, regardless of how personally important the messages therein may be, does not provide many of the benefits that come from discussing things with someone who cares. It is important to talk through our feelings, to interrogate anything out of the ordinary, and check in with those who know us best to see if they find anything amiss. The most complete approach to managing our mental health will leverage all of our touchstones of normalcy, and social distancing does not mean we have to lose the connections that keep us sane, either to our past or to the people who support us.¹

¹ The journal solicited editorials, opinion pieces, autoethnographies, and similar items for the present edition in response to how people were engaging with media as a coping mechanism while quarantining during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This item is one of those pieces. – Ed.