In our hyper-technical society, data-based approaches have largely replaced religious and political ideologies. We like to think that more information will solve our problems and that all we need to do is to go out and do the hard work of collecting more of it. Surely, once we reach a certain threshold, the data we collect will matriculate into a paradigm that would offer us a solution. Our rational faculties are constantly involved and the more we use them, the more human we are. It even seems that our value is no longer measured by the worth of our actions as measured through any form of ethical doctrine. Instead, it is based on how much we know.

COVID-19 emerged and shocked our belief in our ability. People all over the world are making decisions blindly. No one knows what will happen in two weeks as the foggy situation does not seem to be clearing soon. Knowledge is our source of control and security in an unpredictable reality and the pandemic’s raid took that from us. But in our emphasis on the gaining of knowledge, we assume that it is a one-way street- the more knowledge the better; and we have forgotten the double character of knowledge, that it is also dangerous. We think of knowledge as a merciful weapon that will bring us power, security and financial success, never paying attention that it can also backfire at us. COVID-19 forced people to the confines of their homes. There, the were put face to face with questions that, when answered, yield apprehensive knowledge. The existential psychologist Rollo May point out that within the English language, the expression “to apprehend” is synonymous with “to know” which suggests that this apprehensive side to knowledge is deeply rooted in the language (May 165).

Oedipus offers a great example of a man who gained knowledge about himself and paid a hefty price for that. The myth depicts him as being well-aware of the threatening quality of knowledge. Even though he is the king and has all the power, he approaches the simple question of who he actually is with great apprehension. The dramatic scene of the myth revolves around the questions, Shall Oedipus know the significance of his actions? Shall he know what his origins are?

But Oedipus is a hero because he does not let anyone, not even God, stand in the way of gaining this knowledge about himself. Though he scorns at his past that brought him to where he is, he clashes with it directly and destroy himself in the process. From a happy and successful king, he is transformed into a blind, bad-tempered, old man in exile. It took great courage to ask the question, “Who I am?”, but now he knows. The same courageous man who dared ask this question, and take on the debilitating consequences, is the same person who was able to answer the riddle of the Sphinx; a man who knows what a human is.

Elisabeth Bailey, in The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating, describes her journey with her disease that seriously impaired her ability to move and left her bedridden. Like most of us during the pandemic, she spent a considerable amount of time indoors and with sparse social interactions. Throughout the book, Bailey, like Oedipus, shows her remarkable insight into the human experience. Isolation and time are two themes that she uses to show that. She reflect on her perception of the passage of time early in her condition when she couldn’t move: “Time unused and only endured still vanishes, as if time itself is starving, and each day is swallowed whole, leaving no crumbs, no memory, no trace at all.” (Bailey Location 79) When the days are repetitive and there’s little to do, we fail to register how we spent our time. When there’s nothing for the memory to capture, then we are left with nothing to show that we lived that period. The lack of purpose is the worst part of the experience. Waking up everyday only to wait your day out is more draining, at least psychologically, than going about our days like we used to do before the pandemic. Bailey remarks:” Survival often depends on a specific focus: a relationship, a belief, or a hope.
balanced on the edge of possibility. Or something more ephemeral: the way the sun passes through the hard, seemingly impenetrable glass of a window and warms the blanket, or how the wind, invisible but for its wake, is so loud one can hear it through the insulated walls of a house. (Bailey 183)

Having nothing to do robs us of the present and with the uncertainty of the future, it is impossible to foresee how it will unfold, let alone aspire to it. This only spares the past: “Whereas the future had once beckoned with many intriguing paths, now there was just one impossible route. So it was into the past, with its rich sedimentary layers, that my mind would go instead.” (Bailey 348) Looking back can be good or bad. One can ruminate over a sweet memory that they cherished which can bring them joy. Personally, the quarantine gave me time to reflect on my journey in the United States. It has been rewarding to compare myself four years ago to what I gained and achieved now. However, it can also lead to serious issues, especially given how vulnerable and unstable people can be in such unprecedented time. When the past looks better as compared to the present and the future, then people act out. Unfortunately, the present and the future are not clear to us; yet people have been acting. With the amount of stress placed on everyone, whether financial or emotional or both, divorce rates are at an all time high.

The marital status is not going to be the only thing that will change. Such drastic change for an extended period will definitely lead to behavioral and social changes. The most conventional aspect, even those that act as though they delineate reality could be affected as Bailey describes:” I found myself preoccupied with the energy level of my visitors, and I started to observe them in the same detail with which I observed the snail. The random way my friends moved around the room astonished me; it was as if they didn’t know what to do with their energy. They were so careless with it” (Bailey 279). If we were to reckon what will change, hygiene practices will be on the top of the list. People will be more conscious of their surroundings, as in their distance to other people and the boundaries of personal space. In addition, having spent quality time with their families, for the first time for so many people, it seems reasonable to speculate that people will start reconsidering their work-life balance. Overall, the effects COVID-19 are extensive, posing an existential threat but also serving as what seems to be the most disruptive event in the recent times.
Works Cited
