

# A Letter to My Generation

We're entering adulthood in the shadow of COVID-19, economic and social upheaval, and climate change. We don't really feel like Gen Z or millennials—and some like to call us Generation Screwed. We say: Don't underestimate our ability to overcome.

BY  
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● PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACKIE RUSSO

**WHO KNEW THAT** stay-at-home orders could bring so much displacement?

That's how the spring of 2020 felt for many in our generation—we who were just starting to get a glimpse of independence and adulthood before the pandemic came crashing down.

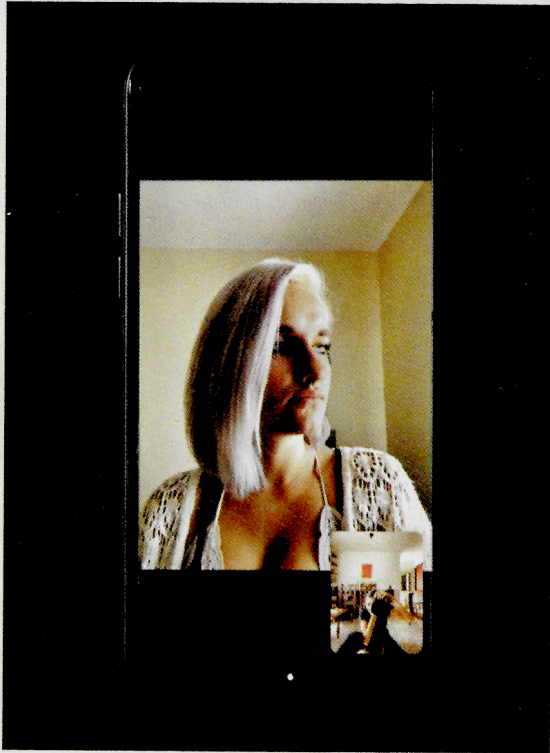
Maybe we need a name, those of us who are currently 18 to 25 years old, instead of remaining just a purgatorial generation: feeling like we're too young to be millennials but not young enough for Gen Z. I'm not sold on any of the names I've heard us called—Rainbow Generation, zillennials, Generation

Screwed. Yet the unavoidable fact is that we're at a critical turning point in our personal lives at a time when the world seems to be imploding in so many ways.

As lockdowns were spreading earlier this year, hardly any of us seemed to stay where we were, racing instead to seek safer ground. I know where many friends sought refuge, because I've spent much of my time in quarantine writing letters—the classic long, handwritten letters—and that meant gathering mailing addresses.

I've kept track of which friends fled as college campuses emptied. I knew

Charlie Coburn—here with Amy Hudson in his San Francisco apartment—wrote in June that “I feel more called to action than I have at perhaps any other point in my life.”



Kasia Vargo finished nursing school during the height of the pandemic.

who left their first real apartments to move back into their childhood bedrooms, who was locked down in the mountains or by the beach, and whose socioeconomic backgrounds gave them no choice but to stay in cities hit hard by the plague. I knew whose jobs were safe, whose siblings needed looking after, and whose boyfriends and girlfriends were suddenly an agonizing distance away. What few seemed to realize at first was how long it would last and how normal it would become.

My pen pals knew where I was too. They knew that when my dad, an infectious-disease doctor at Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, N.Y., saw what was coming, we'd decided it would be safer for our family to stay apart for a while. That I'd left New York with my college-age brothers, my mother, and my ailing grandmother and hunkered down in North Carolina. That the guilt we felt not being by my father's side was overpowering, and we missed him tremendously.

- **IN THE LETTERS** my friends and I exchanged, we shared those

1. When 2020 university grad Elle O'Brien surveyed her peers on Instagram, 91% said they "feel anxious or stressed about how COVID-19 has impacted our post-grad plans and jobs."

kinds of thoughts and feelings—sentiments that weren't expressed in texts or on group Zoom calls (which we still used, of course). Something about writing a letter seemed to draw out emotions and vulnerabilities in a way that many of us hadn't really experienced before. And suddenly there was so much to feel.

Depending on our circumstances, the tone of letters ranged from anxious to reflective, fearful to calm, frustrated to stirred. Friends wrote of their greatest prides, such as a brother graduating early from medical school to join the front lines of the pandemic—and of unexpected joys, like rediscovering a passion for books, which had been lost amid schedules and screens.

Standing by the mailbox one afternoon, I had the heartbreaking experience of learning bad news by mail for the first time. "My grandparents (mom's side) are both in the hospital with COVID, sadly," my friend wrote. (A few weeks later her grandparents died, just hours apart from each other.)

As the pandemic wave washed over the United States, it became clear that the undertow was dragging people our age out to sea. Many were already struggling; wracked by debt from paying \$20,000, \$40,000, \$60,000 a year for school. Priced out by the sky-high rents in major American cities. Exasperated by years of speaking out against systemic racism and gun violence and climate change, only to find corrupt and destructive politicians unwilling to act. The pandemic ripped the ground out from under all of us.

We are, after all, a generation raised on post-9/11 dread and active-shooter drills in our elementary schools. If the future of the world looked grim to us before, what might it hold now?

New uncertainties hang over what should be everyday experiences—living on our own, going back to school, going on dates, hugging our grandparents. It seems to be all we're talking about these days, the pounding of the waves deafening, dominating every conversation.

- **SO ALTHOUGH SOME** like to call us Generation Screwed—and sometimes it might feel that way—I think that's too negative. We've been battered and shaken up, but we're certainly not going down easy.

"This is just not what we thought life would look like," says Elle O'Brien, a recent Colgate University graduate. She's used social media to survey people (many of them our age) about their feelings and experiences during the pandemic. (1) For several months, starting in April, O'Brien posted survey questions on her Instagram and blogged about the results. Hundreds of people took her surveys, O'Brien wrote, and she was struck by the similarities: "We're a complicated mix of scared and hopeful, a lot of us laughing in the same days we're crying." Here's how O'Brien described our generation's bottom line to me: "It's a s\*\*\*\*y hand we've been dealt. But we're speaking up."

On all those counts, I think O'Brien represents how

we're feeling. A movement is beginning, and in my circles, at least, it's no longer acceptable to stay silent. Ironically, it took months of social distancing to help spark this remarkable level of engagement in society, especially among young people.

Such large and diverse crowds of young adults joined the protests of the killing of George Floyd in part because of what the pandemic was revealing about the systemic inequalities in our country. We saw Black friends and classmates whose family members were disproportionately falling ill from the coronavirus. We saw first-generation and lower-income students struggling more with the transition to virtual learning. We saw recent graduates of color lacking the resources and connections to succeed in an increasingly uninviting job market. How could we *not* seek change?

Humanity is in for a similarly urgent reckoning, I suspect, about the consequences of mistreating our planet. As the virus does now, the global climate emergency has long alarmed our generation. Maybe the label Generation Climate Change fits us, as it's the greatest existential threat to us all. By comparison, previous generations failed to act with urgency about melting glaciers, polluted air, slaughtered rainforests, rising seas—perhaps because they're not the ones who'll have to live in that world.

The devastation from this pandemic was once unfathomable. But it likely pales in comparison with the environmental catastrophes to come.

The weight of all these matters was apparent in a June letter from one of my college roommates. "I am sad. I am conflicted. I am frustrated and upset, as much with myself and my own complicity/inaction as anything else," Charlie Coburn wrote. After he'd spent months holed up in silence, something in him was boiling over. "I'm furious with the response of the federal government," he wrote. "And I feel more called to action than I have at perhaps any other point in my life." (2)

● **IN MY OWN LETTERS** to friends early in the quarantine, I wrote about a young whale that washed up on the North Carolina coast not far from where we were



Fedjounie Philippe, an immigrant from Haiti and 2020 Princeton University graduate, was the first in her family to attend college.



PHOTO: JORDAN SALAMA

2. About 41% of Americans who said they recently attended a protest focused on race are younger than 30, according to June survey data reported by the Pew Research Center.

staying. Its death was likely humans' fault, a boat strike or a net tangling. Because the virus kept most tourists off the beach, the buried carcass was left there, and nature had its way.

On my regular beach walks I observed the changes to the whale's spine, the only part protruding from the sand. One week it was covered in buzzing black flies. A few days later it had been scavenged by coyotes, judging from the fresh tracks. And then, after what felt like a world-ending storm—the house shook, the winds howled, the rains flooded the beach grass—I found that the pounding waves had revealed a clean vertebra

(at left) for the taking.\* Through the weeks of lockdown, I scrubbed and polished the bone. I keep it as a reminder of the pandemic—of the uprooting it caused, of the many lonely and untimely deaths, of the natural world and our place in it.

For those of us at the beginning of our adult lives, the faltering start caused by the pandemic means that our choices will matter even more. We need reminders so we don't forget what it felt like: Some suffered far more than others, but all of us were plunged into a period of questioning, of reevaluating, of trial.

It's only natural at times to feel as though we're Generation Screwed—but I want to think that we're shaping up to be Generation Renewed. We will not go down without a fight. And what will define us far more than our struggles in this moment is what we'll do when we come out the other side.

All my best,  
Jordan

Jordan Salama is a writer whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and more. His first book, *Every Day the River Changes*, a journey down the Magdalena River in Colombia, will be published by Catapult in 2021.

\*AS REQUIRED BY LAW, SALAMA CONTACTED THE U.S. MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING PROGRAM ABOUT THE VERTEBRA HE FOUND. HE REGISTERED THE SPECIMEN AND WAS TOLD HE COULD KEEP IT BECAUSE THE WHALE IS NOT ON THE LIST OF SPECIES WHOSE BONE POSSESSION IS PROHIBITED.