

STUDENT OPINION

How Has 2020 Challenged or Changed You?

What impact has the upheaval of this year had on your life and the lives of those you love? Historians tell us to reflect and document now.



By **Katherine Schulten**

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What have you experienced this year?

Maybe you quarantined all spring and attended school online — and maybe you're *still* quarantining and school is still virtual.

Maybe someone you care about is an “essential worker,” or got sick, or lost a job.

Or maybe something hopeful has come out of the pandemic for you — a closer relationship with a family member, a new hobby, a deeper understanding of yourself.

But, of course, it's not just the pandemic. This year of upheaval has also seen nationwide protests for racial justice that many believe is the largest movement in American history. The economy is experiencing a “downturn without modern precedent.” Wildfires, tornadoes and floods have devastated communities. And the presidential election is around the corner.

Teenagers have been uniquely affected by all of this, coming of age during a year that will shape your generation for decades to come.

That's why we're inviting young people everywhere to document their lives right now. For students in the United States, we're also running a special multimedia contest inviting you to submit anything you like — in words or images, video or audio — to tell us about your experiences.

To inspire you, we're posing the question above — How has 2020 challenged or changed you? — and also inviting you to read the July 14 article “This Year Will End Eventually. Document It While You Can.” In it, Lesley M. M. Blume shows how and why historians, archivists and museums suggest we start preserving personal materials for posterity.

She writes:

A few weeks ago, a nerdy joke went viral on Twitter: Future historians will be asked which quarter of 2020 they specialize in.

As museum curators and archivists stare down one of the most daunting challenges of their careers — telling the story of the pandemic; followed by severe economic collapse and a nationwide social justice movement — they are imploring individuals across the country to preserve personal materials for posterity, and for possible inclusion in museum archives. It’s an all-hands-on-deck effort, they say.

“Our cultural seismology is being revealed,” said Anthea M. Hartig, the director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History of the events. Of these three earthshaking events, she said, “The confluence is unlike most anything we’ve seen.”

Museums, she said, are grappling “with the need to comprehend multiple pandemics at once.”

The article continues:

While some curators are loath to suggest a laundry list of items that we should be saving — they say that they don’t want to manipulate the documentation of history, but take their cues from the communities they document — many are imploring us to see historical value in the everyday objects of right now.

“Whatever we’re taking to be ordinary within this abnormal moment can, in fact, serve as an extraordinary artifact to our children’s children,” said Tyree Boyd-Pates, an associate curator at the Autry Museum of the American West, which is asking the public to consider submitting materials such as journal entries, selfies and even sign-of-the-times social media posts (say, a tweet about someone’s quest for toilet paper — screengrab those, he said).

To this end, curators said, don’t be so quick to edit and delete your cellphone photos right now. “Snapshots are valuable,” said Kevin Young, the director of New York City’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. “We might look back at one and say, ‘This picture tells more than we thought at the time.’”

At the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, the curatorial team will be evaluating and collecting protest materials such as placards, photos, videos and personalized masks — and the personal stories behind them.

“One activist found a tear-gas canister, and he gave it to us,” said Noelle Trent, a director at the museum. “We’re going to have to figure out how to collect items from the opposing side: We have to have the racist posters, the ‘Make America Great’ stuff. We’re going to need that at some point. The danger is that if we don’t have somebody preserving it, they will say this situation was not as bad.”

And there is perhaps no article more representative of this year than the mask, which has “become a really powerful visual symbol,” said Margaret K. Hofer, the vice president and museum director of the New-York Historical Society, which has identified around 25 masks that the museum will collect, including an N95 mask worn by a nurse in the Samaritan’s Purse emergency field hospital set up in New York’s Central Park in the spring. (The museum also collected a set of field hospital scrubs, and a cowbell that the medical team rang whenever they discharged a patient.)

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

- How would you answer our big question about how 2020 has challenged or changed you? Don't worry if your answer doesn't seem dramatic — sometimes small things tell a big story. If you like, make a list. In how many ways are you a different person now than you were at the end of 2019? Why?
- What aspect of this year's local, national or global news was most profound for you? The pandemic? The protests for racial justice? Something else? Why?
- Now that you've read the article, what artifacts might you have that tell some part of your story of 2020? For instance, what's on your camera roll? Do you keep a journal, or draw in a sketchbook? What have you posted on social media? What do your texts, emails, letters or, yes, even grocery lists say about your experiences this year? Which of these artifacts might you submit to a museum, and what "back story" would you tell about them?
- You may think you have nothing unique to say, but, trust us, you do. No one can tell the same story you can. What aspects of who you are — where you live, your family, your racial, ethnic or religious background, your sexuality, your hobbies or interests, a job, your health status, a role you play in your community, or anything else — have affected your experiences most profoundly this year?

For example, non-athletes might not know what it's like to have been without team games and workouts all season. Students who are considered essential workers have stories to tell that those who could stay home do not. Teenagers of color experienced the protests for racial justice differently than white students. Young people living in foster care went through quarantine differently than those living in traditional families. This list, of course, could go on and on. What can you express that other people may not know or understand? Why?

If you are a teenager in the United States, consider submitting something about your experience to our related Coming of Age in 2020 contest, which runs from Sept. 10 to Nov. 12. Your submission can be in the form of writing, images, audio or video. Learn more here.

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Students 13 and older in the United States and the United Kingdom, and 16 and older elsewhere, are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.