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Margaret Koval *83: Hello, Princeton. Everywhere we are this semester, coronavirus is changing our lives. But during this extraordinary time, the University's mission and community are stronger than ever. We may be apart, but together, we roar.

The Princeton community is always growing, is always evolving.

I think students from all around campus are trying to come together in this moment of extraordinary highs and lows.

What matters is that we're all going to try our best to be healthy and safe.

This is a special community, and while these are really hard challenges, I know that we will succeed in facing them as a community.

Margaret Koval: This spring, we're reaching out to Princetonians everywhere, to hear how we're continuing our teaching, learning and research; how we're staying together while so far apart; and how so many of us are working together to serve the wider world. Today, Kirsten Traudt speaks from her home in Morristown, New Jersey.

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Kirsten Traudt: Hi, my name is Kirsten Traudt, and I'm a member of the Class of 2020 at Princeton, and I'm in the classics department. It's been a really, kind of, turbulent couple of weeks, but one of the things that is really striking is the fact that the people who are part of Princeton are the same people whether they're, you know, in one classroom together or in one common room together, or they're really far away from each other.

And it's been really heartening to see how all of my professors have been so kind and accommodating and have been really bringing their A game to all of the online classes.

I'm in a class about Pliny the Younger, who was an Imperial author, and he wrote around the time, I think, either the end of the first century, beginning of the second century C.E. So, this letter by Pliny the Younger is really interesting — super, super famous — and it was a letter to Tacitus, who was a Roman historian. And it seems that Tacitus was asking Pliny the Younger for an account of his — an eyewitness account of the eruption of Vesuvius and the death of his uncle, who's called Pliny the Elder.

Basically, what happened was, the Romans, they had been living on the slopes of Vesuvius, planting fields in Vesuvius, and then it erupted really, really violently. And the entire area — which includes the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum — was covered in ash and completely buried for thousands of years. And many, many people died.

We talked a lot today in class about this incident where Pliny the Elder — basically he's an admiral and that's why he's by Pompeii — he doesn't really act at first and ends up trying to, kind of, make sure that everyone feels like things are normal, and takes a bath, and goes to sleep, and eats dinner with them. Which seems very strange — but reading now in this time of our own crisis, I'm really reminded what — how viscerally emotional it must have been to deal with a trauma on this scale.

But living through history invites you to experience a very different perspective on historiography and asks you to read in — a lot more humanity and perhaps a little bit less logic into your interpretations. So, that's definitely been really interesting and transformative for me.

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As a Classics major, pretty much everything that I am reading or studying either originated or just kind of exists in this space that's 2, 3, even 4,000 years ago. And so, you're also really aware of the fact that history is kind of a long game. The most well-attested period of Roman literature, which is mostly what I focus on, happens right at the end of the Republic, which was an extremely violent, like, 50 years, basically, where there were civil wars. People were being murdered in the street.

There was a lot of abuse of the law. The law was changing, regimes were changing, and so there was constant instability, constant political and also social instability. And when you think about living through that, you think, "Oh, man, I can't even imagine that." But then now, living through something where — in a lot of ways, the world as I know it has kind of been turned upside down, and things that I never thought would happen, have happened.

And I think what we can learn from looking back that far is that, in a lot of ways, the pressures on human society are often similar, and are often the same, and this becomes really clear in moments of crisis like this. Whether that's war, whether that's economic collapse, whether that's pandemic or disease, I really can't help but feel that I am living through a time that will be remembered, and I am living through a time that ought to be documented.

I wonder about the historian who's, you know, writing maybe a J.P. [junior paper] or something 200 years in the future, about this time. And how they might say, "Oh, well, they should have, they should have known, they should have known." And trying to think about, well, should I have known? What's the story that is going to be told about my life, and what's the story that's going to be told about my circumstances? And how can my — how is my perspective a valuable part of that story?

I think that a lot of the concerns that my generation has felt — and a lot of the fears that we have felt about the future — have all kind of come to a head in this cataclysmic event that is no longer an imagined cataclysm or something that's five, 10, 15 years in the future, which is often the time frame that you're thinking about when you're thinking about an absolute collapse due to global climate change. Because, I don't think any of us is going to come out of this the same person or having the same perspective on a lot of the issues that had been theoretically debated, say, in the Democratic primary.

I think about all of my friends who are entering the workforce, and how — what things are going to be like for them, and how — perhaps the difficulty of finding a job or the difficulty in even starting a career from lockdown might have really long, far-reaching ramifications — for decades and decades.

Overall, I think that what I learned at Princeton was how to think like somebody who reads the long game of history, and here is where I learned that to do so is not to disengage with the present moment, but actually to engage with it in a way that looks at what's happening right now not as the end of time or not as the, kind of the epitome of the moment, or not as something

entirely unprecedented, but as something that we do have the tools to understand, whether those tools are coming from 2,000 years ago, whether they're coming from how we read Pliny — to, you know, 20th century theorists, to 18th century, to a 17th century poem or something.

I think in the next couple of months, there's a lot of things that make me excited. I'm hoping that whatever form Commencement takes is — I'm really looking forward to that, whether it's a digital ceremony or something where I'm at home with my parents, or if it's something later in the summer — I'm really looking forward to coming up with new ways to think about — rethink a lot of the Princeton traditions that I was hoping to participate in, whether that's, you know, saying goodbye to people in the clubs and activities that I was doing over, like, a big Zoom call, or taking a photo of my thesis at home — because now I'm finishing it at home rather than on campus — that was something I was really looking forward to.

And a lot of the student groups that I'm in, we're talking just as much, and even though we don't have actual on-campus events, we've been trying to really cultivate that camaraderie, which has been really great. And of course, I have all of my Princeton stuff here, I have all of my, you know, T-shirts and orange stuff, and I will still continue to wear it.

And I think at the end of the day, maybe this will just make the reunions that I do end up going to all the more special and all the more exciting. Because Princeton is never — has never just been about that physical space, it's always been about the, kind of, state of mind and the community that exists outside of the walls of the campus.

And I still — I'm still looking forward to making memories at the physical site of Princeton, but I guess this small corner of my bedroom — where I have been, you know, the quietest place in my house, where I have been “making Princeton” — is also sort of, you know, its own, kind of, very small campus.

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