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# LET'S DECLARE A PANDEMIC AMNESTY

We need to forgive one another for what we did and said when  
we were in the dark about COVID.

By Emily Oster



Katie Martin / The Atlantic; Paolo Veronese; Getty

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In April 2020, with nothing else to do, my family took an enormous number of hikes. We all wore cloth masks that I had made myself. We had a family hand signal, which the person in the front would use if someone was approaching on the trail and we needed to put on our masks. Once, when another child got too close to my then-4-year-old son on a bridge, he yelled at her “SOCIAL DISTANCING!”

These precautions were totally misguided. In April 2020, no one got the coronavirus from passing someone else hiking. Outdoor transmission was vanishingly rare. Our cloth masks made out of old bandanas wouldn't have done anything, anyway. But the thing is: *We didn't know.*

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I have been reflecting on this lack of knowledge thanks to a class I'm co-teaching at Brown University on COVID. We've spent several lectures reliving the first year of the pandemic, discussing

the many important choices we had to make under conditions of tremendous uncertainty.

Some of these choices turned out better than others. To take an example close to my own work, there is an emerging (if not universal) consensus that schools in the U.S. were closed for too long: The health risks of in-school spread were relatively low, whereas the costs to students' well-being and educational progress were high. The latest figures on learning loss are alarming. But in spring and summer 2020, we had only glimmers of information. Reasonable people—people who cared about children and teachers—advocated on both sides of the reopening debate.

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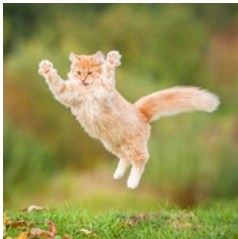
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Another example: When the vaccines came out, we lacked definitive data on the relative efficacies of the Johnson & Johnson shot versus the mRNA options from Pfizer and Moderna. The mRNA vaccines have won out. But at the time, many people in public health were either neutral or expressed a J&J preference. This misstep wasn't nefarious. It was the result of uncertainty.

Obviously *some* people intended to mislead and made wildly irresponsible claims. Remember when the public-health community had to spend a lot of time and resources urging Americans not to inject themselves with bleach? That was bad. Misinformation was, and remains, a huge problem. But most errors were made by people who were working in earnest for the good of society.

Given the amount of uncertainty, almost every position was taken on every topic. And on every topic, someone was eventually proved right, and someone else was proved wrong. In some instances, the right people were right for the wrong reasons. In other instances, they had a prescient understanding of the available information.

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The people who got it right, for whatever reason, may want to gloat. Those who got it wrong, for whatever reason, may feel defensive and retrench into a position that doesn't accord with the

facts. All of this gloating and defensiveness continues to gobble up a lot of social energy and to drive the culture wars, especially on the internet. These discussions are heated, unpleasant and, ultimately, unproductive. In the face of so much uncertainty, getting something right had a hefty element of luck. And, similarly, getting something wrong wasn't a moral failing. Treating pandemic choices as a scorecard on which some people racked up more points than others is preventing us from moving forward.

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We have to put these fights aside and declare a pandemic amnesty. We can leave out the willful purveyors of actual misinformation while forgiving the hard calls that people had no choice but to make with imperfect knowledge. Los Angeles County closed its beaches in summer 2020. Ex post facto, this makes no more sense than my family's masked hiking trips. But we need to learn from our mistakes and then let them go. We need to forgive the attacks, too. Because I thought schools should reopen and argued that kids as a group were not at high risk, I was called a "teacher killer" and a "*génocidaire*." It wasn't pleasant, but feelings were high. And I certainly don't need to dissect and rehash that time for the rest of my days.

Moving on is crucial now, because the pandemic created many problems that we still need to solve.

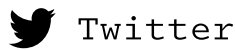
Student test scores have shown historic declines, more so in math than in reading, and more so for students who were disadvantaged at the start. We need to collect data, experiment, and invest. Is high-dosage tutoring more or less cost-effective than extended school years? Why have some states recovered faster than others? We should focus on questions like these, because answering them is how we will help our children recover.

Many people have neglected their health care over the past several years. Notably, routine vaccination rates for children (for measles, pertussis, etc.) are way down. Rather than debating the role that messaging about COVID vaccines had in this decline, we need to put all our energy into bringing these rates back up. Pediatricians and public-health officials will need to work together on community outreach, and politicians will need to consider school mandates.

The standard saying is that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. But dwelling on the mistakes of history can lead to a repetitive doom loop as well. Let's acknowledge that we made complicated choices in the face of deep uncertainty, and then try to work together to build back and move forward.



Emily Oster is an economist at Brown University. She is the author of *The Family Firm: A Data-Driven Guide to Better Decision Making in the Early School Years* and *Expecting Better: Why the Conventional Pregnancy Wisdom Is Wrong—and What You Really Need to Know*.



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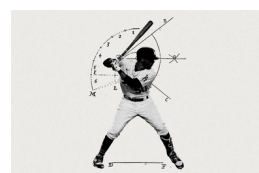
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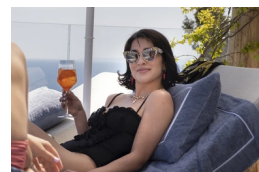
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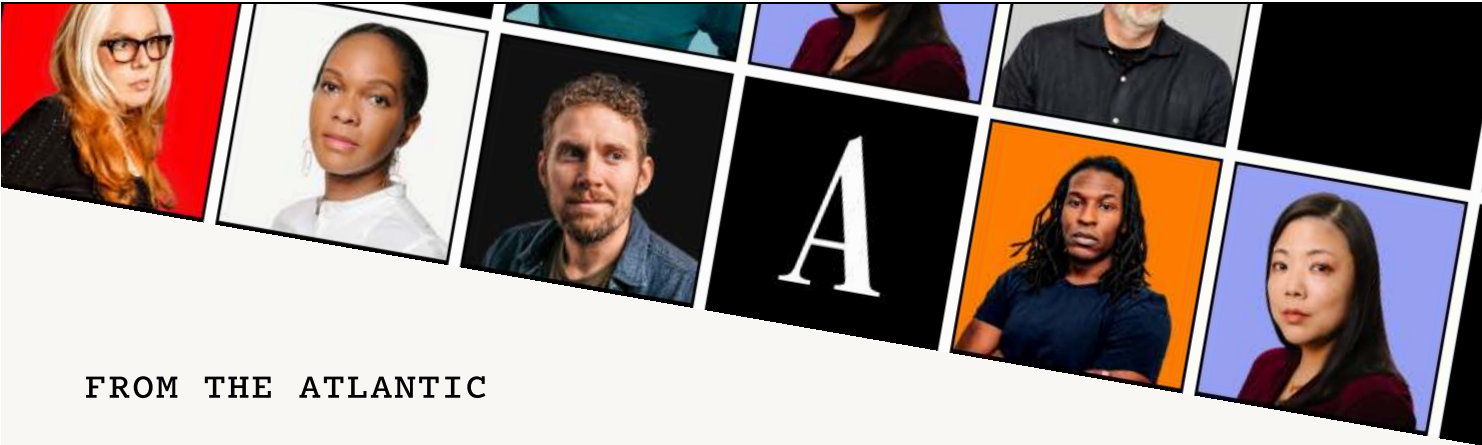
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