Six years earlier, I had left Mexico to pursue my Ph.D. in Europe. I knew the move would bring countless career benefits, including improving my English and having the opportunity to perform world-class science in an international environment. As I finished my degree, my Ph.D. adviser encouraged me to pursue training in the United States to further broaden my scientific horizons. That would mean moving away from my partner—a Ph.D. student in Switzerland—but we figured we could visit each other regularly and would manage to be in the same place in a few years.

In March, I was excited to spend a week back in Switzerland, meeting with collaborators and seeing my partner. COVID-19 was on my radar, and I used a mask and hand sanitizer regularly. Then, halfway through the week, the U.S. government announced that noncitizens coming from much of Europe would not be allowed to enter the country—starting 3 days before I was scheduled to return.

The ban was only supposed to last for 30 days, and my advisers were fine with me working remotely, so I changed my flight accordingly. I kept busy with reading, writing, reviewing, and organizing my summer field experiments, assuming that I would be back in the United States and everything would be normal again.

But as time wore on, it became clear that things would not be going back to normal any time soon. My field experiments were canceled. I called various government offices to ask when the ban would be lifted, but nobody knew. Still, I needed to get back eventually—after all, I had only brought 1 week's worth of belongings with me. An official suggested that a route via Canada or Mexico was my only option, though I would have to quarantine for 14 days in either country before I would be allowed to re-enter the United States.

Mexico was the obvious choice, but I thought it was an absurd idea. I would have to quarantine with my family, and getting to them would require taking three flights and passing through four airports. Why risk exposing myself to the virus and endangering my relatives?

But in June, I got an email from my university's office of international services that forced my decision. It warned of the likely release of a White House executive order that would block some work and student visa holders from re-entering the country. The email encouraged any recipients who were abroad to return as soon as possible. Less than a week later, I was flying to Mexico.

Five days after my arrival, my parents, brothers, and I started to feel sick with fevers, weakness, and joint pain. By the second week, the original symptoms disappeared, but I couldn’t smell or taste anything, and my lungs felt odd. Luckily, our cases were relatively mild. After about a month, I was recovered enough to safely travel again.

When I finally got back to the United States, I couldn’t help but ask myself, “Was all this worth it?” I’m now about 1 year into what is supposed to be a 2-year position. But depending on what happens with the pandemic and the U.S. election, I may decide to leave early. I’m not sure exactly where I would go, but I don’t want to stay in a country where I am not valued despite working, paying my taxes, and fulfilling my responsibilities to my community. Moving around the world has offered a lot of advantages, but it also comes with costs. These days, those costs may have become too high.

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A pandemic journey
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Science 370 (6513), 258.
DOI: 10.1126/science.370.6513.258