

My pandemic comfort viewing

## Three TV shows and movies that have combated loneliness and brought welcome distraction

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue



FRAGILE IDEAL: In *Community*, Troy (Donald Glover) and the rest of the study group at Greendale Community College express a wild vision of diversity for in-person learning. (JORDIN ALTHAUS / NBC)

Isolation during this pandemic is a paradox. On the one hand, I find myself more distracted than ever. “Pandemic brain is worse than pregnancy brain,” a close friend said, as we commiserated about forgetting ordinary words or getting sidetracked by five different projects on our way to do some small task.

On the other hand, the world has slowed down. The rush of daily life has slowed to the movement of four bodies through one small apartment.

With this combination of distraction and release, I find myself rewatching movies and TV shows that bring me joy, ease my sense of loneliness, or help me feel my way to insights I need beyond the onslaught of the daily news. Here are three shows or movies that are filling my screen and calming my distracted mind.

One of the first movies I craved rewatching in quarantine was *Casablanca*. The 1942 film, directed by Michael Curtiz, is set in the eponymous Moroccan city under the control of Vichy French and Nazi German officials. It takes place mostly at a popular bar owned by American Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart). Once an idealistic soldier in the Spanish Civil War (fighting for the Republicans) and a gun runner for the Ethiopians in their fight against Italian fascists, Rick has left his radical political days behind after being betrayed by his one true love, Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman).

Ilsa shows up at Rick's bar with her husband, a Czech resistance fighter who is wanted by the Nazis; romance and moral conflict ensue. There are flashbacks to love-stricken days in Paris and fraught speeches about true love and betrayal. In the end, however, Rick and Ilsa both choose against their immediate desires to support the Allied cause.

The whole movie is tinged with wartime propaganda—it was released just as the Allies invaded North Africa—and hazy with melodrama. But the idea of a unified national response to crisis—framed in terms of sacrifice and moral commitment—swept me off my feet. Well, that plus Humphrey Bogart smirking in a tuxedo.

With 144 episodes spread out over seven seasons (1997–2003), rewatching Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is one of those summer-vacation-has-been-canceled undertakings. But there is no time like the present to delve into the story of the Slayer, the one girl in each generation born with the power to fight supernatural evil and save the world (on repeat).

The first season literalizes common teenage crises into supernatural monsters to be defeated: your overbearing mother turns out to be a witch; the first boy you love turns into an evil demon the first time you have sex. But as the seven seasons progress, the show's exploration of sex, love, friendship, feminism, and family are rich and nuanced without ever getting preachy.

The metatheme of all seven seasons is power: What constitutes it? Who can wield it? Can it effectively be shared without being diluted? The series finale offers the most compelling vision of a Spirit-filled eschatology I've ever seen imagined in fiction, and rewatching it reminded me how much I want to live in the vision of power sharing this show imagines. I consider it one of my tasks as a college professor to get a new generation to watch this show, so consider this an online learning assignment.

Dan Harmon's comedy series *Community* (2009–15) drives home what a paltry substitute online education is for the beautiful, chaotic jumble of learning in person. All the main characters have ended up at Greendale, the fictional Colorado community college at the center of the show, because they can't afford or can't get into a traditional four-year college.

Troy (Donald Glover) was a promising football quarterback who broke both shoulders doing a keg flip in his senior year, blowing his college scholarship. Jeff (Joel McHale) is a lawyer disbarred for faking his bachelor's degree who enrolls to get his career back. Annie (Alison Brie) enrolls after dropping out of high school with an Adderall addiction. Shirley (Yvette Nicole Brown) is a middle-aged single mom and devoted Christian who is finally earning her degree. The students form an ad hoc study group that evolves into a chosen family.

The show imagines higher education as the last real place of democratic connection, where the classroom and the library provide a neutral ground for students from radically different backgrounds to find common cause. It's a fragile ideal, and it's partially a fiction. But as most professors around the country prepare for an uncertain fall of "flexible hybrid learning environments," I need the vision *Community* nurtures.

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