



The Way We Live Now

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Abstract This is a personal account of one man's experience of the months during which COVID-19 spread in Australia. Though personal, it aims to also be representative, so that readers will find in it reflections of their own experiences. Various social incidents are described, some in which social distancing is involved. The altering states of the author's mind as time passes are carefully described in sequence, and the impact of continued anxiety and isolation on his mental well-being is presented as a form of madness, in one dramatic incident.

Keywords Doldrums · Epidemic · Madness · Virus · Flu · COVID-19

Calm. I drive slowly down towards the main road, where I have to turn right. Quiet. It's a difficult turn usually, cars coming from both directions, no traffic lights. You have to be careful. But this morning there's nothing in sight. I drive smoothly across and there's the road, the white ribbon in the centre lit up by the sun as it goes sweeping up the hill into the distance. No sign of a single vehicle going either way. I thought, it must have been like this in the thirties, no-one about, nothing to be done hastily, frantically, anxiously. Instead all this space and stillness. I felt release, the freedom from the present was almost magical.

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I know why the road is empty of course. It's mid-March in the year two thousand and twenty, and no-one is going out if they can avoid it. We've been told to stay at home, and because we're obedient citizens, but more because we're anxious, and frightened, we obey. We stay at home because we are afraid of meeting someone else who might be carrying the virus. I'm driving early to the supermarket because that's one of the few journeys you're allowed to take, to get provisions, to survive.

The virus. Everyone knows about the virus. We don't know much about what the virus is, what it could possibly look like, how it could possibly do what it—apparently—does, but we've heard about it, and we're nonplussed because the we hear on the radio and see on the TV repeated news bulletins about the virus, which tell us to be afraid, because this is something we've never imagined could happen before, and because if we don't there will possibly be many thousands of deaths.

I've seen a virus at the Wellcome Medical Museum in London. It was about twenty centimetres long, glass, glittering, with hundreds of complicated facets, lying on a soft pad, and—if my memory serves me—it was precisely a million times bigger than the source of the glass-blower's inspiration. And it was confusing too, because another virus was glittering next to it, which instead of lying on its side, sat, a spiky ball, its surface evil with projectiles, and much more threatening. It too was a million times larger than its (shall I say?) prototype. They were beautiful, these objects, made beautiful to inform and amaze, as they did. I was happy, like most people, to live in ignorance of quite what a virus was,

and how it works, and I think there also was a glass bacteria in the display alongside. I thought the bacteria didn't look so alarming, but that was all I knew, if I knew anything, about their difference.

We all knew about the flu, and some of us had heard of SARS. I had framed an old photograph taken about 1915 of a family group (stiff and unsmiling, of course): three children, father, mother, and grandparents. They were my distant Latvian relatives, and the grandmother was wearing a peasant dress and scarf. I have kept the picture because two of those children, the two smallest children, and their mother who stands behind them, were not much later to be victims of the flu epidemic of 1919 that killed many millions more. The older girl was consigned to the unkind care of her grandparents. I'm not sure whether we would call that pandemic "the flu" now.

I think most people were keen to know more about this frightening new virus, which bewilderingly changed its name, but they had instead to make do with information about COVID-19's spread. We had seen people dying in the street in Wuhan, but we were informed mostly with statistics and graphs and repeated injunctions to stay indoors at home. The oxymoronic term "social distancing" was endlessly repeated. A person might well have this disease without symptoms and pass it onto you; you might shake your neighbour's hand and be infected by their hands or their breath. You were not to shake hands, hug, or kiss. You were to stand one and a half metres away from other human beings. No-one I know has ever supposed that this was a hoax, nor until recently have the conspiracy theorists got to work, but neither had anyone envisaged a democratic society that put such constraints on its citizens' liberty.

So we all stayed at home, and were not allowed out, only to drive for "essentials" or essential services. This meant that even in your family you stayed apart. My daughter took the rules very seriously and for a while would not allow me near her. I wanted to see my young grandchildren, three and six, who live with their parents in Preston, a drive away. My son was wary of this. He didn't want me caught out driving and risk a hefty fine. I saw the children through the front window, waving energetically at me. I waved energetically back. I couldn't talk to them; I knew they were saying something but couldn't make it out at all. Later we saw them on Facetime, which was something. No-one wanted to admit the psychological cost of these restrictions, which I think we accepted because they seemed our only defence.

But there was a cost. I can only speak for myself, but after the calm came something else. Most of us elderly folk, if we could, compensated for the loneliness by contacting our friends by email or other means like "Zoom." I suppose we shared our loneliness with each other. But despite the optimism, there is an enormous difference between staring at a face and being in the presence of a person. We said we were okay, or "managing" or "coping," a term I've always felt suspicious about because though it seems to say "I'm doing quite well in a difficult situation" actually has an undertow meaning "I'm feeling unhappy and—actually—rather desperate." I found, and find, living in solitude changed not just my mood but with that my whole view of the world.

How shall I put this? It wasn't only the solitariness; it was partly the world outside that solitariness, the grimness of the news, insistently grim with virtually every report. I did still see people, at the shops—I bought books for my grandchildren for Easter and stood with a few other customers scattered on the pavement outside the Bookshop's open door. The manager, staying his distance away from us, brought out an armful of volumes he thought might be suitable. He showed some to me but I was not to turn the pages. One lady found something she wanted, and we were all pleased at her luck. There was a fleeting camaraderie and good-humour as we chatted a bit about the oddity and uniqueness of the new situation. There was space between us.

I searched for words to express the condition that I and virtually everyone else was now in: stuck in our houses, huts, or apartments all over the world. I tried "limbo," "Hades," "Purgatory" before I settled on "the doldrums," which evoked a sailing ship helplessly adrift with no wind and no waves strong enough to impel it onward. This might seem jocular, but it brought together the many things I felt: that there had been calm, but that calm was in fact more like being "becalmed," miserable, frustrated, stuck in one lonely isolated place. Inertia.

When I was alone, I began to feel that I had become another person. I do not believe in God, but it seemed as if this was a world without God. How could I have that thought without believing? Some lines from the *Messiah* kept running in my mind: "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people." I was not afraid of dying, nor for my family, but I did feel as though darkness in the form of this tiny invisible agent, so tiny that it could be expelled in breath, was present everywhere. I knew that "the Lord" who arises in the oratorio

to bring light would not arise. I did odd jobs around the house and garden, to occupy myself but all the time thinking how hopeless it was. Unknown to myself my forced inertia was breeding anger.

And then I went mad. I have thought and written about that word “mad” —the three Anglo-Saxon letters that we think covers both fierce anger and insanity. I had become convinced that madness was usually the result of a pathogen, though I have no qualifications at all in this field. (I think also that the word should be used sparingly.) My madness took the form of a sudden, fierce eruption. I will not, and in fact can’t, give details, except that the physical component of my wrath was vented on a piece of furniture—a reading lamp thrown to the ground and then trampled on and smashed, breaking the shade and the light globe into a thousand glass fragments. There were witnesses to this violent act, which was accompanied by a torrent of violent verbal despair.

To say that I could not understand what had happened would also be evasive. I was not “myself.” Why was I not “myself”? How could I not be myself? My way of understanding it now is that I could not be this

apparently single, isolate thing, “myself,” by myself. The truth I think is that it is not solitude but confinement that destroys the structure of a life, that leads to mental distress and worse.

It is now, as I write, April 18. I’ve been shopping. There are more cars on the roads. That seems unwise and threatening: I don’t want us to return to normal, not just yet. I do not know whether this personal account of my experience of two months of the COVID-19 virus pandemic will strike a chord in other people. It’s just one person’s thoughts and feelings, and that’s one who hasn’t suffered as lots of others have suffered. But I think it might. Many people will be writing as I have, taking notes, filming, keeping diaries. As William Blake wrote “truth exists in minute particulars,” and that’s how the truth of this time will be known to the future.

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