

Walking In A Time of Virus: Thinking With Uncertainty For Companion

Phil Smith

A slight increase in the traffic, an encounter with a clearly unsettled man clutching a hammer and large plastic evidence bags on an “errand for the police”, on the BBC News there are tentative public proposals for easing ‘lockdown’, a man yells abuse during the Thursday applause, a growing sense of my own apprehension about the return of contrails and air pollution. It feels as though we have entered a new phase of the Time of Virus in the UK, when hope romances melancholy. Are we soon to return to ‘normal’? Will we live with some version of lockdown for years to come?

In the moment of suspension, we are subjected to heady combinations of optimism and dread. If we can avoid succumbing to them, there may be creative ways to navigate through the next days and weeks. Although uncertainty is less straightforward than fear, it can be a beginning for new ways of being. Even the mixed messages of media and officialdom, in a time of such radical uncertainty as this, may be just the fluid map we need.

Having spent the last seven weeks practising social distancing in an unfolding walking practice, varying daily exercise from brief saunters to longer wanders, I have been fortunate to observe how others have been operating in my city, and in surrounding villages, in edgelands and along country footpaths, on once busy and now quiet roads and through the windows of houses. I have listened to the birds, watched the skies and clouds – and the procession of Elon Musk’s satellite’s passing by The Plough – attended to the burgeoning plant life and noted the stolid ruins of old redundant industries and the locked properties of recently closed businesses.

By walking, we rub up against things. If we keep our senses open and place ourselves at the mercy of the terrain, things happen, sensations arise. There are momentary discomforts – I didn’t particularly enjoy being shouted at and I had to talk my way carefully through the encounter with the man with the hammer – but they are small repayments for the privilege of immersing in a world that feels, for a while, to be quieter and more open to the creatively paradoxical than it has been for a long while.

My prevailing sense is that the Time of Virus is not a ‘one-off’. Operating invisibly, I fancy it is a micro-herald for future shocks. An early chance to dispense with expectations of ‘normal’ and get ready not for a single ‘new normal’ but for living with anomalies, as the ecology and climate we have hyper-stimulated turns on us in its excitement, hyper-acceleration turns benign productions into unstable compounds, and psyches recoil from a world of representations as it floats away from the things it represents.

While these may be the common crises to come, we have no reason to minimise the unevenness of how we will experience them; or how we are experiencing the present pandemic for that matter. That unevenness itself has meaning and lessons for the future. For those of us so far fortunate to be distanced observers, we have an opportunity, and perhaps the obligation for some deep reflection on subjects we previously thought resolved or best put aside for another day. (Survivors will have their own reflections.) As we translate our daily exercise allowance imaginatively, there are some themes on which we might usefully – perhaps necessarily – contemplate; about how we might comport ourselves in the near future.

Here are a few that have stood forward to me.

The Body – though the virus is taking life away from many, its arrival has also brought an opportunity for many to retake their bodies. The disappearance of planes from the sky and the quietness of the streets have returned a focus to the body as the key agent of mobility. I see far more people out walking, cycling and running. Each venturing out can be an opportunity to contemplate – while in motion – how our bodies are the criterion of our mobility; away from the stasis of home and (for most) work. To travel by body – wheeling ourselves, riding a horse, wandering – we become the connection between where we came from and where we arrive. We see more

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consequences, we suffer more encounters, we touch and jump borders, we risk slippery fords and cattle grids, we see the ruins of histories and ecologies and not just read about them. For all its superior speed and mileage, a body moved mechanically has not travelled; a plane ride may change our location, but it also misplaces us. 'Lockdown', ironically, is a chance for us to place ourselves; taking us to spaces and things that reach out in need of our bodies' attentions; cobbled back lanes of a parallel city, bluebell-covered Iron Age walls ringing an enclosure of buttercups, a pile of ferrous slag beside a river left behind by a long defunct industry, a clootie-bedecked thorn tree in a park. Rather than rush through inside our life-monologue we can dialogue through our bodies with where we live.

Separation and Connectivity – the unevenness of experience is something we can use creatively for the future. While collective acts – the rainbows and STAY HOME signs fading in front windows or Thursday applause – have been useful acts of solidarity, they can also become unhelpful simplifications of complex new relations unfolding. Out in the streets and on the footpaths each day I see a sophisticated choreography of separation and connectivity; a novel blend of friendliness and distance. I see people becoming adept at representing what cannot be present by a shaping of the gaps. This painterly acknowledgement of negative space is one of the disruptions or V-effects of the Virus, *die Verfrempesteffekt* (where *pest* = plague), and it reveals unexpected processes. The Virus causes a cultural stutter or judder – certain products of the 'creative' and entertainment industries are exposed as fabricating desires rather than gratifying them; without football, there is less desire for it, some children still wear replica shirts, but few adults – the usual order of events is disrupted.

We are not 'all in this together'. Partly for reasons of poverty, overcrowding, concentration of the vulnerable elderly and those who perform the most risky key work. Partly for the obvious reason that contagion-suppression means we cannot all be 'together'. That may be a short-term obligation to prevent a spike; it may become a much longer term set of behaviours for which we need to rethink our notions of division. Whichever, it is a crucial opportunity to rethink our priorities and balances of separateness and connection. How, for example, do we balance a capacity to connect globally by air travel or digital technology with the consequences of disconnection from any place, near or far? How do we resist herd behaviours that trade climate-destroying access to select exotic destinations for de-sensitisation to the immediate and local. On my daily exercises, from the suburbs of what is generally accounted (mostly by those who don't know it) an unglamorous city, I have wandered an abandoned tramway through a forest of giant larch mixed with newer green leaf trees, stood at the base of towering gorges, circumambulated the moated perimeter of a medieval church that bears all the marks of the Knights Hospitaller of St John (precursors of today's St John's Ambulance Brigade), stumbled upon an 'apocalypse village' used by the Royal Navy to 'gameplay' disaster scenarios and within a working class estate found a spring and cliff that may explain its name derivation from a knucker's hole or water wrym's lair. All of these are new discoveries for me, and constitute a deepening intensity of connection with the city and its hinterland, requiring very little mechanical travel.

In the late 1950s and into the 1960s a new artform emerged, called the Happening. It remains largely misrepresented as a wholly improvised confection of arbitrary acts and gestures and visual effects. In fact Happenings were not spontaneous, but carefully planned around specific themes and meticulously structured. The organisers created compartments of time and space and allotted these to different artists or performers; within the constraints of the structure the artists and performers were free to determine what their response to the themes would be. The spontaneity arose through the unexpected and unplanned juxtapositions of the different compartments. There was separation through compartmentalisation, but there was also connectivity as meanings leapt from one compartment to another and were changed in the process. This is an old model, but it may be time to renew it (indeed there are hints of it in online distanced performances) as one we can use to navigate safely but creatively. So, in contrast to a world in which our aspiration is to move rapidly and globally via the non-spaces of airports while consuming an increasingly homogenised and disembodied culture, we will more often remain physically within localised compartments, while our cultural meanings travel and hybridise more intensely and spontaneously across borders – forming differently shaped possibilities of a World With Virus.

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Death – we suddenly see it. The daily announcement of deaths in hospitals and care homes; the stuffed toys staring mutely from their windows. I am even struck by a certain morbid quality about the chalked instructions to KEEP SMILING. While the impact of Covid-19 will probably mean many thousands of extra deaths in the UK this year, every year we would expect something over half a million. Each year we grieve in families and friendship groups, but we do very little collectively to recognise or value death, to acknowledge that it is a part of life, individual, social and ecological. I saw from the example set by my own mother that dying well – facing death with equanimity and contentment and inviting love – has an immensely deep and lasting impact on the lives of others. Rather than sensationalising death, remarking publicly on it only in its extreme manifestations like murders or accidents, maybe we should keep it far more closely in view. We may need to acknowledge that a life worth living, for all the institutions' fears of insurance claims, is riskier than we imagined.

Part of the deep, and perhaps creative, shock of the pandemic is how it throws into question a secular version of immortality that has quietly permeated so many dominant social assumptions. That we can, and should, go on extending life expectancy by surgical, genetic, dietary, social and chemical interventions; and if all else fails 'upload' ourselves to surrogate organisms or machines. Such ideas, practical and fanciful, fuel an inflated and distorted sense of human selves – 'human exceptionalism' – as beings separate from time and space and from other species and other things. By honouring death when it comes, rather than fruitlessly seeking to put it off forever, we might recognise how it reconnects our bodies to everything else. Then our guiding human impetus is not Progress but Fold; rather than ever going upwards, we go back into the world, under the forest, racing along the rhizomes. Not ascension but reconnection. To die, when we are fortunate to avoid accident or trauma, can be an act and an art, and to do it well is to escape a philosophical millstone that drags us apart from our body and from the world.

One final thought to ponder-wander: Essence. The Virus has posed the radical question 'what is essential?' What trip out is essential? Who is an essential worker? Is 'essential' the same as 'only what is necessary'? Or is there another kind of essence in play; less defined by functionality and more like a stripped-down version of 'what is' that delivers greater intensity by concentration? Given that a huge percentage of the UK economy has closed down and yet there is surprisingly little evidence of social collapse, how many of the 'non-essential' industries and services can justify their consumption of so many resources when they seem to add so little to the GDP (Gross Domestic Pleasure)?

Equally, many powerful men, it turns out, are non-essential. Many low status and ethnically diverse women are essential. New kinds of separation that are not based on class, wealth or power will be necessary to protect the lives of the key workers we depend on; both for their own preciousness and their importance to everybody. This may have to include separating the wealthy from their money; for more egalitarian and collective societies seem to be the ones most capable of creative separation along non-hierarchical lines and resisting capitulation to the hyper-infectiousness of Covid-19.

Finally, within the bounds of responsibility, we can keep moving our bodily and philosophical parameters around; and not squander the sacrifices of social distancing by returning to 'normal'. Remembering that it was 'normal' that got us here in the first place. How, then, do we become an anomalous society? How do we live at odds with the past and inconvenient to assumptions about the future as we come out of lockdown? Our ruling individualistic beliefs and threadbare social rituals are unfit for the purpose of living with the challenges and perils ahead. Covid-19 is just a hint of the consequences of business-as-normal; the ramifications of our next mistake may be far, far worse. Intellectually, I am deeply pessimistic. Yet my everyday experience of walking the remains of old localised trade routes, the sight of long defunct means for intimate distribution begging to be reopened, the burgeoning of the natural world freed from poisoned air and the daily human choreography of separation and connectivity on the pavements fill me with emotional optimism. We do not need to walk away from now, in denial; instead, we can walk with Uncertainty as our companion, our friend.

Phil Smith

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