

My (first) 100 Days of Lockdown

As I tumbled into a voluntary lockdown the week commencing 16th March all the routines of my work and life rapidly disappeared. Potters Bar and District Photographic Society cancelled planned meetings. Photographic Meetups in the city ceased to meet. London Theatres and concert halls closed – we saw our last show on Sunday 22nd March at The Cadogan Hall. The lady sitting in front of me died of coronavirus the following week. The feared virus was closer than I thought.

Life started to revolve around the pleasures of the Daytime TV circus: Lorraine, Dr Hillary, Philip and Holly, Bargain Hunt. Scottish Presser at noon; UK figures at 2pm, and Downing Street Presser at teatime. With liberal dollops of the Italian Zombie Holocaust to scare us into doing our civil duty. And as a nation we tuned in for updates, facts, figures, and became experts on curve flattening, splatting the sombrero and stock piling comestibles.

Fascination for updates and figures created new national heroes, and we hung our ears on every word. Thirty-eight years ago, in a different conflict, one which had just under a thousand fatalities, Brian Hanrahan stood on the flight deck of HMS Illustrious: – “I counted them out, and I counted them all back”. The closest we got to learning the numbers of Harrier jets in the skies over Port Stanley. In the Spring of '82 we had daily press conferences with the lugubriously voiced man at the MOD, Ian McDonald, giving us battle updates in a stable, solemn, yet reassuring delivery. This at a time when for operational reasons information was in short supply and overseas media fuelled by Argentine propaganda.

Today our ‘Faces of Corona’ are Professor Chris Whitty with his slides; curves, 7 day rolling averages and straight to camera look that says, “Trust me – I’m a Doctor”. Not forgetting Sir Patrick Vallance. “Trust me – Its not Rocket Science”. I do miss them when Boris gives them a night off. I need their scientific reassurance. But the more figures we have, the more the media distort those figures to meet their own agendas.

One evening, infuriated by Sky and BBC using figures out of context I emailed one of my contacts at Sky Centre. Then for about 5 days they started reporting deaths per 100.000 of population. Suddenly UK did not have the highest number of deaths in Europe. Ed Conway adjusted the figures to be meaningful and Belgium topped the Coronavirus Death league. First time Belgium had won anything. And good news for us. We were now fourth after Italy and Spain. Losing semi-finalists in the Corona Cup.

That became boring, so Sky then got interested in Testing, and Baroness Dido’s Track ‘n’ Trace. More ‘T’s than a Frankie Howard script. “Titter ye not”

Then ‘Bang’ – we all started making positives out of the negatives. Knitting and Crocheting PPE Masks. A doorstep wave at 6.15 on a Wednesday morning for the Bin Men and we all joined in singing the David Bowie classic ‘Ground Control to Captain Tom, Hurry Up! and get your sponsored walk done’. Churches experimented with forms of remote worship. Easter Sunday Durham Cathedral webcast attracted 3000 visitors. Far more than the Bishop would have had if the building was open. As churches become proficient so the number of web

viewers increased. Church music groups created amazing lockdown orchestras. And with Zoom for socialising we have a window to our new normal, our new future.

In a crisis we turn to faith. For the first time I can remember BBC One was running two and a half hours of Christian worship every Sunday. During the Falklands War a vicar in Plymouth noticed enlarged congregations. Many families of Devonport based servicemen were in churches. Even the Mayor of Plymouth started worshipping. But after victory, as the vicar puts it – “the people reverted to type”, the congregation shrunk back to the usual handful. Back to the ‘Old normal’.

The challenge to the churches today is how to build upon this enthusiasm for faith today and make what we are experiencing the ‘New Normal’. One-meter Plus won’t help.

In the Camera Club we’ve been running our planned competitions with remote judging, using YouTube to engage members. Using the routine of compiling competition entries to keep in touch with the older members. And my London photographic group has been running weekly competitions, mentoring, reviewing portfolios, preparing mood boards and story boards for shoots that are still pie in the sky. Above all having a jolly good laugh through a very lively and welcoming WhatsApp group. During lockdown our group membership increased by over 100. I’ve tempted two of them to join PBPS. These new friends are made to feel welcome and engaged through our 24/7 banter and picture sharing on WhatsApp and I’m looking forward to meeting these new members when government advice allows.

When do we return to our theatres? One-meter Plus won’t help The Bard. Thousands of incredibly skilled artists, musicians, technicians and Ice Cream vendors are without income. The ‘Ghost Lights’ are the only lamps to glow. Like freelancers in TV, these stage folk are not supported by the government safety-net schemes. With TV Networks running on skeleton staff, automation, machine intelligence and an acceptance of falling standards the new normal will be challenging for those in entertainment where break-even was tight anyway.

But being locked down gave us more family time. Busy doing nothing time. Lorraine, Philip and Holly time. I watched the last Star Wars Trilogy and an Anime series “One Piece” with Dan, and with Jackie and Penny avidly watched the SpaceX Crew Dragon launch on 30th May and automated ISS docking. Like Apollo all over again. The onboard cameras were from Star Wars and the return to earth booster landing to the second on a drone-ship named “Do you still love me?” was straight out of a Netflix Romcom.

But even now, travelling at 7 miles a second circling 400km above us, on the ISS in the new normal there’s social distancing and Chinese Astronauts are banned from visiting. No Crispy Aromatic Duck in space while all the restaurants are closed. That’s Rocket science Sir Patrick!

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