

Life

A lexicon of Life & Arts

Most **in-flight** magazines pitch to their advertisers on the basis of the number of passengers
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Genetic analysis of viral **mutations** suggests that humans were first infected in November
Books essay, page 8

Kanye West's **phantasmic** tilt for the presidency must rank among the most ill-conceived episodes of celebrity activism
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The reflections in Kapoor's 'Sky Mirror' conjure up an almost **filmic** parade of optical illusions
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We once believed the busy social life a sign of success, spurred on by visual displays of **hedonistic** nights out on Instagram
Joy Lo Dico, back page

I think of myself as resilient and tenacious. I made it to Harvard from a crowded Brooklyn public high school. I was a waitress and a house cleaner before I was a chaired professor. This has always reassured me: I think of myself as my own back-up. Covid-19 in America challenged me.

First, there was an intimate challenge. Solitude. I built a career arguing that social media undermines our capacity for solitude, a precious thing. Not just for what it brings us in terms of possibilities for creativity. But also because it is so necessary for intimacy with others.

I thought I had a gift for solitude. I'd worked on it. Through psychoanalysis, yes, and more habitually, as a writer and ethnographer, professionally trained to stand a bit apart. The alone time of the pandemic was a stricter lover. What I had mastered was how to be alone in the hum of a busy life.

Also, solitude and self-reflection came easily when I wasn't frightened. The pandemic struck when I was feeling young for my 71 years. I was back from a fitness holiday and was finishing a new book. And then, suddenly, my age was the age of the Covid-vulnerable. My migraines, under control for many years, thundered back. My apartment building had sensible rules that now worked as migraine triggers. No visitors. One person in the elevator at a time. Disinfect before and after every ride. Masks and gloves. If you had a delivery, your doorbell would ring. You would wait 30 seconds so that the porter would be gone before you opened the door. Ghosts. Amazon had no hand sanitiser or Clorox or masks. I stopped going out.

I have a summer house on the sea, a wooden cottage with no heat. My daughter and her husband, New Yorkers, packed a bag, bought some extra space heaters, and drove out.

Was it Rebecca, working from home, cooking dinner? Was it living in my house, or Ben, lighting a fire in the morning, or the ritual of preparing my classes on the large table facing the sea? Was it the sound of the waves, always? I settled down.

I was no longer worried about getting sick. But as my first fears subsided, Covid-19 presented me with a new challenge. Less intimate, more political. We are on a path where the irrational and rational seem oddly matched, where science and lack of reason each have their team.

It had been reassuring to trust my employer MIT's response to the Covid-19 threat. There is a crisis. We follow the science. We put no one at risk. After a professional lifetime of criticising the overzealous promotion of online education – I always think that the most significant mentorship takes place with a professor in the room – I set myself the task of becoming as competent an online educator as I could possibly be.

Then, incredulous, I saw my government push scientists to the side. Whether people wore masks became a political statement. People claimed to be "tired" of confinement. Public messaging became odd, sometimes literal non-sense. The economy could not tolerate what the virus was telling



Hossein Fatemi/Panos Pictures

Dreams of an American Eden

EAST COAST DIARY

SHERRY TURKLE



Read this week's column by **Simon Kuper**, page 15

us. I spoke to friends in France and Germany. They were confident in their country's test and trace plans for the summer. My country went into summer with no plans, only incoherent ideas.

I checked my sense of confusion with American friends. I wasn't alone. Everyone seemed to be waiting to see what their employers would ask of them before figuring out how to respond. As summer began, many parts of the country reopened, even as Covid-19 cases were increasing. The virus came roaring back. Airlines opened up service, with guidelines advising passengers to wear masks – but airline personnel had been told not to be confrontational. Masks became a political issue. Now, the White House, darkly, is undermining the reputation of its chief epidemiologist, seemingly because he has told the truth about the reality we face.

What I suffer from now is something I didn't anticipate: Covid-19 political trauma. Even though the US long ago turned away from a fact-based response to the environmental crisis and every day allows the pollution of its drinking water and air, I thought we would behave differently faced with a

plague-style public health threat. In retrospect, my surprise seems naive.

But I understand it. It's a legacy of being a child who grew up with the fear of polio. I remember my grandmother's terror every summer. And mine when she made a contraption to secure the upper casement windows in my bedroom so

Liminal times, periods of disorder where old rules don't work, are also moments when something new can be born

that I could sleep with my head outdoors during polio season. It was, after all, a potential guillotine, secured by clothespins. Despite being a child of the 1960s, with all of the scepticism that brought, I grew up believing that the government saved my life in 1955 when it brought the Salk vaccine to all American school children.

I was brought back to that state of mind when, on the recommendation of the historian Jill Lepore, I listened to tapes of Hubert Humphrey, made when he

was mayor of Minneapolis in the summer of 1946. At the time, there was a polio epidemic and local officials had called for a voluntary quarantine, mainly aimed at children, most vulnerable to polio. There would be no swimming pools, no summer camps, no baseball. Humphrey was reading children the Sunday comics to help keep them indoors on the weekend. I had a moment of nostalgia – the government on the side of your health.

Then, on that same Minneapolis website, I stumbled across a story from 1931 about a black family (the father was a first world war veteran) who had purchased a house in an all-white neighbourhood. Night after night, police tried to protect that family from an angry white mob. From the newspaper reports, it seemed that from early on, the black man promised he would sell his house; his only demand was to prove that he had the right to buy it. Of course, there is no American Eden.

So, what Covid-19 brought to me was the depth of America's ability to deny science when it is not politically expedient. Then the murder of George Floyd brought a historic, tragic lesson that we have refused to learn.

I am an activist, a progressive, and afraid to be in crowds just as my country faces historic protests and a brush with authoritarianism more serious than any I have seen in my lifetime. Half of our elected officials and Supreme Court defend where we are. One of our political parties will renominate an impeached president who holds democracy and American lives in contempt.

Social media, my career-long object of study, plays a complex and divisive role in this drama. It allowed the world to watch a real-time lynching, real-time police brutality, and a national and now international movement for social justice. Even as it publishes a steady stream of lies about public health, political protest, and the facts of every matter. Facebook says it has the right to publish falsehoods and not tag them as such.

The anthropologist Victor Turner talked of liminal times, periods of disorder where old rules don't work, and new ones haven't been written. Traditionally, history has looked at these chaotic times and only seen social pathology. In the 1970s, I studied with Turner, who trained me to see something else: moments when something new can be born. He spoke of *communitas*. Boundaries between people dissolve and they see each other not in their social roles, but as human beings.

When the government no longer plays by the rules, people want more than a return to order. My generation of protest made dust fly and left the system intact. Today, we hear echoes of the pandemic of 1918, the protests of 1968, and for me, the rise of fascism in 1938. We are offered the chance of something genuinely new coming out of the crucible of our current disorder.

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Welcome to the 15-minute city

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four months I was struggling to stay patient, in spite of the strangely Mediterranean weather.

On the basis of the lockdown experience, there are aspects of a "15-minute city" that I would struggle to welcome – not least an overfamiliarity with one landscape, even if Moreno's concept also includes ideas to promote a greater "amour des lieux", or attachment to place, with pop-up galleries in markets and more city gardens.

The friction between personal confinement and public benefit made me think back to *The Glasgow Effect*, a book published last year by Ellie Harrison, an artist who tried to explore the relationship between literal mobility, the environment and social mobility by staying in Glasgow for an entire year and only travelling by bike.

The project, for various reasons, was wildly unpopular in its test-bed city. To those who could not afford to leave Glasgow in any scenario, Harrison's Creative Scotland-funded "lockdown" seemed in poor taste. But it touched on an interesting question: is the ability to move about and switch locations integral to advancement? Is staying in one place the same thing as being stuck in another sense?

Many people may accept a long commute could be necessary for a fulfilling job, but it is possible to achieve significant changes in circumstance without moving to a new city. Peter Lampl, founder and chairman of The Sutton Trust, which campaigns for social

mobility, points to recent research with the LSE that challenges the narrative that "those who are willing and able to move to areas where the opportunities are will reap the highest rewards".

London's place in the popular imagination as the city where people "make it" is not quite the full picture, according to Lampl. He notes, "While London since the 1980s has cemented its position as the epicentre of the elites, we found that socially mobile people tend to build their careers near to where they grew up. The Dick Whittington vision of moving to the capital to move up in the world is largely a myth. Those that benefit most from opportunities in London were either born there or are the economically privileged from other parts of the country."

In this context, Lampl says, "The success of working from home during the lockdown has the potential to widen access to opportunities."

Though Moreno and others do not prohibit movement beyond the 15-minute mark, the aspiration to contain work within this distance still seems potentially problematic. Not everyone will have the luxury of choosing a home close to their preferred industry, and not everyone will have a home that could double as a long-term office.

Anthony Breach, lead analyst for housing and planning at the Centre for Cities, says that what Hidalgo is doing in Paris is "exciting" but he believes the 15-minute principle "would go against the grain of what we know about city life. Workers want to work in places where

Below: Carlos Moreno; Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo cycling in the city last month. The Sorbonne professor has been influential in the mayor's implementation of pedestrian and bike schemes — Getty Images



land values are high, and live in a place where land value is cheaper. That needs to be factored in; workers will try and exploit that mismatch . . . I think [the coronavirus fallout] will only increase the importance of London."

Part of Breach's reasoning for London as an ever more dominant city is the strength that comes from its specialised, skilled workers being close to one another geographically. Digital home-working will not quite bring a revolution either, Breach says. "There are special qualities about information exchanged face to face which video calls have not been able to replicate. We can observe that demand in the price that people are willing to pay to live and work in London. It means there is something about that city centre and its intangible benefits – Alfred Marshall called it 'something in the air' about 100 years ago."

Marshall, a 19th-century economist, asked why companies from similar industries tended to cluster together

geographically. He concluded that proximity to competitors was a benefit rather than a threat because connections and shared information created a valuable pool of new ideas.

"Historically, with the invention of the telegraph, phone, internet . . . every time there's technological progress people predict we will all be able to work in the countryside. But the attractiveness of city centres only increases; the information that can only be exchanged face to face becomes more valuable in relative terms," Breach says. "There's not enough housing in the countryside either. We don't build many houses in the UK, full stop."

Back in medieval Milan, it was the pious archbishop, Carlo Borromeo, who provided the leadership that saw the city through its bubonic ordeal. He modestly said the recovery came about "not by our prudence, which was caught asleep", but because God himself stepped in.

There is a sense that cities, if not all caught asleep by coronavirus, are mostly waking up sober and in a different place. Moreno says the vision of the 15-minute city is akin to an ancient idea of a "ville vivante" – a living city in which more of life is on a human scale. For this to work, we'd have to celebrate what he calls a "big bang of proximity".

Not quite Alfred Marshall's type of creative proximity, but a nearness and a localness against which other explorations could be offset. It's still hard to imagine, but as a pandemic will teach you, we never know what is coming next.

Natalie Whittle is FT Weekend's development editor



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