

AFTER A FRAUGHT PAUSE

*'...And our singing shall build
In the void's loose field
A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;
We will take our plan
From the new world of man,
And our work shall be called the Promethean.'*

[Percy B. Shelley, *The Pale Stars are Gone*]

It is April 2021 and we appear to be walking slowly, but steadily, to the end of the dark tunnel of a global pandemic. A fraught decade ended with a fraught year in which we lost much more than we gained. The global death toll alone of 3.360.000 makes Covid-19 a hugely significant historical event. We have witnessed unspeakable things. We had to confront human suffering and misery daily. Sick persons became numbers on our television screens and lost souls were converted into terrifying, mind-blowing daily facts. We endured months of isolation, the absence of physical contact with even very close family members and friends, walked in empty streets and noticed business closures and job losses. Surrounded by the piercing sound of ambulances' sirens, we experienced fatigue, mental drainage, loss and deep psychological trauma. In brief, during the past 365 days, life was nothing than a long, tiring and traumatic pause in which more had to be endured than to be acted upon.

We emerge from the shadows so tired and wounded that a natural inclination would be to forget the global pandemic year. Let us focus on the fact that the Covid-19 related restrictions ease and life begins to obtain a semblance of normality. After all, Covid-19 stole enough from us. It would be irrational to allow it to exert even one more day's grip over our reality. We need to break free from its oppression. We need to let go of the past year. Without a doubt, this is what I would like to do.

And yet, I cannot silence an inner voice that calls me to record my thoughts and experiences during the past 365 days. I feel I have to surrender to the proclivity to gather life's fragments under Covid's grip and to preserve them carefully. I cannot fully explain why I wish to collect everything I wrote during the past year into a short volume which, like a time capsule, would remain there, somewhere, safe from oblivion. The thought of reliving past experiences and diving in the moments of loneliness when pouring your thoughts onto paper was the only way to keep your mind sane makes me tremble. As unappealing as this might be, however, I feel a strange obligation (to whom? I wonder) to capture, record, assemble and preserve something of these historical 365 days, something of me in those days, from forgetfulness. It could be the obviousness of a historical event that prompts me to do so. Or perhaps, I need some kind of proof that suffering, anxiety, grief and despair are not solely numbing. They can also be important steps in a journey of discovery and rediscovery. I need a re-affirmation that human beings are not only forced to grow in pain but they can grow in memories too, and can seek a new life and role.

Hence, this volume of collected writings under the title 'Bearing, Reckoning, Belonging in a Year of Covid-19 and Brexit'. In it, I have included a few poems I wrote when prose was impossible when days were so heavy that I was unable to clear the fog. The various pieces were written in different months of the pandemic year. The reader will notice time gaps among them. This is because in some months I could write about the shocking exposure of human frailty on a mass scale and the frightening experience of living a life under the shadow of a deadly, almost uncontrollable, virus. But there were other days, many days, of the pandemic year when I felt powerless and inconsequential. During those heavy, grey days, it was impossible to write. It was impossible to write anything. I guess I was not alone.

But no darkness lasts forever. Heavy days and hard times were followed by other days throwing at us something that was enough to keep us going, keep us hoping for the invention of a vaccine in Autumn 2020 and waiting patiently for signs of the virus' dissipation. By the time the news about a possible scientific breakthrough in the invention of a vaccine against Covid-19 reached us in late Autumn 2020, we had learnt the positive effects of daily expressions of deep gratitude for being alive, for the luxury to be surrounded by our loved ones, for the trees, clouds, rain, gardens and the birds, despite our scars, both visible and invisible.

One cannot but be amazed by the ability of human beings to transcend the limitations around them and to find meaning, any kind of meaning, even in the most oppressive settings. Difficult

as it might seem initially, we can heal, reset and restore things in time. After all, life never stops when tragedies and catastrophes occur; the challenge is not to allow them to pass through us inaudibly when negative things happen but to manage to transform the aches within the self into rays shining light onto the way forward.

AN AGONISING LIFE EDIT

Even when days, weeks, months and seasons all seemed to merge into a flat, linear and draining present under the grip of Covid-19 when all had to be endured and life had to be limited, there were things we tried to do to reframe the way we were experiencing the world and ourselves within it. We made choices; some were life choices made under conditions of emergency. The home became the office, the school, the nursery, the hospital, the care home, the gym, the disco, the pub and, for those persons unlucky enough to be tangled in abusive relationships, an intolerable hell. Those choices did not reflect our ambitions, but that was not a time for ambitions. That was a lived pause.

It is true that during the tightest grip of the pandemic, post-truth statements were viewed as unappealing. It was important to know the truth, some truths about Covid-19, and to listen to science even when scientific opinion was divided. A basic shared understanding of truth was restored at last, at least for most of us.

Time also became more 'ours' during the global pandemic year. Alongside the involuntary loss of the multi-layered quality of our lives – our world was no longer split into work, family life, friends, private pursuits in different places and so on, came the singularity of time. Time seemed to be constant because our locations remained unchanged. Subsumed by the unbroken flow of time, we started re-appraising our past lives and routines only to find that we had overrated past activities, exaggerated their significance for, and impact on, us and perhaps had wasted too much time on faces, places, endeavours and events that did not deserve such an investment. We learnt to float and to appreciate moments.

As time became singular, expectations more easily manageable and the present was fused into a flat future, we started asking more penetrating questions about ourselves and the socio-political world around us. Who were we hiding from? Who and what had been limiting us, suppressing us, driving us to the ground? Where did we need to place our trust? How much

time and effort had we wasted in our lives? Accordingly, a context for our life had to be recreated as the remnants of the old context became awkwardly interweaved with new realities and newfound duties. And we (re-)discovered daily molecules of life that could sustain us in the darkness; valuable life threads in a pandemic year.

In the days of time-less-ness, when nothing seemed to happen at all until the afternoon bulletin of the announcement of Covid's new victories and newly captured victims as regards hospital admissions and deaths - days in which we could barely recall the passing of time, we re-discovered mind-ful-ness and time-ful-ness. That is to say, our ability to make time to mark time, that is, the days, weeks, seasons under the grip of a pandemic as well as Brexit and to protect our physical and mental health. The pandemic birthed contemplation and contemplation birthed new realisations. And we started noticing: nature, colour, seasons, sunsets and blossom. Some persons managed to find new meanings in lockdown. But the pandemic also drove some people off the edges of reason and led to a surge in suicides and depression.

As we remained trapped in Covid's loops, bearing witness to the misery it created and powerless to act to stop it, our injuries became stories to be told and to live by. Simple activities became symbols of our heroism, of the transgression of our confinement. Walks in nature became the crucial breath of freedom in the unfreedom of lockdown. Online platforms became the stages for the public performance of what under different circumstances would be kept private. After all, Covid offered no judgment on the ethics of our lives. More importantly, the unease generated by the disease justified whatever personal release.

We needed to tell our stories even though we were not writing them alone; Covid-19 was also writing at least parts of it. And as a cruel author, Covid was condemning people to breathlessness and then to death in agony and isolation - without even being able to say 'goodbye - I love you'. We were bearing witness to all this and the fragility of human life and human relationships. Some persons' lives changed completely in the pandemic year; some could not withstand the strain, others preferred to rethink the terms of their engagement and to re-forge relationships while others would remain numb by the loss of loved ones. Longing but not belonging, being caught in an inhospitable reality that dislocated, emptied and drained, we learnt to live amidst the violence of the raw numbers of Covid's victims.

As we were discovering and often creating little pockets of freedom among the limits of the walls imposed on us, we became humbler, more human. We appreciated the power of seeing, seeing little rays of light defiantly punctuating a deadening half-life under lockdown which left

nothing and no one untouched. We felt fatigued, emotionally vulnerable and unmoored until one day hope returned with the announcement of the invention, and approval, of a vaccine and then the roll-out of the vaccination programme. At that point, the burden of the present became more bearable. From then on, it was just a matter of waiting time - waiting for our age group to be officially called for vaccination and maintaining the safe distance, masks and sanitisers. We were waiting to live again.

Energised by the arrival of hope, our lives were taking many shape-shifting forms. Like chameleons, we were adjusting our epidermis to cope with the lived experience of the lockdown. We could create, we could wait. We could plan, we could demand. We could change and be changed. The birth of a new consciousness was emerging. Age group by age group was called for vaccination. Persons formed queues outside the vaccination centres; one behind the other stood in a calm and steadfast demeanour as if they took part in a religious compunction. The eagerly awaited jab in the arm provided reassurance that normal life would have to be deferred just a little bit longer. Or at least, this is what we were told at that time.

WAS COVID JUST A PAUSE OR A REHEARSAL FOR A RECONSTRUCTION?

From Dante's *Inferno*, people 'emerge to see the stars again'. We slowly emerge from Covid's uninterrupted, brutal reign of 365 days. We lived amidst a horrible pandemic and feel lucky to have survived it! We are tired but are also wiser and more courageous. But for what? What do we do now? Can shattered lives be reassembled? Are we in some kind of transition and, if we are, to what? Has Covid-19 had a transformative effect on who we are, what we want in life and our understanding and appreciation of others? Or are we keen to live dressed in an amnesiac post-Covid self shaken by a well-deserved exhilaration following a year when all was in pause?

We have collected valuable information about what needs to be adjusted and what needs to change in order to facilitate the flourishing of persons, communities and societies. This is a time of realignment with core human values and human decency to chart a better, liberated future. Far from being a fading pause, the global pandemic must be the point of departure for more equal, more sustainable and just institutions structures and practices. Now is the time for brave re-orientations and re-adjustments. For the alternative is too painful to imagine. If we remain stuck for years into a Covid-19 mode, blocked by our collective trauma, held back by

the ugliness we saw, the denial of human touch and connection, accustomed to living in our distanced bubbles and unable to be released from fear's patterns, then a chaotic, fraught future awaits us.

Under such a scenario, I can discern new brutality hidden behind layers of lies and justifications. I can see the migrant NHS staff we applauded a few months ago to be told to go home once again since they are no longer needed. I can feel the oppressive grip of hierarchies of all sorts seeking to maintain their advantages by dividing the populations, manufacturing crises and engaging in non-sensical posturing. As Covid recedes, more craziness could begin. Persons resentful and aggrieved might be ready to generate trouble and re-enact the pain they feel. Resentful, they might embrace authoritarian populism because it gives the thrill of strong emotions, an enemy who could be targeted and red-blooded nationalism. Such emotions could become as virulent as Covid itself. Political upheaval and instability, public unaccountability and corruption, surveillance and de-humanisation might reign in polarising landscapes. We might witness the extraordinary eruption of externalised pain and the friction generated by narratives of estrangement, mistrust and exclusion.

THE OTHER DIRECTION

Without a doubt, these are very volatile times. We have witnessed generalised fragility, destruction and suffering in our homes, neighbourhoods, localities, regions, countries, continents and the globe. We also see daily glimpses of inequality, injustice, domination, power struggles and geopolitical moves. As the post-austerity, post-Brexit and post-Covid world begins slowly to unfold before us, we, the ordinary persons, long for healing, solidarity and reconstruction.

Motivated forgetfulness of what happened is not healing. It is denial. It does not work in psychotherapy and we have no reasons to believe that it will bear results in a post-Covid world. Healing is only possible in the warmth of human connections and through justice and change. We have to confront not only a climate emergency but also the stark reality of millions of persons being pushed (back) into poverty, long-term unemployment and long-term ill-health. We cannot disregard the global economic setting that engulfs us. The surge in mental illness cases will continue. Racism and sexism have gained new vigour. And it is quite likely that the

shadow of Covid will remain with us for years, irrespective of whether we like it or not. The shadow, and reality, of Brexit will do the same. They will not be lifted any time soon. Collective healing of our collective trauma, the rebuilding of what we lost and what got disrupted are bound to take time. We must be prepared for this. Healing is slow and unassuming; it knows no fixed timelines, no end dates and no expected targets to be met.

And this is also the reason why the choice of our path, the choice of the right direction is so crucial at present. As the time where all had to be endured is fading away and the horizon of action and interaction is looming ahead, we can discern a definite junction in front of us. Several paths are in view and there is no determinacy as to which of them will be chosen. The only certainty is that our choice will determine our future and our children's future for decades. Therefore, we must be on the future's side. We cannot afford to waste time and to lose.

Did Covid-19 end up creating the mindset that will procure the long-awaited socio-political change? A mindset that will create a different future? Or was the global pandemic merely a long, hurtful and health-harming pause that is now ending? This will be a political decision and a policy choice. It cannot be anything else. Now is the time to let go of old misgivings, failures and absences and to work towards a renewed future. A future that is more humane, more hospitable and more life-enriching than life-restricting. We do not need to reinvent commitments and ways of acting and responding that reflect the values of constitutional democracies and good governance. We just have to effectuate them with vigour.

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