

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Covid-19: A Personal Reflection

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Looking around my small cosy living room which is unusually clean and tidy I sit on my sofa and look out of gleaming patio door windows onto a recently mowed lawn and neat garden borders. My beloved brown terrier snuggled in his basket is gently snoring. The sun is shining, there is not a cloud in the sky and the birds are singing. From this vantage point, to the unknowing eye everything appears 'normal' but of course nothing is 'normal' or ever will be again.

A tiny virus that is named Covid-19, originally identified in China and now sweeping the world at an alarming pace, has caused a major pandemic. Creating panic as it advances, measures are put in place to halt its progression. Liberties, that in Europe we take for granted, are suspended and the whole world becomes silent as traffic noise and pollution cease, factories, shops, leisure facilities and schools close. A seismic shift in the world has occurred and there is no going back. It has taken some time for us to realise this, clinging to the now shattered belief that 'things' will return to 'normal' soon, in a few weeks, maybe months, by the summer holidays, and now as we approach the beginning of our second lockdown, by Christmas.

Initially I had been quite blasé and sceptical about the virus that some believe was man-made or even imaginary and watched slightly bemused as it travelled the world from China finally reaching Europe, never imagining the profound and catastrophic effect it would have upon our lives.

I watched the news with some bemusement and sadness at people panic buying, fighting with each other, abusing supermarket staff, knowing that we are collectively so much better than this. Or are we?

Some adopt a camaraderie stance, a blitz mentality we like to imagine, and use the same vocabulary we engage when entering the arena that is cancer. We will fight it, beat it, stand up to it. We see our Prime Minister on one of his many confusing press conferences shaking his fist as if to emphasise that "we will win the battle against this invisible enemy." My husband diagnosed two weeks before the first lockdown with stage 4 prostate cancer is deselected from the surgery he requires. My reassurance to him that non urgent surgery may be suspended, but surgery for cancer and life-threatening conditions would continue, was misguided. All anaesthetists are to be reassigned to the extra Intensive

Care beds, hastily created for Covid patients. As we leave the surgeon's office, my gentle, practical, down to earth husband is white with shock and rage. The selection process for who may live and who may die has begun.

Before the pandemic we laboured under the illusion that we are in control, expecting things to be fixed, things accepted as so, like access to health care and education, the ability to work, move around freely, meet our friends and family, to love and hug and kiss. I am unable to visit my children and when eventually we do meet, miss hugging and kissing them, all aware of my husband's vulnerability. We expect a linear progression in life, we expect continuity. This expectation has been destroyed, and in this outward seismic shift is reflected our inner psyche, or perhaps, it is the other way around.

Although I believe it a necessary evil, the speed at which our liberties are taken away using fear as the agent of control, is frightening and I am shocked how we so readily police each other.

Although I continue working two days in a psychiatric hospital, I am unable to continue with my art therapy work and at home I am immobilised, literally physically and psychologically, my anxiety overwhelming. Creativity suspended, I continually check my phone for news and updates, flick through the news channels, seeking reassurance when there is none to be had.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the brutal murder of George Floyd and the subsequent explosion of outrage by black and white people, rips through the world and I am forced to challenge my own complacency, my middle class `niceness` and my prejudices and ask myself, what is my role in this struggle, what can I do to support and help?

Daily we listen to the role call of the dead and I am lucky that so far none of my loved ones are on that list, but many have a died, too young, too soon and often due to the restrictions, alone.

Between lockdowns my husband received his surgery and is now almost recovered. Some are not so lucky, many still await treatment, others have lost jobs, their livelihood,

their homes. I reflect on all that I have. I have a clarity that I did not have before the pandemic, my priorities have changed as I believe many other peoples have, and I repeat a daily mantra of thanks.

Trained as a conceptual artist my drawing skills are very basic and so I resolved to use the lockdown to develop these skills. An exercise in shading slowly develops into the form of a woman, hovering in mid-air, arms outstretched, her head thrown back, shimmering in a halo of light. Whilst absorbed in my drawing one word enters my mind, hope. The figure's name is Hope, she sits on my mantel piece and I view her daily.



Figure 1. Pencil and Cartridge Paper. 14.5cm x 21.5cm.

About the Author

Jacqueline Pearce works as an art therapist within schools and with Looked after Children. She has extensive experience of working in adult mental health, art education and general nursing.