



Centre for  
Mental Health



# Reaching inland

Reflections on the A Year in Our Lives  
stories about living through Covid-19

David Gilbert

# Preface

It has been a privilege to read these accounts. And I want to acknowledge the courage and craft of those who have written them.

I hope you will be inspired to read them all for yourself. This is a unique collection – here are people not ordinarily heard.

We have been in the same storm but ‘different boats’ (as one writer dubs it). There is no single narrative. But our boats were not equal to begin with. Here are descriptions that back up the data on how Covid has struck a blow against equality and affected different people differently.

Covid has been an enormous invisible pressure on our bodies, minds and souls. A pandemic is not a war with an obvious enemy, that we can fight or flee from. It is insidious and grinding, seeping through cracks in our protective and defensive mechanisms. It has revealed us at our most raw – vulnerable, courageous, terrified and beautiful.

The task was to offer ‘creative reflections’, not perform a qualitative analysis. Nevertheless, a bit of structure might help:

- **Patterns:** The first section outlines some overall emotional themes
- **The Unequal Blow:** The second focuses on the effects on people from particular walks of life and parts of society – covering some, but not all, facets of inclusion and diversity
- **Blooming Defiantly:** The third focuses on the experiences of those with pre-existing mental health conditions
- **Reaching Inland:** A fourth section adds a few reflections on the wonderful quality of writing, plus a few final thoughts.

Read all the pieces [online](#) or download a copy of the [A Year in Our Lives anthology](#)

# 1. Patterns

## Shock, loss and grief

These accounts were written over a long period, across lockdowns. I read them in the order they appear on the website and only slowly realised I was moving backwards in time. Many accounts from the first few months of the pandemic were shockingly raw, and/or akin to prophecy.

One woman predicted early: 'For those of us who have mental health conditions and for those who go on to develop mental health issues during this time, this journey will be immensely difficult'. And so it has been.

'This will make or break me' another wrote: 'I was concerned about how devastating the COVID 19 virus could end up being. I wasn't overwhelmed with this, just being pragmatic.' I would love to know how they are now.

I'd forgotten the Chinese animal market and that immediate shock: 'Wuhan – how could a place I'd never heard of strike terror into my heart?' And the inane consequence of our consumerist habits (including mine): 'People, like locusts, stripped the supermarket shelves of everything they could get, especially pasta and toilet rolls.'

Loss comes thick as night in this collection. Read them all, but not in one sitting.

- 'My fiancé died from cancer two weeks before our wedding... I've been living in almost permanent lockdown since. I am anxious to go out and not seen anyone except my son for almost a year. My mental health is in a bad way... so lonely and know I'm not the only one. I cry a lot and the sadness has taken over.'
- 'We lost two close friends... I know 17 people now tested positive, three of whom are very seriously ill and in ICU on ventilators.'

*'My partner, best friend and soulmate sadly passed away with covid... didn't realise a broken heart actually hurts like real pain.'*

One writer dubbed Covid an intruder: 'a sense of unending boredom, unfathomable feeling of weighted exhaustion... then in regaining our stolen senses, I saw it in yesterday's frozen footprints, left by partner as he had walked to his car'.

Fear stalks these writings. For one carer: 'Now there is a real chance of that order (of who dies first) being reversed, or of us both dying at a similar time. I write a set of instructions for our executor, apologising things may be messy if I have not had time to clear things up'.

Daily life became fraught, an obstacle course, alongside a heightened sense of vigilance:

*'In a lorry park on the edge of the M6 we argue about who last had the hand sanitizer.'*

*I try not to treat the kids like biohazards.*

*I am daunted by how easily plans are disrupted.*

*As I pass another runner (at a distance) I wonder if they are also testing their lungs? Do other people do this?*

*I order the "backup bird" for Christmas day. Just in case. The "backup bird" brings some much-needed light relief, but also reminds me it is the only bit of Christmas I have planned'.*

And then deeper – an existential level threat to identity: 'what is normal, the one that was or this new normal? Will life be ever the same? I am beginning to forget who I was'.

The simple pleasures are mourned. Parkrun is not just Parkrun: from loss of a means to keep healthy and routine through to measuring one's own progress. Have we fallen back? How do we know? Where are we?

*'There is a motivating familiarity [to parkrun], repetition of instructions, encouragement, crossing the line to collect our finish token and a well-earned drink. I miss it so much. It was my self-care routine, inspiration for gifts bought for me by family and friends. Part of my identity is the number I have completed.'*

## Isolation and loneliness

Here was the one emotion that trumped the lot: '(Covid) showed me something I had always taken pains to ignore; the extent of my own loneliness... Perhaps it's a 'man thing'.

Or perhaps it's not: 'The lack of human interaction is somewhat soul destroying and to someone like me who thrives on connection, the world feels cold, disconnected and quiet'. So much pain on display regarding separation: 'Maybe we could meet one day' said one person of a friend 'but keep our distance come what may'.

So many people as islands:

- *'The anxiety of the single grew immensely. Facing life and death alone. More & more rules, taking away freedom and love stories – no household mingling, no meet ups... alone and afraid'*
- *'I feel a kind of loneliness that seeing people on screen doesn't seem to ease. It's far more existential, somehow; it dwells in the bones of me, in my DNA. I feel like a non-participant observer in a dysfunctional world and whilst I acknowledge that non-participation is keeping me safe, it is giving oxygen to a consuming sense of disconnection'.*

Everything was up for grabs – both time and space: 'There is little chance of setting up the recommended "quarantine area" within the house if one of us were to fall prey to the virus; we just have not got the spare space. I dread the thought of bringing it into the house and infecting my Mum...'

Many mourned opportunities for 'real' connection. But perhaps there have been compensations:

*'... we reconnected [online] in a way that would never have been possible previously [with people far away]... We found consolation in the smallness of my physical world. The parks near my house, the communities which I inhabited... new communities in which to involve myself in. We found that 'community' can have many different meanings.'*

Boundaries were ruptured, permeated or vanished, others erected and renegotiated urgently. One writer nailed it: 'Your office is your lounge or conservatory. Your dining table is your workspace. You haven't got a table so you're struggling. Reclaim that space! It is still your home, but now I'm tidying things away after work, so that I can't see them. Lines become blurred.'

Relationships with loved ones became strained. I would start reading a piece mentioning relationships and almost hold my breath. How would this one end?

*'... my husband and I have grown closer working at home together. It could have gone either way, but we are so lucky to have the space to work separately, making each other coffee throughout the day to say hello... it's just as well we get on!'*

People were thrown into the digital world. It was a boon for many. But the more nuanced takes on this sudden digital immersion were

particularly fascinating: ‘My constant worry now is that I am falling further behind my colleagues in adjusting to home working, and I am letting the team down’. This person, who fell out with colleagues, fell further behind when system changes meant being unable to log on to MS Teams. A vicious tech-relational cycle.

Someone told of resenting infrequent superficial text messages from friends, reinforcing a sense of marginalisation: ‘My self-esteem was never very high to start with, and this makes it plummet further’.

Adjustment was a watchword – one person with anorexia described video conferencing: ‘The zoom calls got to me though! I have never found it easy looking in the mirror and when you are faced with zoom calls... the pressure to look a certain way was mounting. I would spend the calls looking at myself. Sound vain or like a first world problem? But for me identifying this was so important as it allowed me to move forward again, readjusting my coping mechanisms.’

## **Fear, tiredness, guilt and anger**

It wasn’t solely the virus that disturbed: ‘I see no end to this situation and feel like I’m actually grieving for a life I’ve lost, never to be regained’. A dread emerged – a fear of what’s happening in the world, of being exposed to wider forces without defence: ‘But our world is still in a scary place. Am I mad to wonder? To still feel nervous?’

Another writer talks of a ‘sense of doom’ descending each time they were left with their own thoughts, without online distractions. ‘If I stop and let the real world in, anxiety washes over me’. Others feared for the future and their/our children.

New fears arose, about the external world (‘Here was a new type of uncertainty – a word I had never imagined could be so heavy

LOCKDOWN’) and also of the internal: ‘I was less concerned about this very real, very present virus, and more consumed by the just-as-real (but hypothetical) terrors dreamt up by my own mind. Maybe there just wasn’t enough space in there to encompass any more fear’.

‘I’d spent my time thinking about how I couldn’t cope, trying to work out how we were going to function having to be home at all times, where we were going to get nappies and food.. and then the realisation, that our lives and people could be taken from us without warning’. Daily challenges shot through by existential fears.

Add to all this, a dose of good old-fashioned guilt:

*‘I’m lucky, I tell myself. And I know it’s true. I had the days mapped out ... a juggling act I could manage. Now I always have a ball too many... (and that extra) ball is on fire or made of lead. I make plans, but they are out of date and useless by the following day. I long for the predictability of the late running 7.11am to London Victoria; the human contact of the crush for the tube; my to-do list; and family planner packed full of 8th birthday parties, school trips and after-school clubs’.*

*‘What was my disappointment in comparison to theirs [my children]? I will tell you what my disappointment was – it was real and painful to me, it was MY disappointment, I was entitled to it. I didn’t need to share it, I wanted to wallow in it for as long as it lasted and I did’.*

Here’s guilt in a different guise: ‘I knew my colleagues were donning full PPE and working on the frontline, so how could I feel happy at home? Guilt crept in, but gin and crisps helped me cope.’ And this: ‘Because you’re working from home, you should be proving you’re working hard, so you put in even more hours than you usually would.’

And as things wore on, the sinking into a morass: 'I can't quite remember when I last wore anything other than jogging bottoms and a hoodie, or got a haircut, or for that matter, took a shower. I resemble a recluse, which is not far off the mark; I am certainly starting to feel like one. My nephew, on a rare video call appearance, says my grey-white beard makes me look like Father Christmas'.

*'Then the depression. Hours of alone-ness. Became obsessed with chat rooms and paid for the company of others in far off lands. Hundreds of pounds. I bought a ticket to Malaysia and cancelled the next day. Still trying to get a refund. Now I am angry with myself. Venting my rage on others.'*

Rage might erupt at any time in this sensitised arena – even at the non-delivery of a frying pan (granted, it was to be used for a long-sought after fry-up!). Another did her best to bite her tongue: 'We do our best to be mindful of each other, to not indulge in those small irritating habits that could explode into a major disagreement. I watch every word I say, and everything I do, as there will be no escape if we argue. Each additional ask is like the drip of water on stone, wearing me down atom by atom'.

Then there was raw and justifiable anger. For example, from those with mental health issues seeing services withdrawn: 'It feels like Covid has returned treatments back to years ago, fixing it can wait. Can it wait for the person who feels alone, not of value?'

And then of course, about politics:

*'It makes me angry how badly it's been managed, and it's yet another trigger for my depression. I watch our politicians bicker while people die... I know my rage is futile. It doesn't help me and it changes nothing. But god I'm angry at how this whole pandemic has been handled'.*

One activist ended with a plea: 'I cannot fix everyone... but will continue to speak up and I urge you to do the same because these conversations could be the lifeline for someone else'.

A few reframed things so as to see the bigger picture: 'we have lived high on the hog of shallow surface esteem and neglected the dull budgeting necessary for survival'. Another wrote: 'History, even in those moments when it blind-sides us, has as many layers as an onion.'

## **Courage, hope and gratitude**

And yet and yet. That small, big word: hope, particularly in the first lockdown: '.. amid the despair, endless spring mornings... clothed in a shroud of morning dew which brought with it a lack of hope'.

And it came in many forms – the luxury of time with loved ones (if you could get to be with them of course!), nature (all praise those first few sunny spring days!), the novelty of learning to bake, the rediscovery of hobbies: 'talking to loved ones, listening to music, reading books, writing stories/ scripts, playing piano, watching fun thing on YouTube, taking a hot shower, and drinking tea... do[ing] what you love...'

Several people echoed one writer: 'more importantly, a newfound respect for the little things in life'.

Each writer seemed engaged in trying to draw on their own agency. Many discovered or rediscovered strength. People described, whether they knew it or not, courage by the bucketful.

*'I never knew that to be brave is to experience, learn, change and protect. To be resilient is to keep going. One foot in front of the other.'*

‘A sameness that left a dull numb feel when the same streets were pounded every day for that spark of light, we did, perhaps find new ways to survive’. This sentiment was echoed by many: ‘When asked about my greatest accomplishment in 2020, I think I’d say ‘getting through it’’. I nodded whilst reading.

This is not being ‘tough’ or ‘resilient’ (that over-used word) or having ‘thick skin’, but through the very reverse – having been ground down to the bone. Strength forged, paradoxically, through sensitivity – fragile and volatile.

There was a rawness, a hyper-real awareness of what one was going through, an opening and exposure to the atmosphere. I’m assuming this is because other forms of protection had crumbled. The mind and body are vulnerable, the soul strong. This is my abiding assertion having read all these accounts closely.

The following is beautiful, yet no easy reading, a portion of an ongoing diary:

*‘There is so much beauty in the little things – or are these the big things – the blue skies, running down a hill, staying in and dancing to your favourite songs. These are the things I will hold on to... everything is changing, but the beauty is still in the world. The world isn’t over, and I won’t let this stop me being happy when I can.*

*[But the next day] Everything just seemed to get on top of me today. The injustice of having my whole life cancelled when I’d just started enjoying it, that I’ll never be able to do final year again or graduate “properly”. With the added noise of my eating disorder, it just felt like too much. But I don’t think it’s bad to acknowledge this. It isn’t always easy and I am allowed to be upset.’*

Many of the pieces felt like this. A ‘yes this, but also that’. Contradictions, change, and a new attitude not just to space and place and self, but time. Some wrote of time standing still, others felt the odd liquidity of unpunctuated hours and days. And as the novelty of the first few months faded, people got bored of Joe Wicks. As things wore on, and people were stripped of erstwhile coping mechanisms, they had to reach in more deeply.

I was struck repeatedly by how hard people were on themselves. Even as they coped with the worst: ‘When I look back, I am rather disappointed in myself. I have not discovered some inner fund of resilience that I did not know I had; I have not expanded or grown, learned how to play the violin or wrote a novel. I have been more fortunate than some, I know. The only thing I can claim is that I have muddled through and survived so far. And that is the best I can keep doing right now’.

*‘I haven’t read every book on my list, or started a blog, or learned to podcast. But I did get through Tiger King, and a lot of Scandi Noir and the (fantastic) Queen’s Gambit’.*

For several, deeper trauma rose to the surface. Some dug to a deeper core or made radical shifts. One woman wrote of a shift in her sexuality, another of the breakdown of a marriage. Several changed jobs, many had to. Others lost theirs. Overall, I was left with a deep impression that everything and everyone had changed or been altered.

Alongside the switchback ride from hope to hopelessness and back again, gratitude. Heaps of the stuff. Towards social care staff, friends, family, volunteers, NHS, charities, the Samaritans – they’re all in there – a cast of thousands:

*'I was introduced to Mind. They are amazing (my angels). Mind set up therapy for me once a week which is helping me dearly, as I progress onwards. There is also a Support Worker who checks in with me and they are now a dear friend, who I can't thank enough for helping me through some hard days and times in this dreadfully scary pandemic. Even a phone call means a lot.'*

Perhaps as one person explains, we have witnessed the best and worst of ourselves and others, of humanity: 'I am in awe of the resilience and many kindnesses shown by people throughout this period... however I am also disgusted by the behaviour of people coming out of lockdown; the tons of rubbish being left on our beaches, in our parks, in our woodlands'.



## 2. The unequal blow

Suffering strikes everyone equally, one or two maintained. It is the great leveller: 'I am part of something much bigger. What is it to live through history and see the world unfolding. To see sadness, despair and fear and to live through it...'. They went on to claim: 'This is our trauma. This is an event which will define our nation. We will never not know fear. We will never not know how quickly our expectations and our lives can be changed. This may not be a bad thing, but it will always be 'a thing'.

Also: 'I have however, discovered a world where everyone to a degree, is more equal'.

Or is it?

It was always going to be worse for those with pre-existing conditions or those caring for those who were 'vulnerable':

'Residents will be allowed one 20 minutes visit a week (not much when there are 10,080 in a week)', pointed out a wife of a man with dementia: 'We have been married for 36 years and together for 40, now he does not recognise me... heart breaking'. This sort of calamity comes with resentment for another writer, who said: 'I can't get into a bubble because everyone has already made their own, whilst I've been busy shielding!'

I knew the data showed the exacerbation of inequalities. I wanted more stories from marginalised communities, but that may require another programme of work. There were clues enough here to begin that exploration.

My assumption is that many pieces were written by white people. I only say this,

because when the searing sense of injustice within the collection comes through, it is plain that racism was compounded. This is from someone who became a care worker, after having other opportunities closed to him during Covid:

*'And then we started seeing the images of the NHS people that had lost their lives trying to save our lives... hugely disproportionately black. Everybody had to acknowledge this truth, but the investigations into why this was happening were laughable... then came the police murder of Breonna Taylor, Daniel Prude and George Floyd. And black people everywhere were suffering a trauma as they saw their own sons, brothers, husbands, nephews laying on the floor, saying 'I can't breathe'.*

*In the care home... where verbal threats and actual assault is a daily experience. And where the staff were 80% black, but all the residents were white. The residents were happy to play into this racial imbalance by just dropping things on the floor for staff to have to keep bending down and picking up. But their actions are excused as being completely down to their mental health issues. So – keep bending down to your knee, Mike, even at work'.*

One man turns to verse to describe, obliquely, the people – his people – 'covering' what matters; how identities, masks and amulets fail to offer protection in times like these:

*'There's a bitterness that comes with cover*

*how many mango poems tell you deep there are some things you cannot cover*

*She dropped her garments, he left his clothes*

*So many creative ways to shame for sickness, pride acts as post written cover...*

*My ancestors wrote about winds that carry words and souls*

*But we are left in their wake heel-less scratching our tongue of its cover*

*we are but humans, lave [bone] and jiir [skin] and little else.'*

One white gay man wrote: 'part of the reason we are so animated is because in lockdown white people are finally beginning to understand, in some small way, what living with limited liberty feels like... HIV/AIDS took hold of our friends and lovers and killed them, brutally, violently. That pandemic changed our identities and our politics, as gay men, our relationships and aspirations. The mothers who lost their sons and the men who lost their lovers still bear its consequences, day in, day out.'

We (those with privilege) need to be more careful in our use of the word 'unprecedented'. There are several gender-focused pieces here too. One of the stand-out pieces was by a mum of a two-year old:

*'I know I am meant to tell you she is my world. I can not. I can however say...*

*I am fed up to the back teeth of Mr bloody tumble. I would rather stick pins in my eyes than once again have to deal with the mess of glitter and glue and paint and stickers that get stuck on everything apart from what they are meant to be stuck on.*

*"Bake with your baby"*

*"Sing songs with your baby"*

*"It's the best job in the world"*

*What!?! Listening to her screaming "I want up" "I want tubbies on" "I want my pink cup" is the best job in the world is it???"*

She was not alone in these accounts: 'As you can imagine, even the hardest most positive person crumbles when faced with the prospect of bills, no income and a baby that needs caring for.'

And on to age. Maybe because I'm a dad of a teen, there was one story that touched me more than most. Here it is, almost in full:

*'March 2020: schools would close, drawing a sharp close to my two years spent revising a-levels, struggling for nothing. My university applications fell through when I received my results... I truly felt lost in the world, had no ambitions, ...spent weeks isolating and doing nothing. Tried to make a change to my life, search for a job and that has still gone nowhere... the light was fading in my mind. I hid away because not trying meant I would never see the failure of my actions... I split up with my girlfriend, lost touch with friends, all I could do was cry and look at old photographs, wake, eat, sleep, repeat ...*

*End of 2020: an old friend reconnected... I opened up to her about everything, she spoke the same, I wasn't alone. She and I became closer... spent nights video calling and gaming together, for once I felt wanted again, I felt new hope in life. We shared feelings and counselled one another, created little goals each day, making the bed or eating three meals a day, little things to get ourselves back on the rails. These little things boosted me, I felt a lot more confident, I re-joined the job search, [sought] therapy...*

*I still have many days of no energy wanting to stay in bed... but sprinkled throughout are*

*those sunny days where I feel I could conquer the world. I won't let myself fall victim to giving up all hope, we have achieved so much and whatever happens, I want to get to see us beat the pandemic and reunite with each other in person. I may have let the light fade in my mind at one time, but now I only want to see the light of the sun fade over the horizon each night for eternity.'*

Contrast that with this short entry, as poignant for what it doesn't go on to say, as for what it does. Again, I was left wanting to know what had happened to this person now: 'I was diagnosed with anxiety at 10 years old and I had finally reached a point of calming it down. I had school and clubs as a distraction and it was all fine. Then when the pandemic happened suddenly I was stuck with my thoughts and I would get panic attacks about the smallest things like not submitting homework on time or the WiFi being slow. I hated myself for going back but I didn't stop it and let it take over again'.

Another person, whose hopes of going abroad to study were dashed 'one by one' as scholarship rejections came through as Covid arrived, said: 'I felt sad as well as anxious, depressed as well as lonely, frightened as well as weak. I endured an unknowing pain that kept me from enjoying even the biggest accomplishments.... But I never lost hope, because I had faith in God and that everything happens for a reason. My beliefs were so strong that it kept me sane in the middle of all insanity. I completed reciting the whole Holy Quran during the month of Ramadan. That was my biggest achievement this year'.

Not just hopes dashed, but lack of completion and regret: 'I'll never get the opportunity to say goodbye to a lot of my good friends who were heading to uni in the summer, to say thank you to my teachers for all they did to prepare me for my A levels... the frustrating lack of closure on that part of my life

consumed me... the emotion of sadness is an ache in my heart at what has been taken from me. It was my purpose.'

One 25 year old went through hell and back, with a relationship break-up and physical and mental health problems, yet states: 'If you are reading this, you can get through the bad days, and the best thing is you will appreciate the better ones more'.

Ambivalence and contradiction were rife: 'the most challenging days in my life and my most happy days of life'. Another said: 'And this feeling of this is so unfair I'm missing out on my teenage lives. But I feel we are going to be better prepared for life as we have discovered what matters.'

But I was left feeling hopeful for the next generation. They are strong in ways we cannot predict. Watch how this next short piece unfolds. Sing more confidently for the future:

*'When the closure of schools and cancellation of exams were announced, I was devastated. I am aware of how odd that sounds, but I felt like my hard-work, devotion and time had been wasted. Furthermore, the routine of school gave me structure to my day so for that to be snatched away was a massive shock. Everything was so sudden, chaotic and surreal. For all I knew, the best was over and the worst was yet to come, and I was terrified. I must admit the first week of lockdown was the toughest, I had zero motivation and found it impossible to adapt to the new normal. After one long week of sulking in my own self-pity, I decided to get a grip and focus on the important things.'*

We've heard much about the heroics of frontline staff in health and social care. Here are more nuanced and fascinating tales:

*'I saw the very best. But I was not part of it. I was both supporting but also removed ... during one of our regular reflective (online)*

*sessions... I felt worst. Listening to the ward staff talk about how they had felt abandoned by the rest of the multi-disciplinary team, of which I am a part, how they had to come on the ward... while I dialled in from home. That we were able to have this conversation in the open, despite its pain, was a testament to the strength of the team.'*

- A newly appointed care home manager: 'No longer surrounded by laughter and hugs and fun I sit alone at home in quietness and solitude trying to continue to shine a light on the amazing work our care homes do. Remaining positive and joyful on the outside even though on a personal level I am anything but.'
- An ambulance service worker: 'I became worried that I could take this virus home to my Family, My Wife has an autoimmune condition and she was in the high-risk category of People'.
- A local authority keyworker: 'I now feel awful – burnt out, very depressed, exhausted - but the work just keeps coming & all of my pleasures / coping strategies have been taken away. I have some very noisy & inconsiderate neighbours & can now only escape the stress they cause if I go to the shops or for a walk, there's just nowhere else to go. I feel like a prisoner in my own home... This is the worst time of my life & I'm so worried that, when we do come out of the restrictions, I won't be the same person that I was before because I feel that this has damaged my mental health so badly'.

These next two quotes from mental health nurses hit me particularly hard. Years ago, as a psychiatric patient, I remember thinking that the cheery positivity or toughness of mental health nurses was a veneer, necessary perhaps given the trauma surrounding them:

- *'I am known as an outgoing and confident person who is social and full of fun. What I have described now feels like a former version of myself. I am now quieter, less confident and I see myself in a negative way that I have never felt before. I question my actions and I question my thoughts.'*

*'I had always prided myself on my emotional resilience. Always the one to put "the mask" on in order to smile, laugh and execute the day's objectives in a timely, effective manner in a way that made work feel NOT like work. But the end of 2020 finally got me. I broke. Badly... here was I, one of those individuals who is supposed to have the most insight and knowledge of tools that can help keep my mental health stable and healthy. But I broke.'*

### 3. Blooming defiantly

Unsurprisingly, given the initiator of this project, this collection provides a unique insight into the perspectives of people with mental health issues. Many of these are gruelling accounts, and one is left in awe at the tenacity on display.

- *'I believe I have always been a solitary person by nature and am lucky enough to enjoy spending time on my own. However, what I am not able to cope with is being alone for too long with my thoughts, this can be a very dangerous place for me to be.'*
- *'I've been grateful for and comforted by the love of my friends though I ache with the absence of touch in my life.'*
- *'I was already depressed and suffering from anxiety & the knowledge that there was a virus out there taking lives my anxiety went through the roof. Self-isolating was not really a problem for me as I more or less isolate myself because of my mental health issues. As a bipolar sufferer it is not very easy to keep up with relationships around people if you are manic or feeling low. But the fact that it was compulsory is what made me mad. My levels of paranoia went up and I had so much more traffic racing in my head that I had to self medicate for peace sake.'*

*'My mother died [of Covid-19] without me. Guilt heaped on top of guilt. No social network to keep me afloat. Scared to go out, panicking indoors. My mental health is always a step away from crisis. Bipolar plus coronavirus, a lethal combination.'*

It is often assumed, justifiably, that those with mental health problems would have fared worse than others. Some more sensitised to external stimulus benefited by withdrawal, at least temporarily.

*'Despite carrying a serious and diagnosed mental health condition I can truthfully declare I am coping with the ramifications of this present pandemic rather well, thank you. It is not because I am 'mad' and hence oblivious! It is because I can grasp the pandemic (and particularly 'lockdown') as an opportunity for personal pause, growth, reflection and healing.'*

- *'I had spent most of my life looking after others, (after six weeks of lockdown, drinking too much) I was making time for my own self.'*
- *'so lovely and peaceful around here when all the pubs were shut and the noisy anti-social yobs locked down too!!'*
- *'COVID has made me realise what is important and the things in life that were clearly damaging my mental health.'*
- *'the pandemic has enabled me to avoid situations which turbo-charge my anxiety; I finally had a legitimate excuse for keeping my distance. My daffodils and crocuses bloomed defiantly.'*

It should be noted that several of these accounts were written early on. This person echoed much of what I first thought, remembering my own troubles: 'My only feeling about the removal of social contact

is that maybe other people might now understand what life is like for me – to not be able to go out (even though you may want to) and to be afraid of other people in a social environment. What has changed is that the safety net that made my disability easier to cope with has now disappeared’.

Another astutely pointed out: ‘The narrative focuses heavily on negatives and the extrovert deprived of their past times. Welcome to the world that favours introverts for once’.

One woman watched the pandemic unfold from within an eating disorders unit, and in a fascinating account tells of her shifting views – from feeling angry at not being informed, then ‘abandoned’ with insufficient home support. Yet still: ‘I need to keep hope alive and change my perspective from ‘buried’ to ‘planted...’

But many with mental health problems saw things get worse. One writer wrote eloquently about living with OCD and that being exacerbated during Covid. May this account aid the fight against stigma:

*‘Imagine a life ruled by fear, fear you will be responsible for contaminating someone and they will die. Imagine a life where thoughts come into your head as rapidly, as savagely as walking into a wasp’s nest, constant, unrelenting barrage of thought after thought’.*

Having lived like this from the age of 15 to now 38, they go on movingly to describe what ‘living with my brain’ was like during the pandemic:

*‘I no longer leave the house other than to walk in the fields miles away from anyone. I regularly sterilise my gate, front door, packages. I won’t let my neighbours go near my pets, just in case they have Coronavirus*

*on their fur. But all my other thoughts have come back just as strongly. ‘Have I turned the gas off?’ ‘Go back and check, and again and again, and again...’*

*‘If you haven’t, the house which will catch on fire, which will catch the power cables alight, which will spread to all the houses, and they will all catch on fire, and many people will die and it will be your fault’. So think of those of us diagnosed with OCD right now. Educate yourself. Don’t create more stigma saying your ‘a bit OCD’ because you line your pens up on your desk. I have lost nearly everything now to OCD. Think of me, think of us.’*

Physical and mental health issues became yet more inextricably intertwined, making a mockery of the fact that we divide the two. Food, drinking, smoking. The pleasurable turned poisonous: ‘I began excessively drinking, I took up smoking (despite not particularly enjoying it), and repeatedly self-harmed’. And: ‘A more long-term and perhaps indirect effect of the COVID pandemic is the weight I’ve gained – you don’t realise how much walking you do on an active day until you stay in the same place for six months’.

While many baked, some sought comfort through eating and drinking: ‘My descent into a 3 stone weight gain was a tasty one, filled with cakes, bread, pies, pasties and pizza. I was soon glugging alcohol every Friday night. Before long, I thought it would be okay to drink on a Thursday night too. Those fruity gins are nice!’

The pandemic brought, I felt, overly harsh self-narratives – one person described the stripping of their daily activities and return of issues as meaning that ‘the anorexia... controlled’ her after all. One writer got it spot on: ‘My mind has re-shaped a false narrative that imposes total responsibility onto my shoulders’. Thankfully, this writer was able to turn to meditation and mindfulness, and movingly illustrates one marvellous healing visualisation journey.

Being ‘with oneself’ to such a degree has, for one or two, been a profound experience: ‘I feel much happier about myself as a person. I have very rarely talked as negatively towards myself, compared to the last twenty plus years. I have begun to take away the responsibility I took on for things that were out of my control and wasn’t down to me. The pain that comes with that is again very distressing. I have put boundaries in place that will help me manage my mental health. I am now in a place where I can put myself first. I have been able to stand up for myself a lot more’.

Return to ‘normality’ is a particularly vulnerable time for people with mental health conditions:

- *‘An increase of two dress sizes might not seem dramatic, but it plagues my conscience and has caused my confidence to dwindle. As the world opens up again, I can only hope it begins to drop off – or that I learn to accept whatever size I am, as long as I am safe and as healthy as possible.’*

- *‘No more attempting to make conversation in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil. No more inability to keep up with office ‘banter’ and being the one who never gets the joke. No more dreading the phone ringing in an open plan office. No more girding my loins, putting on a bright smile and getting through the day with gritted teeth...’*
- *‘As spring lightens up the world and the vaccines open it up again, I am left in a very dark place with little hope for a bright future.’*

*‘I am scared to go back to work and my physical and mental health return to where they were pre covid... I have removed things from my life that cause negativity such as toxic friends and relationships.’*

Much is at stake: ‘The only thing that’s stopping me from killing myself is my kids and grandkids as I know too many people who’ve killed themselves and the devastation this causes but I’m worried that the bad days will get too much’.

## 4. Reaching inland

I don't wish to patronise, but the craft on display is impressive. Such a release of creativity – angles, images, sheer delight of words. As Emily Dickinson wrote: 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant'.

The plethora of metaphor – from 'navigating a sea of uncertainty' to 'having too many balls to juggle' to this, that I particularly loved: 'Covid's impact on the soul as a creeping tide reaching inland and before you knew it you'd been upturned'.

'Just writing this article has made me realise just how lucky I am', declared one grateful soul, 'for one to be alive and second for all those loved ones that are there to help me through the tough times, and for me to be there to return the favour.'

Writing was a survival mechanism for a few. One person committed to write a four-line poem every day, though admitted their energy ebbed and flowed for such a project:

*'I hunker down, face my fear, and  
Peer into my inside world, and  
Thoughts of death and love and you  
Fall from my mind like flags unfurled'*

My own contribution was, inevitably, through verse, likening the pandemic atmosphere to one long sigh:

*'The sigh seemed to spread  
and take up a position in the clouds  
and all afternoon blew itself across town...'*

People leaned on historic voices too. One person drew on a poem written in 1895:

*'Then an old sage remarked: "It's a marvel to me*

*That people give far more attention  
To repairing results than to stopping the  
cause...'*

Another wrote a gorgeous and surreal poem about the music playing in the supermarket, and including interweaving lyrics as ghostly refrains:

*'(I don't know what it is that makes me love  
you so)*

*I don't know when this will end*

*I make a note in my phone*

*Of the songs that are playing in the  
supermarket*

*Don't worry be happy*

*and I only want to be with you*

*Is the music louder than normal?*

*Or do we all just stand silently obeying,  
muffled and shuffling past the mozzarella...'*

People reached for factual styles, reportage, prose and poetry. The interplay of the concrete and abstract:

*'As I wake up again under those stars,*

*I lie to my therapist when he calls.*

*I tell him about the ways*

*I've been "coping"*

*during this lockdown.*

*And next week I won't answer the phone.*

*My broken heart will have opened my door.*

*My resting head will roll along the floor.*

*My spirit won't be locked up anymore.*

*Having to stare*

*At my bedroom walls.'*



Sense the juxtaposition of that raw worldly experience – the therapist calling – against those stars – the Romantic poets would have been proud. No intermediaries here, just one person’s struggling soul against the raw backdrop of existence, unmuddled, crystal.

Often, the craft was exhilarating:

*‘The image is seared on my mind: she lay on the bed sobbing; I was standing in the doorway and she turned her tear-stained face towards me and told me she couldn’t go on anymore. She said this wasn’t the life she wanted. The conversation had been building for a long time but I didn’t want to acknowledge what she was saying and the timing was awful. My daughter was in the next room and I was getting ready to take her to an orthodontist appointment. I had to go but here was my partner telling me she wanted our relationship to end.’*

And often, I just laughed and was left yearning for more – there was a poem from someone in a nursing home, a perspective we’ve not often heard about. This was stoical and sweet:

*‘Other residents, companions that matter  
Pop by with a smile or a wave and a natter  
Nurses, carers and staff give care night and day  
Largely good, but they are human, hey hey...’*

The differences in perspective led me to question whether there was any one story. As one person said: ‘There is one storm, but we are all in different boats.’ Moreover, what if the stories are, or story is, not over yet? We are still not out of the woods. Maybe each one of our stories is but jewel, a fragment, a part of the whole – maybe we are not ready to fashion them into a single gleaming necklace just yet.

There was a philosophical exploration in many of the writings (note the struggle in this following account even to find the words):

*‘What I am trying to express is, I feel like as individuals, again can’t talk for everyone, my hope would be, that we don’t waste what we have learnt, to not be complacent or to think life will go back to normal. Life as it is, won’t be the same. We as people won’t be the same. It’s neither good nor bad. We will adapt, as we have been [doing]. The journey will not end, when lockdown is officially over, it will be with us for years to come. It is hard sit here and say how I am very grateful for being in lockdown. It is hard when there has been so much suffering. I don’t want to be dismissive of the struggles we have all been through. But if [this pandemic] hadn’t occurred, I perhaps would have never learnt the things I have about myself and others. In many years I hope I can look back and say “2020 was the year that made me”’.*

The poet Muriel Rukeyser once said: ‘All the poems of our lives are not yet made. We hear them crying to us, the wounds, the young and the unborn – we will define that peace, we will live to fight its birth, to build these meanings, to sing these songs’.

Again and again, I came back to this sense of life at its most raw, most distilled, close to the essence of things: ‘I handed in my notice so as to look after my loved one... Covid reminded me of what really is important’.

I was reminded again of Rukeyser: ‘However confused the scene of our life appears, however torn we may be who now do face that scene, it can be faced, and we can go on to be whole. As we wade from the chaos without to the cohesion within, this is what we move through and move toward’.

This is what I see in my work – we bring jewels of wisdom and insight from the caves of suffering. Robert Frost, the famous American poet said: ‘No way out but through’.

As I read more deeply, my own feelings opened: an overwhelming sense of being ground down – at personal and professional level (I left my job during Covid times) and at societal level (Trump, Brexit, Covid... now the Russian invasion of Ukraine).

There have been ruptures in minds, bodies, personalities, identities and relationships under the emotional gravity of what we were living through. Almost crushing. Forcing change:

*‘The horror of the impact lockdown has had on my mental health is that it has helped to solidify in my mind what I absolutely do not want to tolerate anymore. And what I deserve and want for myself. Day to day peace. A home which is a sanctuary. Choice and control. Who I want to be and how I want to live’.*

Whilst reading, I couldn’t shake the image of thousands of little bottles containing ‘essential oil of human’. Souls without accustomed defences and protections; of having to come to terms with deeper truths (or lies).

And as poets so often do – sensing the enormity in a ‘grain of sand’ – people came back to the small-big things:

*‘If nothing else all my heart is genuinely craving right now is a hug from my grandparents. I want to hear my nans voice in person again. I want to sit on her sofa in front of the fire as the budgie chirps along in the background. I want to stand in the kitchen with her and mum as we chat away, my father and granddad browsing my nans buffet table in the living-room. Until then I’ve made a promise to myself to never take these moments for granted in the future.’*

Einstein said that there were three things he hung onto: ‘kindness, beauty and truth’. These pieces are true testament to the human spirit – and with Covid only one part of current pain, unkindness, and volatility, and with the earth in crisis, how we need testaments to the human spirit – and how we need words to shape the cold, leaden and fear-laden air.

Please read these writings. Please say thank you to those who’ve written.

And finally: ‘I am eternally grateful for my guinea pig Steve as I never realised how important the comfort of having a pet was’.

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## Reaching inland

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