

Covid-19 coronavirus

Being in my 90th Year I am self isolating not to save my life, but to prevent myself becoming a carrier. I am prepared to die but not to infect younger people, particularly my own family. Like Mervyn Peake I feel to have lived at all is miracle enough.

The very old, like me, are acquainted with - or I could say accustomed to - grief. We have inevitably lost many friends to cancer, heart troubles and so on. Now we are old we can no longer go for long hikes or enjoy sport, so being denied them does not matter to us. We have survived a war, many have been used to poverty, for us there is nothing novel about keeping calm and carrying on. Isolation was not unknown to us either. When we were young there were far fewer inoculations against infectious illnesses. Most caught several and then were off school for weeks (and library books had to be baked in the oven until the pages went brown before being returned). If our relatives, such as grandparents, lived far off we could not visit because train travel was restricted.

I am being very well looked after, mainly by my daughter. She shops for me weekly, often adding gifts, like a plant for my garden, a home made dessert or jam tarts. Friends of hers I do not know sent me a present. Neighbours have offered to help. I am grateful, and deeply appreciate all the acts of kindness, but not having suffered any real deprivations or done anything to merit such generosity I cannot help feeling guilty.

Some people have compared this difficult time to being in a war. While there are some similarities the situations are very different. The virus is behaving naturally, it is not malicious. War does not kill people at random, children as well as professional soldiers. Wars lead to increased xenophobia and religious intolerance, the virus too but not as forcefully. When a combatant is separated from their family they often have no way of keeping in touch, and may wait a very long time for news. In wartime the authorities usually manage to control information, these days there are many more outlets; national newspapers, television and radio publicly, our Council and Peter Riding of the Initiative locally. There is no barrier to telephoning or emailing each other, like I do, or using Skype. Entertainment as well as information reaches more people now, through television, You Tube and the internet. During WWII most people had radios, many telephones, but television was virtually unknown. I was not old enough to want to visit pubs, and while the blackout darkened street at night I had no reasons to go out.

One of the things I miss at present is foraging the supermarket aisles serendipitously for bargains or new items to sample, and taking things to charity shops (then falling for things to purchase myself). Now I must accept my daughter's choices when items I asked for were not available, but would have much preferred the chance to pick my own substitutes. I do know this is unimportant. Today we are accustomed to being able to buy many more things than were available during WWII. In the 1930s the UK did not import mangoes, kiwi fruit and such - perhaps to Harrods but such fruit was not in local shops. Children who were tiny at the start of the war were reputed to try and eat bananas without peeling them when they became available again. The country did not import as high a proportion of food as it did recently. Allotments were fully used, lawns dug up to plant vegetables where they had been. To my surprise perhaps what I personally miss most is sliced bread; I am ashamed and annoyed to have lost the skill of slicing evenly and hate to waste any. When I was a girl the toilet paper was stiff, not soft, newspapers were really pleasanter to use: now people seem to have picked toilet paper shortage as their worst deprivation. My family helped others in various ways, certainly never looked for black market goods, and my dad gave vegetables from his two allotments to many neighbours. Relatives in Yorkshire who kept hens tried sending us eggs in stout boxes lined in felt with individual egg sized spaces, but we were lucky if any arrived unbroken. Once after harvest they sent an unwrapped hare; my father put it down on the hearthrug and when our cat saw it he ran out of the house and was not seen again for a week.

In WWII we learned how to "make do and mend". We mended and altered clothes, and passed them down to others (I was given my cousins', which neither fitted nor suited me). I have disliked clothes made to look as if they were patchwork ever since. My father got cobblers' tools to mend shoes and a soldering iron to attempt to mend saucepans (there were no new metal objects to be had; railings and even the the slim bar dividing our front garden from next door had been requisitioned). While men can no longer freely go to the barbers they can order clippers to be delivered. Once again I am fortunate in having had a broken hearing aid replace and a supply of new batteries given the day before the lock down; I wonder how many people have been less lucky. I was less lucky over teeth, being half way through a series of four appointments, and shall continue to have difficulties eating for months. My refrigerator is not fully disposing of the water when it defrosts, but at present no one may visit to look into this. The food keeps cool still, so no insurmountable problem. Refrigerators and freezers were rare luxury objects in the 1930s

House building and maintenance is on hold, but none are being lost to enemy action.

We miss our holidays. Foreign travel used to be one of my greatest pleasures. But that too reminds me of the help people give in difficult times. During a sudden French rail strike a friend and I were stuck in Paris, rapidly running out of money. The Gare du Nord Hotel gave us free accommodation - after all they could not let the rooms to the usual travellers. Museums and galleries are closed, but the National Gallery showed their closed exhibition of Titian on television; something I might well not have seen had the exhibition remained open.

Before many months have passed we shall be able to resume a pretty normal life. What a Guardian writer aptly called "the anonymity of days" will change to a normal pattern of enjoying visits, clubs and so on. For comparatively few people the virus will bring tragedy. There will have been heroes, and much kindness. For many it will bring difficulties and annoyances. It has brought out communal solidarity, but also selfishness, hoarding and a black market. People remained healthy during the time of severe rationing of food during the war; they now may have become used to a simpler diet - will obesity decrease? Will people try to continue walking more and driving less, with improved air quality as a result. I wonder what may change afterwards politically. Shall we so long for a return to what had come to be considered normal in the UK that we selfishly put that aim as the top priority? Global overheating is still our greatest danger. Society continues to favour the few not the many. After WWII people demanded, and got change - will that happen again?

Gillian Mulley