

Isolation : Age and Mind

Each morning we awaken to a new world---a surreal world where a desperate human face on a screen instructs us to avoid socialising, to keep apart and not to wander the streets to be accosted by uniformed authority with a threat of arrest. After a bulletin breakfast, we realise that this is not exactly the Orwellian dystopia that it might seem. As the older people of the nation, we are well used to relying on the so- called authorities to administer our lives including its physical well- being and personal security---but suddenly this no longer appears to be possible. Now we must take ultimate responsibility for our own well- being if we have no physical disablement.

‘Time’ as a common place concept now takes on a new dimension. Will it now creep by like a drunken snail as we hope---- or be a period cruelly and illogically spliced out of the limited time we have left? Away from the wider family---or even a sight of a human face? Months become decades, particularly if you live alone and have little method or inclination of occupying yourself. Of course, we are advised that now is the opportune time to learn a skill or develop a talent. By pursuing our inner potential we can become symphonic musicians, nuclear scientists, computer wizards or we could simply clear up the garden or decorate the living room. All this, while tolerating the newly-recognised personal idiosyncrasies of a spouse/partner who has suddenly become bizarre and irritating, very different to the caring, attentive and loving person you once knew. This might be part of the ‘new world’ alluded to earlier.

My own feeling is that for many of us older isolationists these next months will be as much a psychological skirmish as a social or physical trial. From my perspective there are no empty moments when thoughts, ideas, perceptions, memories do not invade. Television or reading are only partial diversions ; easy it is to drift into the distant past reviving moments of regret, success, epiphanic delight and utter embarrassment. And even now a conscience demands an explanation. I have found myself smiling or snarling at photo albums, playing certain pieces of long lost but familiar music; reading old letters and ancient diaries; reminders of days when I was an athlete, an academic, a romantic soul and a great dad. Where is that person now ? I ask myself in satirical bewilderment. Has the ruthless process of time stolen my real Self and subtly replaced it with this worn out, semi-cognisant specimen? Naturally I turn to philosophy for reassurance.

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I had recently read something by philosopher Julian Baggini (2011), on the topic of 'Ageing and the Sense of Self.' He agrees that the older we get, the less able we are to identify clearly and with confidence what we might call our 'true selves'. Indeed, we may not be the same person we were 30 years ago—but for our own peace of mind we actively strive to sustain a sense of Self through into old age. It is vitally important to us as individuals that we unconsciously do this.

"This *sense of Self* is a composite of diverse elements and interactions which are very much part of our psyche : memories, habits, idiosyncrasies, and predictabilities---but surprisingly, in the brain there is no single anatomical control centre for this process."

However, Baggini reassures us that it is actually our place and role we play in the world that more accurately defines us as people ; our sense of Self is more dependent on our social interaction and regular experiences than actual brain processes.

Many years earlier, the famous philosopher William James (1907) pointed out how much we as individuals are shaped by our social environment; our family and friends make us who we are; by living with others we take on their view of the world as well as our own. Interestingly, James adds that we continually renew our sense of Self by exercising an *internal self-narrative*—a psycho personality that reiterates an autobiography of our past life so re- establishing our principles and values, therefore maintaining a self- assurance and esteem.(Can we not invent our story?). Thus we can deal with daily life confidently into old age.

A fine piece of modern Stoicism may be of some positive use :

"....in all we are the lucky ones---with finances that are secure and with interests to keep the brain working, as well as the modern technology to keep us connected."(Mawdesley U3A member)

Ok. So I might be panicking too soon about being abandoned by my sense of Self. On a serious note, I still believe that our enforced isolationism is a very different prospect for those living alone. Please keep in touch by phone with any members you know in this situation. But forgive me if I don't answer immediately, I am likely to be in the loft searching for my elusive sense of Self.

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Look after yourselves. John Latham.