

The Gillian Proctor Column

In this ongoing COVID situation, I find myself wildly fluctuating in my awareness of what is happening. There are times when I am out in public, usually on the rare occasions I shop for food, that have now become ‘events’, when I am constantly aware of the threat of being close to people for them and for me, and become easily irritated when others ignore the social-distancing guidelines. At other times, I find myself wandering locally, and momentarily forgetting to keep away from people. This fluctuation between hyper-vigilance and dissociation made me wonder how much we are in a situation of ongoing trauma, provoking responses akin to Herman’s (1992) findings about responses to complex ongoing trauma. It is clear that we are now in a chronic crisis state rather than an acute one. The immediate responding necessitated by the initial situation led to us being taken on the adrenaline of

novelty, but we now have to cope with the ongoing nature of the existential crisis. Does this ongoing situation lead just to constant stress, or is there a possibility of post-traumatic growth?

I also fluctuate between a sense of power and agency to make my own choices about how I respond, within the constraints of my circumstances, and feeling powerless to take charge of my life, feeling like a pawn in a much bigger plan on which I have no influence. Here I find Foucault’s theorising helpful about power-over and productive power. His earlier idea of ‘docile bodies’ on which power is played out described the operation of coercive power, whereas his later concept of the ‘stylisation of the self’ describes how we shape our own identities in relation to the world around us (for further explanation, see Proctor, 2017).



I suspect my feelings of powerlessness are related to the loss of my previous illusion of control over my life. I was an expert predictor, planner and preparer; anticipating what was needed to be done, preparing for all eventualities practically and emotionally, especially for disaster and disappointment. I thus created the illusion of control. This meant I was rarely able to enjoy satisfaction or happiness in the present, as I was also simultaneously getting ready for when the next disappointment or disaster occurred. I have become much better, through lack of choice during COVID, at focusing on, and being in, the present rather than planning for the future. Despite the frustration of being unable to plan and thus enjoy anticipatory excitement and the comfort of believing I can control my life, I think this has left me freer to experience more everyday enjoyment.

My current emotional state is now less clouded. Several factors seem to have coincided to result in this. I have found myself much more aware of the constant stream and flux of my emotions, much less distracted by planning for the future,

or travelling from one appointment to another and thinking in advance about what I need. As a result, my emotions have been more intense, perhaps a result of the reduced distraction from interactions with others, and perhaps also from more intense emotions arising from the situation. I have had to think more consciously about how to ground myself in my emotional travels, and to prioritise other ways to sense and perceive through my body, usually by focusing on my interactions with nature and the outdoors.

Both the present focus and increased awareness of my emotional state have resulted in my increased focus on *being* rather than *doing*. This shift has been a goal of mine for decades to challenge my habits learned in childhood of focusing on achievement and producing. The COVID situation has certainly helped me make this change in practice much more successfully now. However, I have been unable to ditch my goal focus entirely; I have found myriad ways of creating new goals, such as kilometres cycled and aiming internally to achieve calmness interacting with my son, rather than staying in the being-together process.



My experience of my body is another paradox, with my awareness of my embodiment being both heightened and reduced. Relating to people online is of course a much less embodied experience than meeting in three-dimensional space, although with more consciousness of how our own head looks to another. Personally, the ways in which my new habits and routines have become part of my self-experiencing and understanding have become apparent in my new version of an anxiety dream, which is about being unable to connect to an online meeting, or being unable to find a link. I have conversations in my dreams with others on zoom tiles, and this quickly felt surprisingly normal to be aware of myself and others as merely disembodied heads.

Yet simultaneously, many of my new COVID habits are much more focused on the needs of my body, perhaps in compensation for the online disembodied experiences, and perhaps in part due to the awareness of the potential COVID threat to our bodies. I have developed the bad habit of drinking at the end of each working day as a reward, justifying this habit as being only temporary, as long as other forms of reward are harder to envisage. I have simultaneously found it easier to get into new good habits, exercising far more regularly (in the absence of other reasons to go out of the house) and also thinking more carefully about a healthy diet and cooking food that I enjoy and look forward to.

Merleau-Ponty (1945: xvii) emphasises the importance of our habits: ‘The world is not what I think but what I live through...’. We are embodied, bodies placed in the world, we become our subjectivity through how we inhabit the world. Surely our changing relationship to our embodiment must have an impact on our self and intersubjective awareness, and on our identities.



References

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