

## Lockdown Story 2 (Anonymous)

There's a tree opposite my front window. In March, when it was announced that over-70s should stay at home for twelve weeks, I remember looking at it, still stark and grey in its winter dress, and thinking, "*It'll be covered in leaves again by then.*"

It was hard to imagine.

In July, 2019, I had told the headteacher of the primary school in which I was teaching, part time and mostly casual, that the following year would be my last. This was not because my 70th birthday was approaching or because I didn't like the job any more, but because work was getting in the way of other things that I was doing and wanted to do; most of which involve singing indoors with lots of other people. Little did I know what was to come! – that something so small that it can only be seen through a microscope would shut the world down, that singing would be cancelled, a hairdresser's appointment would become a red letter day and a supermarket shop would be a day out!

As the number of Covid infections rose, I decided that school was not the place for me and my retirement came about rather abruptly; and so began my personal lockdown. When the 23<sup>rd</sup> March announcement came, I decided, since I have asthma and was only a month away from my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, to place myself in the over-70s category.

In those early weeks before the supermarkets got a handle on the increased demand for home deliveries, I was fortunate to have three friends who offered to shop for me – one was looking after three other households as well as her own. Another is extremely clinically vulnerable, but as her husband works in other people's houses all the time, she insisted it was pointless staying at home and she wanted to help. The third works shifts in the care sector. Beautiful, selfless generosity for which I'm eternally grateful.

One terrifying day at the beginning of April, my great-niece, aged three, was admitted to hospital with breathing difficulties just as she and her family had recovered, it seemed, from Covid symptoms. For 12 hours she deteriorated and we feared that we were going to lose her. Through the magic of WhatsApp, over 100 people were praying for her. The following morning, she slowly began to improve and was well enough to return home by the afternoon. She has been well, but is only now returning to normal.

Then there was Joe Wicks! Oh yes!

My children and grandchildren all live over 150 miles away, so each day we shared our before and after photos and comments (some of them unprintable here!). The sessions were designed for primary aged children. I'm not 10. So many of my exercises were heavily modified! They did, however, in the absence of the gym, keep my arthritis at bay and we had a lot of laughter.

When it became possible to drive a short distance for exercise, I headed for the beach – ten minutes away. This has become my happy place since then. Always beautiful, even in fog and rain, and never the same. Once or twice, apart from the surfers, I was the only person there, walking along the waterline. Heaven! I feel very privileged to have this so close to home when so many are in high rise flats with no outside space, no transport and/or are many miles from any natural beauty.

Another lifesaver for me was Gareth Malone's Great British Home Chorus: 30 minutes each day live on YouTube learning songs before filming oneself singing them for inclusion in a huge virtual choir. Not as good as singing with other people in real life, but goodness, what an enjoyable way to bridge the gap! I kept thinking, "*I'M SINGING WITH GARETH MALONE!!!*" Recording myself was a sight to see: my phone was taped to a music stand, which was placed on a chair to give the required height, but the forward angle needed to avoid wonderful views up my nostrils put too much weight on the music stand, which often flopped forward mid-song and gave, instead, wonderful views of the floor!

Of special value to me have been the several WhatsApp groups – family, friends, those singing groups I mentioned earlier – which during the depth of lockdown kept me busy often for a couple of hours in the mornings. It's ironic that in some cases this has been a way of getting to know quite well some people I'd hardly spoken to before.

Then we found Zoom! My birthday at the end of April marked our first Birthday Zoom; my siblings and I all live miles from each other, so it's likely that this will become a regular thing long into the future. That first night, someone remarked that we should have had a cake. One of my brothers disappeared and returned a few moments later with a large potato spiked with lit birthday candles. They sang "*Happy Birthday*" in that rather mis-timed way of Zoom calls and I was commanded to blow out the candles, which, amid much laughter, I did (with a little help from my sister-in-law!). Thus was born The Custom of The Birthday Potato. I have visions of children, in generations to come, wondering why theirs is the only family to carry out this strange ritual and no-one being able to answer their questions about the forgotten reason for it!

During those wonderful, warm months of spring and summer it was easy to spend time outdoors and, along with online streamed Mass and prayer, I found time to spend with God – not necessarily praying in the formal sense, but finding a profound awareness of God's presence. I tried to pray Morning and Evening Prayer of the Church each day at one point. I failed singularly!

I've often heard people talking about "*watching*" Mass online. Much to my surprise, I haven't felt that I'm watching, but feel as much a part of the liturgy as I have always done when physically present. I haven't been into a church yet, as my own church still hasn't opened and my "*online parish*" has continued to broadcast in spite of having been open for more than three months. It was very moving to hear voices responding when people first went back. If I'm honest, I still don't feel confident about going into a church, and I've begun to feel very much part of the community in my online parish. I've been blown away by the efforts and imagination of priests and parish communities – not just the one I'm joining, but throughout the world – who have used so much imagination, many learning technology skills from scratch, to minister to their people, even, or perhaps especially, those who have been unable to stream their own Masses or times of prayer, but have made gargantuan efforts to keep contact going.

When we were allowed out again in June, I found it a little nerve-wracking venturing first to a garden centre and then to a supermarket, thinking myself very brave! And when I met up with others in a friend's garden again for the first time (all in our winter coats on a chilly day!), I was exhausted at the end of the couple of hours and had a sore throat, having said very little out loud for three months, apart from "*Hello*" and "*Thankyou*" to delivery people. I kept thinking how frightening it must have been for people who were shielding when they eventually emerged, not having seen how sensible most people were being with distancing and moving out of the way.

A special joy to me was the day that my daughter and her partner made a 300 mile round trip to spend four hours with me in the garden and at the beach and when, a few weeks later, they came at the end of a week's road trip in a hired camper van with the children, and parked up on the verge outside my house for their last night. It was horrible and odd not being able to hug, but we sat on the front driveway during the rather chilly late afternoon and evening, so that the van could be left unlocked for the children to move freely between the van and my back garden. Passers-by didn't bat an eyelid!

I still haven't seen my son and his fiancée in the flesh since the end of February and I haven't hugged anyone or been hugged since a family event on 11<sup>th</sup> March. I'm pretty certain that my first hug when this is over will make me cry, no matter who it is. Hugs are what I'm missing most.

In spite of the many frustrations of this period, I feel very fortunate: fortunate that I have access to technology; that I have good friends; that I'm able to be active; fortunate that I have the beach and a garden; that, being a pensioner, my income is unaffected; and I'm all too aware of those who don't have those advantages and of those for whom this is a desperately lonely time, of those whose mental or physical health has been adversely affected and of those who are struggling financially.

I've been deeply inspired by the efforts, imagination and generosity of so many during this period, who have made such efforts to look after their neighbours and those in their local communities and further afield.

And now here we are, with, it seems, some certainty of an imminent and effective vaccine and the cautious optimism that there may be light at the end of the tunnel.

A year ago, we couldn't have imagined any of this and as I look from my window at the tree across the road, its last few leaves are clinging on as it reaches the end of its cycle and prepares to rest again, building and storing energy for the new life that is to come.