

The current pandemic has disrupted life in many ways, too many to even begin to discuss in a short talk. So I decided to concentrate on one thing, probably the most obvious thing about the pandemic: Physical (originally called social) distancing. Suddenly in mid-March we were told to avoid other people, literally like the plague. We were told to shelter at home, not to go out, to isolate ourselves completely if we'd travelled or been near someone who had. It was a huge and very sudden change in our communal lives. Contradictory messages from different government and public health figures, not to mention Facebook and Twitter "experts", didn't help. Just as a little example, Niagara Region instituted a state of emergency that supposedly closed all parks and required people to leave home only once a week to shop for essentials. By the way, I looked at the Region's website on Thursday and the state of emergency, including these draconian instructions, is supposedly still in force. The day after the state of emergency was promulgated, the mayor of Welland announced on the radio that parks and trails were actually open for walking and a day or so later the acting Niagara public health director stated that going out for exercise was perfectly fine as long as physical distancing was observed. Most of us found a comfort level that involved changing our daily lives quite a lot, but not to the extent of never leaving the house.

I started thinking about giving this talk when two things happened. First, I saw an ad for a T-shirt, being sold for charity, with the slogan "A Lifetime of Social Distancing Prepared me for This." Next, I was talking with my son, Adam, who lives in a tiny apartment in downtown Toronto and has been working online since he returned from Greece, and had to self isolate for two weeks. We had both watched the film *Parasite*, and laughed that his life was like that of the man hiding in the basement in that movie. He remarked that he felt as if he were returning to his life as a shy and nerdy teenager, when his world revolved around his room and his computer. His life had changed quite a bit since then – in fact he'd been in Greece to play in a music festival with his doom-metal band. But the band members were now all in their own apartments, communicating online like everyone else. What had impressed Adam was how easy the transition had been for him.

That started me thinking about my own life. I had also been a quiet, shy young man who, over rather a longer period, had begun to travel about and socialize more. Once I got over the shock of empty streets and constant exhortations to "Stay Inside" as if the virus were transmitted by some sort of miasma in the outside air, rather than by getting too close to other people, I too found it surprisingly easy to adapt to the "new normal" of staying home or at most walking about the neighbourhood. In fact I was having a bit of fun putting my own geeky skills to work organizing online meetings and helping people, over the phone, get the technology working. I

didn't miss the constant driving about the peninsula, and it was kind of fun watching people give concerts from their living rooms.

Unlike Adam, I live in a quiet suburban area where physical distancing while walking or cycling isn't a problem. I still got out and life seemed almost normal, in a way. Penny and I gave up our habit of watching the national news in the evening, as we found it interfered with sleep. We certainly kept up with events during the day, and there was definitely a constant level of anxiety about the future – but our personal lives weren't affected as much as I had thought they would be.

Others have responded differently, of course. Some European countries, notably Italy and Spain, had very large and sudden increases in cases and had to resort to draconian social-distancing regulations to reduce the spread. People were confined to their homes except for the most essential of trips, and this was enforced by police. In Canada this was suggested, but never actually enforced. This kind of lockdown seems to have been particularly hard on cultures where life is lived more on the street than in people's homes.

Even in Canada, suburban families with lots of room seem to have had an easier time than people living in more crowded conditions – certainly poor people, but also more affluent people living in small urban apartments and relying on going elsewhere for entertainment, socializing and even exercise. Lately there seems to have been an increase in cases among urban 20-somethings in Toronto, for instance, that doesn't have an obvious cause. I expect at least some of this is due to people living alone in small apartments and unable to stand not being with others any more. I suspect the crowds in parks there are due to this feeling, especially among extroverts, and not to any spirit of rebellion.

As the pandemic has waned a bit in Niagara and things have begun to open up, I've noticed something rather strange. I can pretty much ignore the situation when I'm alone, or with Penny on a walk or bike ride. We've even gone canoeing on, and swimming in, the mighty Welland River, as we do every spring. The only time I'm really bothered, in a visceral way, by the physical/social distancing is on those rare occasions when I go shopping or pick up take-out food. People lining up 2 meters apart, some wearing masks, and following, or trying to follow, arrows on the floor, remind me of the crisis. I go out quite a lot, but I try to avoid situations where I interact with people in person, as the rules involved in this remind me of the crisis. My inner introvert is just fine with this. My occasional visits to check on something at the UCN, where the chairs are still set up for what was to have been the March 15 service, also feel strange and ominous, even though, or perhaps because, I'm generally alone when I'm there these days.

I'm certainly aware of the privileged position I'm in. I'm retired, with a pretty decent pension, so I don't have to worry about money. I'm not concerned about either becoming unemployed, or having to work at a dangerous job. Penny and I are healthy enough not to need help with daily tasks, and, like every other healthy senior I know, we simply ignored the advice from authorities that seniors should not go out at all. Luckily that advice wasn't backed up as in other countries with any attempt at enforcement. We're conscious of the hardships of others, of course, but mainly at a distance, from news reports.

I am also very lucky that I'm not completely alone at home. Penny and I have a marriage that has thrived for 46 years and I'm sure we'll survive this. By now we know how to give each other space when we need it, and our house is large enough to make that possible. It's certainly a great help to have one person from whom I don't have to distance myself at all, physically or emotionally. Both our children have partners they live with, and jobs they can do online, and I'm sure that makes life much easier for them as well.

Many people are not so well off, of course. I well remember homeless people being told to stay home, and sometimes fined for not doing so – not that that mattered, as they didn't have any money to pay the fines anyway. Many people are completely alone, or in close quarters with children that they have been trying to keep amused and busy. Some are in abusive relationships with no ability to get away. I can surmise what these people are going through, but these are not my stories to tell.

As the pandemic, or at least its first wave, wanes, everyone is wondering what happens next. Until an effective vaccine is found and widely distributed, the virus will lurk, liable to spread again if distancing is relaxed too much. No one really knows how long that will take – all the estimates are really wild guesses, so many people, including me, have been wondering what society will look like for the next while – perhaps a year or two, maybe even more. We also wonder whether permanent changes will result. So I've been thinking a bit about this and here are my personal musings.

It looks as if masks are going to be a thing, at least when people are indoors at relatively close quarters. This is new to us. Some Asian cities have seen many people wearing masks for years, but that was mainly because of air pollution. Still, they have adapted pretty readily to wearing them because of the virus. I suppose that will happen here too. I still feel very uncomfortable, both wearing a mask and being among masked people. It reminds me that others are dangerous, which is not a feeling I'm used to or am comfortable with. I remember when seatbelts came in, and when bicycle helmets became popular, and even compulsory for young people. Both of those seemed strange at first, and reminders of the dangers of ordinary activities, but I got used to them. In fact, I now put on my seatbelt in a car without thinking of it, and if I happen to get on my bike without a helmet, something immediately feels very wrong. I

wonder if putting on a mask to enter a store or auditorium will become like that, a reflex action we don't really think about.

It looks like restaurants, hairdressers and so forth are about to open, but with many precautions. I don't know how comfortable it will feel to eat in a restaurant where the waiters are wearing masks and where the menu is on your phone, because handling one on paper is considered dangerous. I think I'll still feel more comfortable getting take-out and eating it at home. Concerts and other performances will be strange as well. When the lockdown started, many performers and groups rushed to do concerts from home. This was fun for a while, but the fuzzy pictures and garbled sound made me conscious of what I was missing. I saw a couple of large, professionally done productions, one American and one Canadian, and the technology involved was impressive – but the incessant talk about the pandemic, and the necessity of staying home, just served to emphasize how different and scary the situation was. Will at-home artistic productions become part of the “new normal” and will they just be taken for granted rather than being seen as remarkable, heroic responses to the situation? We'll see, I guess. This service actually has a couple of these productions – you've seen one and there's another coming. For that matter, Maurice's song is an at-home production as well, just not due to the pandemic.

Religious institutions have just been given permission to open, though at one-third capacity. Our board hasn't discussed what to do about that yet – there's a board meeting this coming Tuesday – but my guess is that we'll wait till fall. Churches and similar institutions have been vectors for the disease. Even in the fall, probably the chairs will be widely spaced, we'll all wear masks, choral singing will be out, and perhaps congregational singing will be as well, and I expect that my favourite part of the service, namely coffee hour, will be cancelled. I don't know – I might actually feel more comfortable at home, looking at your unmasked faces on my computer screen while sipping my own coffee.

Most concerts, plays, etc. have been cancelled at least till fall. Even then, if they open at all, venues will operate with greatly reduced capacity. This will be disastrous for their finances, I'm sure. Exactly what will happen remains to be seen. I expect the gradual decline of the popularity of movie theatres will accelerate. Watching a film at home is safer, and with modern home-theatre equipment the quality is comparable. Live music and theatre are different, of course – there is an element in a live in-person performance that can't be reproduced by electronics. So we'll see. Is the extra excitement of a live event worth the risk, and the creepiness of closed lobbies and snack bars, long lineups for washrooms, and so forth? I don't know yet. I've been watching Stratford's series of filmed plays online; what will it take to get me to Stratford to see them in person?

Speaking of social interaction with actual physical people, the pandemic lockdown has, I'm sure, been very hard on people actively looking for romantic partners. This is not my problem, of course, so I can only speculate. Theoretically we are not supposed to be less than two meters from anyone we don't live with. I don't think it will be possible to maintain this for long, among lonely people searching for romance, or maybe just sex. The fear of syphilis didn't stop people from having sex in the past – I doubt if Covid-19 will now. Just recently I read a report that said that sex is safer if you wear a mask – sounds pretty kinky but somehow I don't think it'll catch on. (I did read of a strip club in Texas where the performers are naked except for masks.)

I worry that the “new normal” will confirm some of the worst, most regressive and least energy-efficient features of North American civilization. Walking around my neighbourhood I hear the laughter and splashing noises of people enjoying their own backyard swimming pools, while public facilities are closed. The wide, empty streets of suburbia have certainly been more conducive to distancing than narrow downtown sidewalks. Curbside pickup works much better in the suburbs, where stores have spacious parking lots. The first movie theatre to open in Niagara was the Can-View Drive-In. Automobiles feel safer than subway trains and buses, or theatres. I feel this myself: For the last few years, when I've gone to Toronto I've taken the car to the nearest GO station and the train from there, using the TTC once I get there. In the near future, once I feel confident enough to go to Toronto at all, I'll drive all the way to avoid being in a crowded train, bus or streetcar. I'll hate myself for it, but that's what I'll do.

Speaking of travel, there seem to be two sets of predictions. Some see a great increase in cycling and walking as people feel nervous on buses and subways. Others see the same increase, but in car travel. I can see both happening, but for longer trips there's no question the auto will be king. This could really set back the idea of a sustainable recovery. So could the idea that to get away from people, the best way is to move to a low-density suburb. Suburbs are much less energy-efficient than denser parts of cities, and use much more land per person, so that's a bad thing for the environment.

On the other hand, it looks like airline travel, long-distance travel in general, and especially cruise ships, are going to be slow to recover. That may be bad for the economy, but there's no doubt it will be good for the environment. As for me, I'm pretty glad that I took a trip to Europe, including a cruise around the Greek Islands, last fall. Penny and I had been considering whether to take it then or this spring. Looks like we chose wisely.

As life gets a little more normal, I'm finding that my sense of immediate danger has abated slightly, replaced by more worry about the longer term. Will we be in such a rush to get back to normal that we forget that normal wasn't all that good for many people, and certainly wasn't good for the future of the planet. I hope not!

Perhaps the most lingering effect of the pandemic will be the sense that people, all people are dangerous and that we should stay away from them. In a way, the whole world has become a dark alley, with even people we know having become dangerous strangers. The worst tendencies of introverts like me, and of insular suburban North American society, are encouraged. Gated communities, private clubs, private cars, all seem more comfortable in a world where danger lurks everywhere. Let's hope there is a vaccine soon!