

A PERSONAL BLOG OF THE PAST THREE MONTHS

by Pauline Warner, Free Church Chaplain

I put my watch on today. It felt really strange to see it on my wrist. I haven't worn a watch for three months. My main job is as a chaplain to Abbey Park a large nursing home run by MHA, a charity founded by the Methodist Church and now the country's largest care provider for the elderly.

The reason for the absent watch? Back in February we received instructions that we were not to wear anything below our elbows and no jewellery. Standard instructions for health care chaplains but not ones which normally apply to us. As the government were still prevaricating about the proper response, MHA acted decisively. I took my watch off and, going in every day, there seemed little point in putting it back on again....

....That's why it felt so significant to put my watch back during a few days off. I think it's called a 'madeleine moment' after the simple action of Marcel Proust biting into a madeleine cake released an absolute cascade of memory and 4,215 pages later he had written In Remembrance of Times Past. I intend to discipline myself to about 350 words each time!

At the beginning, the enforced separation from loved ones notwithstanding, there was something exhilarating about this new quietness, this insistence that we must be still. Another palliative care chaplain, Kitty O'Meara, expressed it so powerfully that her words became an inspirational world-wide virus.

"And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

"And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

"And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed."

~Kitty O'Meara



Time. How do we experience time? You might think that, coming from the Christian tradition, I would say it is simple, all straightforwardly linear. The first words of the Bible make it clear. 'In the beginning'.

Except I know that is not true. The beginning is not always where it begins. I know that because I have written a thesis. The introduction was the last thing to be written. I had to wrestle with my ideas and my powers of expression before I knew my argument. I am not the only person who started my master's thesis intending to celebrate a particular position and, in the process, changed so much that the finished thesis was a thorough repudiation of it.

So it was with the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. The story of a people, told as a journey of understanding, wrestling with what it is to be human and divine. When they started they believed that Israel was chosen and protected by their god. That certainty climaxed as they took Jerusalem as their capital and built the Temple for worship. Then they lost everything. Taken into exile by the Babylonians, they lost their freedom and security. But most devastating of all, they lost the Temple. How could this be? Either their god did not love them as much as they thought. Or he was not as powerful as they thought. No wonder they sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept for how could they sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Gradually it dawned on them that there was another explanation. Perhaps their god did not love just them but also the Babylonians and had even worked through the Babylonians. Perhaps there was only one God who had made everything. So the story was written... 'In the beginning God created.....'. It had taken the loss of everything they valued for them to be able to write the introduction.

"Give us some hope, Pauline", said a Christian carer on that first Sunday. So I blasted out Bony M, read Psalm 137 and suggested that perhaps we had to lose the world we know to find the truth.



There are those moments when time does feel frozen. Stands still. Ours came at the end of March.

We had gone into early lockdown. Most residents isolated in their rooms. Many staff shielding or isolating at home...it was my task to ring and check on them and residents' families, did elderly partners need shopping etc. It was actually a pleasant way to earn a living.

The staff began to speak of a local lady who had died of the virus. I didn't know her but it was still a shock to think that 'it' was that close. I heard of a friend's death and the shock deepened....but, then, she had had heart problems.....

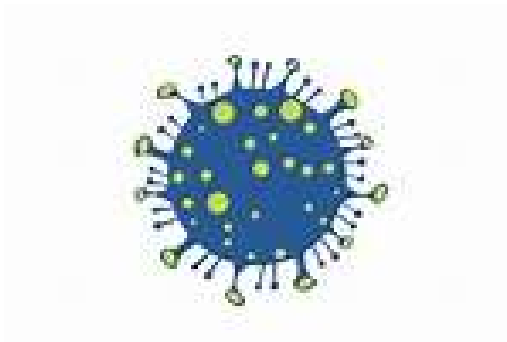
There were still many positives. One lovely gentleman just wanted company and sat with me everyday to chat. I live on my own and don't have any close family. So I did not have the worry, which was hitting staff, of whether they were carrying the virus from their families. I went home, phoned friends, watched telly, cleaned out one kitchen cupboard as my daily discipline, did some 'University work' by reading a serious book in preparation for my chaplaincy lecture to mark the opening of the Wroclaw campus. Then I read a novel.
A pleasant way to earn a living.

I happened to be in the office, on my way home that evening, when the call came. One of our residents admitted to hospital had tested positive.even now I can feel the numbing effect of that call. The carer who took it was actually working on an essay for her access course for a nursing degree at Cov Uni. She broke the spell with the irrationality of shock, even bereavement. "What's the point of doing this? It is all a waste of time". That knocked me out of my stupor to tell her that it was precisely for moments like this that we needed her quality as medical staff.

I went home, called the resident's wife, told her to ring me at any time she needed to talk.

Put the phone down and cried.

'It' was in.



Many Christians said it was their most meaningful Holy Week. It got us back to the original story of the events leading up to the death of Jesus – because, apart from his turning the tables in the Temple, none of them happened in a place set apart for worship.

Holy Saturday, the in-between day, is my favourite. This year, I had something special planned. It was Vicky's birthday. She is a committed Christian but I couldn't really get her to engage with that anymore. However, when I discovered she came from Bacup in Lancashire a bond was formed! Bacup is the location of one of the strangest folk festivals. I love that sort of stuff. The Britannia Coconutters dance every Holy Saturday for some inexplicable reason. Barbary pirates, Cornish miners and fighting evil are usually mentioned in explanation.

Because Vicky's family could not visit, I promised to go in, show the youtube of the Coconutters, then use the idea I had once used for an Easter service – about coconuts. Named by Portuguese explorers because the 'face' on it reminded them of the mythical bogeyman, Coco. That which we fear breaks open to become the taste of paradise. We would not be able to share Communion but Vicky and I could eat a Bounty Easter Egg together.

But by the time Saturday came round, all five lounges were isolating. I wasn't allowed in any of them. All I could do was to ring from the office. Vicky's carers took the phone in to her room and we chatted. I could tell that she was struggling more than she had but basically she seemed well.

Within an hour, the ambulance turned up. I couldn't believe it - it was for Vicky. She had deteriorated that rapidly.

And I was beginning to get angry. We had several residents in hospital and in the Home fighting for their lives. But the staff caring for them were not being given proper equipment.

Then I heard the Daily Briefing. The Home Secretary apologised. "I am sorry if you think that there is a problem with PPE", she said.

Must be our perception. Silly us.



Holy Saturday was the theme of the thesis I never finished. A study of the twentieth century mystic, Adrienne von Speyr. Unlike most Christian mystics she was not a nun. A professional woman, wife of the history professor at Basle and stepmother to his two children, she nevertheless found time to have visions! They were mainly of Christ descending into hell. Indeed on a couple of occasions she went into a mystical trance on Good Friday afternoon and stayed in it until early Easter morning.

Those visions have inspired many to ponder whether the cross may have been over-interpreted as the Christian symbol. Does it carry too much baggage? 'God goes into hell to rescue people from there' might speak more powerfully. Most people recognise that hell exists in war zone, prejudice, sickness, abuse and violence. Many know what it feels like to be there. The message of a God who enters into those situations to rescue people is both meaningful and hopeful.

It also avoids a facile triumphalism. "The strongest argument against Christianity", wrote the Jewish philosopher Buber, "Is that the world looks so unredeemed". But if the message is expressed in terms of the world still being in hell but touched by a redeeming, rescuing God... in the in-between state of Holy Saturday with a glimpse of resurrection victory.....there may be reason to hope.

Until I wrote this blog I had not registered just how significant Holy Saturday had been in our story. That was when we really started to worry. The speed of Vicky's deterioration seemed to sum up how frightening it was becoming.

On a normal Easter Sunday, I would go to a sunrise service. This one I was up before dawn to catch both night and day staff. People of all faiths and none for whom Easter would not have any religious meaning but in whom I was seeing self-sacrifice and love which, Christians believe, is the central message of the festival. I left a bag of Easter eggs outside each lounge with a card THE EASTER BUNNY HAS LEFT SOME DROPPINGS.



If Easter is celebrated a bit too naively and triumphalistically that was certainly not true for us this year. Experienced nurses said that it was the worst time of their careers. I had been a minister in Bradford at the time of the football stadium fire – had taken a double funeral of husband and wife from it – and can still remember the immense shock followed by numbness of a whole city in grief. This was different. It was remorseless, an unstoppable bulldozer moving through the place.and there was as much fear as there was grief. Is it never going to end? Are we going to lose everyone?

I was with those living with dementia or severe physical illness. I still wasn't allowed into rooms. So my main focus was on supporting staff whether through washing up or listening to their anguish as they witnessed people struggling to breathe or as they arranged face-time meetings which they knew were farewell conversations. We are used to end of life care but this was something else.

I was getting disgruntled. ...of course I did not begrudge the gratitude being shown to NHS Staff but care home staff were not being mentioned. It was resonant of the way the care sector has generally been side-lined in political debate over the last thirty years. Yet they were facing the same pressures and fear. There were a few grateful relatives who thought to send cards – and biscuits – to us. It meant such a lot.

I would not deny that we weren't on the front line making complex clinical decisions, watching people on respirators etc . But a big difference between care homes and hospital wards is that we can care for people for several years and grow to love them. As the staff say, they see more of the residents than they see their own families. We become a family. And it was our family which was being attacked. In those days after Easter we lost several members and there was no real time to grieve for any of them.



It is true that I experienced time in a strange way during the next two weeks. As I was living them they were so intense. Now I can hardly remember them.

The outcry following the death of a fourteen year old boy who died on his own meant that guidelines were changed and someone was allowed to sit with the dying. That became my task. Something I do regularly in normal times but these were not normal times. As I was sitting at Joan's bedside, I was asked to sit with Bernard instead because his passing looked more imminent. By the time I left at the end of the day both were still alive. I wished I had stayed another hour because then Bernard was at the end. A nurse sat with him. Then moved immediately to sit with Elsie who had taken a sudden turn for the worse. Two minutes later she died. Two different funeral directors were phoned and turned up at the front door simultaneously. Joan did not die for a few more days.

One of the different tasks of those abnormal times was it fell to the staff to clear out resident's rooms immediately so that they could be deep cleaned. Taking one deeply loved lady's belongings to put with the other piles, looking like the detritus of a war zone but actually the accumulated testimonies of lots of beloved lives was when it really got to me. I cried.

"This must be like it was at the end of the war", I said, standing looking round a lounge and seeing the empty chairs, identifying them with the person who would never sit there again. "When the village gathered and you looked round registering all those you knew wouldn't be back".

At that very moment, my phone pinged. It was Vicky's daughter. She had suggested that her Mum would soon be discharged and I assumed she was confirming that. In fact it was to say that the hospital had called. Vicky had just passed away. One person was now allowed to go in and say farewell and she was on the way to do that. I blurted out, "Vicky has died" and a carer, Meghan groaned back. "I loved that woman". And promptly burst into tears.



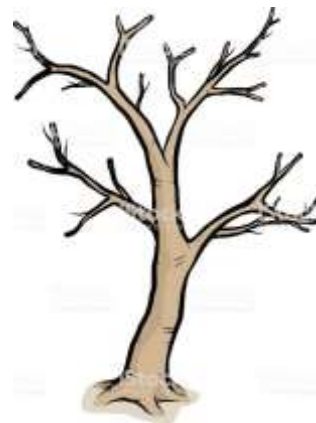
The onslaught lasted a fortnight. I sat with the dying and spoke to their relatives who were still not allowed to visit. Most were philosophical. They knew that their loved one was near the end of life anyway and that Covid had probably shortened it only by months. It was the question of funerals which was more difficult. At first only six people were allowed to attend and I came across families where there were more than six children. How do you decide which sibling will attend a parent's funeral? Or the children of our elderly residents could themselves be over 70 and isolating or, as in one case, a son who could not attend his beloved mother's funeral because his own son had a severe medical condition.

On the other hand, others commented that they appreciated being able to simplify the process without guilt. They imagined new ways of paying tribute. Later, I read a newspaper article by an undertaker suggesting that funeral practices will change for ever.

The CEO of MHA, Sam Monaghan (a Social Services graduate of 'Coventry Lanch') was at the forefront of a national campaign to get PPE and testing in Care homes. We got the PPE but had to wait for several weeks before we were all tested. It was fascinating when we were because our residential non-nursing wing had apparently escaped the virus but when they were tested all but two had actually got it! It was the fact that so many people could have been asymptomatic carriers which brought home just how evasive this thing is.

Of course, there were positive highlights as well. We had our applause moment as one lady, who had come back from hospital to die, walked down the corridor to the lounge for tea. There was the day when one of the nurses owned up to having trained as a hairdresser and suddenly became very popular. There were the meals the staff shared together once the residents, isolated in their rooms, had been served and it is generally agreed that we have grown closer because we have lived through this together.

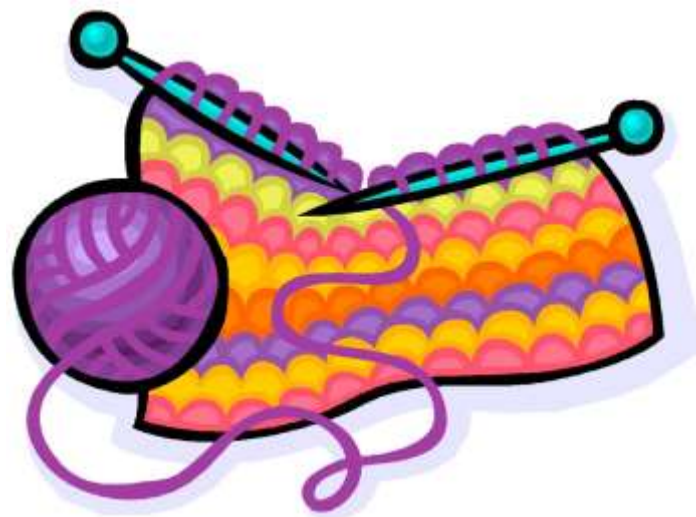
My thoughts began to turn to what we could do to help the healing of memories and honouring those we have lost.



Shawls have often been knitted prayerfully and given to people in bereavement and sickness as a token of care. I decided to re-name them for this season and am encouraging an army of knitters to 'Knit A Hug' for the relatives when we are able to hold a Memorial Service. As I started to knit, some of the younger members of staff said that they would like to learn. Then I found this passage and realised that knitting might not only be a means of providing gifts to the bereaved. It might also be a simple form of therapy.

"There is nothing new under the sun" - it seems that a very modern treatment for symptoms of anxiety, depression and even more, for post traumatic stress disorder can surely be seen to have its roots in the earliest history of humanity. This is EMDR - acronym for Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing. It is a simple and now scientifically established technique, developed from the 1980's in which the patient is taught to move the eyes rapidly while discussing their traumatic experiences and emotional problems with a trained therapist.

It has been pointed out by historians who understand the crafts traditionally associated with women, such as sewing, knitting, weaving, spinning, that these are very ancient, reaching back into prehistory. They have also told how women doing these skills have been getting together in groups from earliest recorded time, often at the end of the working day or while watching pots boiling and children playing - and most certainly to talk to each other. The conversations will have ranged widely from the latest idle gossip to the deepest collective and individual sharing of grief and trauma. Quiet and repetitive hand movements have a relaxing and soothing quality, leading to mindfulness and collective peace. The eye movements following a shuttle or a needle or crochet hook in a repetitive pattern, not only stills the mind but when combined with the opening up of trauma and distress to a safe group of like minded women is very therapeutic - as any woman who has been part of such a group at its best will tell you.



I could not finish without mentioning Matt Hancock's statement. I can't help feeling that if he hadn't said on May 15th that 'right from the start the Government has tried to throw a protective ring round care homes' the subject might have gone unnoticed. But that was such an obvious untruth, an insult both to the carers whose own lives had been endangered (three MHA staff had died of Covid) and the relatives who had grieved. As it was, it served to highlight the most contentious policy decision – the government's instruction to the NHS to discharge untested patients from hospital wards to care homes. MHA resisted and refused in spite of sharp practices designed to get those patients to transfer. Other care providers did not resist as much and the virus was spread.

On June 2nd BBC's Newsnight ran almost their whole programme charting Covid 19's journey through MHA. I recommend you to watch it. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000jr6j/newsnight-03062020>. What struck me was how the words I have used to describe our experience here in Coventry were more or less the same words which were used on that programme.

The Knit A Hug continues. The Memorial Service is planned. We just need to be able to arrange a date where we can socially gather. Every MHA Home is to be given a flowering cherry tree to plant as a memorial which will flower at the time the virus hit as a sign of hope and renewal. I am also channelling my inner Charlie Dimmock and asking for volunteers to re-vamp our garden as a gift to the staff. It might become a living example of one of my favourite chaplaincy stories told by a colleague in the NHS. She had said to a patient, "You know God can take the shit of life and turn it into manure". The patient replied, "Does that mean the roses will grow again?".

Meanwhile the Methodist people, given the chance to return to church buildings, are saying that we do not want to do that too quickly. This liminal time has shaken us up, we have learned 'to sing' in different ways in this strange land and are now asking ourselves how to use our resources in the cause of community building, justice and reconciliation 'without walls', mission for the future and not just preservation of the past. For the first time that I can remember, we are quoting the apocalyptic verses of the Bible – eternity has broken into time and made us ask what are eternal values. We haven't quite got round to writing the introduction yet but we are asking Is this the birthpangs of a new age?

I still don't wear my watch regularly. But slowly things are getting back to new normal. Families can book an appointment to see a resident out in the garden and shielded by a screen. Kathy, who we feared at one time was close to death's door, has just come back from seeing her daughter. "Goodness", she said to me, "My daughter has been telling me about this dreadful virus that's out there. You see we don't know what's going on do we? We're so cut off in here".

Sometimes there are advantages in having dementia.

