

What have I become?

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This morning, I refused to hold the heavy front door for a frail neighbour who was struggling to open it. In fact, I walked away from him and let him carry on unaided. When I check Facebook, I tut tut at my friends for drinking too much and frown at their photos of 50 mile cycles. Not sure that's really what we're supposed to be doing! On my walk, I swerve to avoid coming within 6 metres of a fellow pedestrian, who is already observing the 2 metres' distance.

Unhelpful, judgemental, afraid of the physical presence of other human beings. Is this what I've become?

I announced I was working from home on 12 March, well before the official lock down on 23 March. I went into the office to grab stationary and personal belongings on the 13th and stuck a notice up saying we were temporarily shut and giving my contact details. I forgot to clear out the fridge and I left our beloved spider plant to fend for itself in the fusty air of the overheated room. I suppose I thought it would only be three weeks. Like a longer than usual Christmas break. I don't really remember - who knows what I was thinking back then.

I am lucky I can work from home. Our organisation invested in smart phones and laptops about four years ago, so that we could work when out and about, and weren't tied to particular desks in either of our two offices. But the expectation was that we would mostly be based in an office when we weren't running groups or attending meetings elsewhere. Now we are each in our own homes, some of us with the luxury of spare rooms, others hiding out in their bedroom while their children bang on the door. No one remarks on the fact that we all have WiFi. Few of us have working printers.

I am lucky my job is possible to do from home. But I can't do some of the stuff I used to do - co-ordinating courses developed and delivered by our collective advocacy groups. We're not running any courses. When I first went off on the 12th March, I wondered what I could possibly do to fill all my contracted hours. I struggled working almost 7 hours a day over 4 days. I couldn't concentrate, I spent too long reading the

news online. I felt guilty and resentful that I should be efficient and productive, and anxious that I would get into trouble. Though who from, I am not sure. My manager and colleagues have all been supportive, as of course they are dealing with similar problems.

I soon switched to 5 shorter days which helped. And I found Zoom calls absorb a lot of time. Now I am struggling to fit everything into my contracted hours. I attended a session on resilience for advocacy workers and was ridiculously delighted to see familiar faces. I found it very helpful and now I wonder what had happened to my views on the whole concept of resilience (O'Donnell and Shaw, 2016).

The most enjoyable thing in this situation is a new group I facilitate on Zoom. The first meeting was supposed to have happened on 13 March but I cancelled it. Two weeks later, we met for the first time on Zoom. Ten of us, including two workers, all of us with mental health issues, are developing a new course. We are doing it by just chatting. We have a topic to start with and, out of the discussion, a topic for the following meeting emerges. We just talk about our experiences and how we make sense of them and how the current situation is affecting us. The check out at the end of the meeting is always the same: thanks for this opportunity, how good it is to talk with others, so glad I can do this. When I close the meeting, I have tears in my eyes.

Two people in the group haven't been able to attend any face-to-face meetings in the last year because of physical illness and impairment, so this way of working is so much more accessible for them. Two other people struggle a bit with the technology. But they manage and they are there. However, not everyone has the smart devices, the technical skills and confidence, the internet... Some people are really struggling with their mental health and with accessing basic needs like food and physical safety (see Luke Campbell in this issue).

One of the best things that I am doing outside work is as a result of a former student inviting me to an online reading group focusing on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. I love having students on placement and I always urge them to continue to read once they graduate. Now I am the one needing that encouragement.

I am struggling to make sense of this reality we are now living. For example, I am sceptical of the Clap for Keyworkers, but every Thursday night I rush to the balcony to join in, moved to tears by the sound of the ship horns from the docks and the banging and shouting and clapping from neighbours. I am sceptical of the comments 'we can't go back to normal after this, we need to make a better world' because I don't think many people are thinking of more than a few tweaks to the new form of capitalism that will emerge from this.

Will reading theory help me make sense of my judgemental attitudes to rule-breakers and rule-benders? Will it explain my guilt about productivity? Will it bring me hope and connection and a way forward? I'll just have to see.

I remind myself of bell hooks

I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend-to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.

References

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- O'Donnell, A. and Shaw, M. (2016) 'Resilience and Resistance on the Road to Recovery in Mental Health', *Concept* 7(1)