

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT: Eighteen months of stultifying housebound solitude, or (nearly worse) inescapable togetherness, has done our heads in

Season of mists and brainfog forgetfulness

Anita ROBINSON



I BELIEVE I'm suffering from Long Covid. I think we all are. Before you fling this paper from you for fear of contagion, I don't mean literally. I'm fully vaccinated, plus booster and I never caught Covid in the first place.

Eighteen months of stultifying housebound solitude, or (nearly worse) inescapable togetherness, has done our heads in. Mine anyway. It was far from reassuring to read a recent article in which scientific experts suggest our brain functions may have declined during lockdown. Apparently, prolonged anxiety and depression diminish short-term memory, equivalent to six years of natural ageing. The same experts indicate that the over 50s have 'aged' five years in the past 18 months, and six and a half if you're more elderly. What a cheering thought.

It's a truth universally acknowledged that social isolation, loss of routine and absence of contact with people are psychologically damaging. Personally, I always found 'family togetherness' all singing harmoniously off the same hymn sheet a tad overrated but then I came of an opiniated family whose favourite form of communication ranged from mild bickering to apoplectic argument, each of us utterly persuaded we were right.

One of the great disappointments of marriage was when bones of contention presented themselves, the Loving Spouse went dangerously mute. You could nearly see the frost forming on his features as I followed him around trying to pick a fight.

Each of us is lonely in our own way. I recall one of those crowded standing-about functions full of people who don't know each other exchanging platitudes. Being a socially responsible guest I engaged in conversation with a morose-looking fellow standing alone by the window. Lord, it was like pulling teeth. No, he wasn't local. No, he wasn't alone – he was here with his wife. Hoping to identify her, I asked, "What's your wife like?" "Difficult," he replied. I moved swiftly on.

We've all responded to the pandemic in our own fashion – the practical, in an orgy of home and garden improvement; the sweaty lycra-clad are jogging grim-faced past my gate; the cerebral improve the shining hour by reading thick novels, solving cryptic crosswords, soduku and playing bridge. I bought two feather cushions for my favourite chair and sit in it the length of a working day reading newspapers and shouting at the television.

I grudgingly confess to developing a mild interest in nature by standing at the kitchen window watching a pair of buzzards rear their young in a big ramshackle nest in the beech glen behind the house. They have obviously eaten the dear little grey squirrels (yes, I know they're vermin, but such cute faces) who annually strip the oaks and sycamores of their acorns and keys. Frequent scatterings of bloody pigeon feathers adorn the lawn and the hedgehog has disappeared. Nature, red in claw and beak.

Many of us have sublimated our energies into frenetic activity; others have withdrawn into themselves. Too much introspection is bad for you. Self-examination is rarely a wise idea, unless you have food stuck between your teeth. In an idle moment (of which there've been many) I recorded the consequences of lockdown I've experienced and discovered I can't bear silence. There must be music or speech audible throughout the house. The radio's on all night and I dream the programmes. I hold conversations with inanimate objects, "Good morning kettle." "Now cauliflower, what are we going to do with you?"

I have to look at the top of the paper to see what day it is. My memory's away with the fairies. I reach for a word in my mind that I know is there but I can't retrieve it. Normally the most social of creatures, I've a profound disinclination to go anywhere. Over all hangs a pall of indifference. As for dreary domesticity, I do as little as health and hygiene allow, though now that chance callers are permitted legitimate entry, I've had to up the ante.

The moral of this piece is – avoid reading features headed 'Slow the Ageing of your Brain by Simple Tests to Sharpen your Memory.' That way madness lies.

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ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 16 1971

Two RUC Men Shot Dead

THE two unarmed policemen shot dead in a Belfast off-licence were named as Sergeant Dermot Hurley (50),a father of five form Co Wicklow and Constable Walter Moore (37), single and a native of Derry. Four gunmen followed the officers into the Oldpark premises and shot them down.

The killings bring the death toll since 1969 to 158. This year's toll of 125 comprises 76 civilians, 36 soldiers, 11 police and two UDR men. Of these 95 have died since internment.

Faulkner Challenges SDLP

PEOPLE were entitled to be concerned about the ugly weapon of internment, but they failed to carry conviction if they did not show at least equal concern about the much greater ugliness of violent death, Stormont Premier Mr Brian Faulkner said last night. He added: 'I thrown down to them [SDLP] this challenge. Go out into your community. Condemn the IRA and all its works utterly.'

Mr Faulkner said it was as unthinkable that the war aims of the IRA – 'one of which is Direct Rule as a first stage' – should be realised as it was that the Mafia should be allowed to govern Italy.

Lynch Appeals to Unionists

THE Unionist population should give up 'freely and voluntarily' any idea of dominating in the North, the Taoiseach Mr Jack Lynch said last night. In return, he was sure the response from the Catholic minority – and from the rest of the country – 'would be a determination to leave nothing in the way of total reconciliation'.

Speaking in Monaghan, Mr Lynch said: 'The past two years had taught that there could be no return to old attitudes about the North. There can be no resumption of the old policy of coercion of the minority … there will be no conquest of the Northern majority either. We, who represent the majority of the whole island, do not seek it. We do not want it. …'

The majority in the North had seen their government rule unjustly and in a partisan way for fifty years. However, the objections of the Northern majority to Irish unity 'must be faced … Unionist Irishmen could be allowed the right to have a special regard for Britain. Entry to the Common Market would narrow differences and, indeed, eliminate them,

THERE was more than a hint in Faulkner's speech that direct rule – regarded by him as a capitulation to the IRA – was on the cards. Jack Lynch's speech in Monaghan showed a more nuanced approach to the north, moving away from old-style anti-partitionism to balancing the rights of northern nationalists with the desire of unionists to remain British.

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