

## Blog 14

### Betwixt and Between

I wonder if, like me, you are feeling in a state of limbo? The lockdown has been eased and is set to be eased still further soon - perhaps even ended, though what is likely to follow will not be life as we knew it before the lockdown. Transitions tend to be difficult, even when tinged with hope. As I drove the short distance to my nearest shop this morning I listened to the overture to *The Magic Flute*. Why could life not be as calm and measured as Mozart's music?

But of course it can't and that is the very reason why Mozart so charms us. And we shouldn't assume that Mozart had no cares. Although as a result of his genius he had access to the Austrian court and nobility he lived sparsely. *The Magic Flute*, his last opera, was first performed in 1791, two years after the French Revolution and a time of turmoil and threat in Europe. Mozart died the same year at the age of 36, probably from chronic kidney disease. According to Percy Scholes "the severest economy accompanied his funeral"\*. Yet despite his hardships Mozart created music that according to Scholes "is perhaps the most pure" of all the instrumental music ever written.

We can't all be Mozarts. But we can try to accept that life is what it is, at this moment, accepting too that that moment is fleeting and change is constant. We will soon hear what the (temporary) new normal will be like after 4 July. That will bring its own joys and challenges. We may or may not agree with it, but we can make the most of it. It will be another step along the way to a more stable situation. Meanwhile to seek some respite from the cares of everyday play the overture to *The Magic Flute* (or whatever music has the same effect for you.)

Take care and stay safe.

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\*Percy Scholes, Oxford Companion to Music, Tenth Edition edited by John Owen Ward.

## Blog 13

### Towards a new community

*“It’s anarchy in the UK, but this will pass”* wrote Kate Maltby in The i newspaper on 4 June. I think that most, perhaps all of us will hope she was right, though many of us will hope that constructive change will nevertheless come about. Her article rightly shows that *“easing lockdown exposes our conflict between freedom and rules”*. However, there is a contradiction in her analysis of how we will, or should, escape from this conflict.

On the one hand Maltby seems to think the answer is governmental diktat. As she puts it:

*“The question – urgent after a pandemic lockdown, but always relevant to 21<sup>st</sup>-century societies—is how we re-impose a sense of community and order without again renouncing our most basic civil liberties”* (emphasis supplied.)

However, towards the end of the piece a more evolutionary approach seems to be favoured:

*“This anarchic period will pass. New norms will establish themselves. We won’t all hate our neighbours forever”* (emphasis again supplied.) As a resident of a small coastal village where dislike of visitors has reached almost fever pitch I can empathise with the second sentence. But I question whether norms “establish themselves”. Norms are developed when a sufficient number of people accept them as binding on their behaviour. It would seem that government diktat is an inefficient way of securing acceptance, at least for any sustained period. The more social distancing rules are eased the more likely, it seems, that many people will stretch their interpretation of the remaining rules.

Above all, new rules will need to be developed in consultation with those to be bound by them, and to take account of what is practicable as well as desirable on safety and economic grounds. There is a vital role of leadership here, leadership built on an understanding that ALL lives matter, albeit we owe it to those parts of the community which have suffered particularly in recent years, and in the pandemic, to address their needs urgently with practical action, not just talk. The theme of leadership, both by and within the Unitarian movement, will be the theme of the Winter issue of *News & Views*. Contributions on that theme will be very welcome.

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## Blog 12

### The Bonfire of the vanities (with apologies to Tom Wolfe)

I don't know about you but I do love a winter bonfire. But a summer fire is unusual and potentially dangerous in dry weather. This was brought home to me graphically the other day when I had a fire to burn up heaps of cuttings at the local community garden. All it took was a few firefighters and a match to produce a conflagration. The cuttings were rapidly disposed of but I had to stay with the fire until it burnt itself out.

As I watched the fire it came to me that the coincidence of the Covid—19 pandemic with the revulsion, rightly felt across the world, at the killing of George Floyd had produced a similar situation – the potential for a seismic change to the way we confront racism but also for a serious spread of the virus and a social revolution which might lead to unforeseeable consequences.

I wondered how scenes such as the toppling of the Colston statue in Bristol had come about. The removal of tributes to the slave trader had been debated locally for years and had got nowhere. The impatience of the local black community is understandable. But the argument that nothing had been done over recent years to challenge imperialistic attitudes stung me. The pursuit of multi-cultural, anti-racist education has been a theme of my professional career, first in research, then in regulation of legal education and finally in advising schools, colleges and universities. Fundamental changes to the way students are taught have been introduced in the last thirty years. No child these days should be taught history as the spread of civilisation as the world map was steadily covered red. But as monuments to former heroes such as Sir Francis Drake, Queen Victoria and Gladstone are threatened with destruction it's clear that efforts to make education more inclusive have failed in the eyes of many in the Black community.

I hope I am not being too fearful when I see the risks of a second peak of the virus and of criminal damage and violence. I applaud the fact that we have seen Black Lives Matter demonstrations – peaceful and socially distanced – in towns in the South West, a largely white and socially conservative area. And institutions such as Oxford University must do much more to increase their lack of inclusiveness. But surely there are more effective ways of doing this than removing a statue of Cecil Rhodes (though it would be more sensible to move it to a museum where Rhodes' life and work could be placed in context.)

So I accept that the efforts of myself and other white liberals have been inadequate and that political change must now take precedence. But I would appeal to all to remember that ALL lives matter and that so far as humanly possible that change should be brought about by peaceful, democratic means.

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## **Blog 11**

### **Are we still all in this together?**

When writing these pieces I have been determined not to get drawn in to politics. So why am I now going to discuss aspects of the easing of the lockdown? Surely the great majority of us are pleased to see the beginning of a return of our hard won freedoms?

Well, yes and no. I am sure many of us will have appreciated the new found feeling of solidarity that the lockdown has inspired in many communities. I do fear that that solidarity is already starting to break down. Some beaches are full of people clearly not complying with social distancing. Many ordinary folk seem to have no qualms about flexing the rules. Does it really matter if we invite a seventh person to our socially distanced barbecue?

Some of the easing measures may also reduce that feeling of solidarity. When test, track and trace is fully operational it will make it possible to introduce local lockdowns in particular areas, after months of assurances that the rules would not be varied to allow different areas to come out of lockdown at different speeds depending on the relevant infection rate.

And the release from lockdown of those being shielded may make protecting the vulnerable even more difficult. I am reminded of the words a social worker used when I expressed concern that an aged aunt must be allowed to return home from the care home where she had been convalescing: she “must be allowed to fail”. In that case the only person liable to be affected was my aunt (who had dementia). In a pandemic, however, the shielded person may not only be let free to incur possibly fatal infection but also to contribute to the wider dissemination of the disease.

When you add into the mix the fact that there are slightly different rules – and underlying attitudes to the desired speed of easing the lockdown - in the four countries within the UK, regional variations of the infection rate in England and the appalling and as yet unexplained increased susceptibility to covid-19 of particular BAME ethnic groups and you really do wonder how long we can claim to all be in this together.

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