

Abstract

For some time now I've been mulling over the business of 'returning to normal life', wondering about the possibility of being able to do so in the foreseeable — or even distant — future. In fact, I've been wondering about 'normal' itself, and about what it means now that we know that our encounter with COVID will not only be protracted, but unpredictable.

Time's axis has shifted. It has become relative.

In a mundane, everyday kind of way it is expansive and leisurely, almost indulgent. Nothing is urgent. I am not bound by a routine that is regulated by my watch. I edit mss., read proofs, correspond with authors, discuss projects, in the knowledge that none of these are going anywhere in a hurry — at least for the "foreseeable" future. I'm not rushing to publish a lot of books, to make up for lost time (there's a thought, time that has been lost in lockdown) because there is a serious question mark hovering over sales. Who will buy? Will people rush out to buy books just because they have been confined, or will they have had their fill of reading already, because they could do so little else? Maybe the last thing they will want to do is pick up another book. Let's give book production a bit of a rest, I think.

But at an existential level, time has suddenly collapsed into itself. Is no longer measurable, because — will I even be around to see those books published if I don't hurry up and get them out? Shouldn't I be accelerating instead of slowing down? What if I run out of time??

In between the mundane and the existential is yet another impulse, that of pretending that I can, in the short term, exercise some control over the time at hand. I can pretend that, really, nothing much has changed, everything will settle down, so I should carry on regardless, because time will — if I can hold out for long enough — resume its normal rhythm, and life will resume its normal tenor. I can pretend that if I, personally, carry on as if there had never been a lockdown, then I will be able to turn the clock back, and no time will have been lost.

But that will be tilting at windmills.

And so I manoeuvre myself into that tiny space, that sliver of time between lockdown and post-lockdown, whenever that might be, to think and plan for a week at a time, which seems to me a good compromise between the everyday and the existential. As for normal, it looks like I might be wishing for too much and too little at the same time for, as Grace says, "everywhere vast public suffering rises in reeling waves from around the earth's nation-states".