

## **“SMEYES Though Your Heart Is Breaking” Pre-COVID Vaccine Vacillations**

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Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh’s Late Late Show lock down mantra of “dúiseacht le dúthracht le breacadh an lae” where he invokes his mother’s optimism to awaken to each day’s dawning full of beans and enthusiasm was a little easier this morning the 29<sup>TH</sup> of June 2020 as we entered phase three of lockdown exit. Even in windy sideways Tipperary Monday Morning sheet rain.

The elusive “WATIO” i.e. “When All This Is over” feeling seems somewhat within the realms of not so far off possibility. Are we deluded? Do we need to indulge a spot of pretend arrival at WATIO? At least with good hair (hurray for opened hairdressers and tended manes), and the possibility of a few indulgent pre-booked, socially distanced, nine- euros- worth- of- food- with- your -beer, #theorganizedfunmustbeoverwithin90minutes “real” pub pints. Many Mothers will be happy about the new prerequisite of a forcibly lined stomach before one is to indulge in a few jars. The concerted association of alcohol consumption to food consumption and also with a time limit may actually be cathartic for Irish Drink Culture. Or will it be all just be a swift reprieve before we are thrust into another Covid wave front stamped with OTATO (One Thing After The Other) yet again? More and more people begin using the past tense somewhat tentatively when discussing Ireland’s lockdown and the worst of the Covid Crisis. The USA and Brazil are still in the throes and epicentres of Covid Pandemic Pandemonium. But we Irish seem to be able to see light in the distance. An albeit flickering light, but it catches a cheeky glint of shiny hope on our now flattened curve. Our now dwindling numbers of cases are plotted reassuringly on down sloping glimmering graphs.

There is a much longed for seismic social shift afoot. But it comes laced with anxiety. We have habituated to quarantining and limiting our travel and contact with the outside world. Our choices have been curtailed and with that there has been less anxiety around the act of choosing. Is that the attraction of cloistered convent or monastic life or political dictatorships where there is no trepidation with choosing?... just all those “rules to be followed”, “lines to be toed”. Just “follow the leader”, “maintain the status quo”. We are emerging from hibernation, from unprecedented hermitage. There is palpable trepidation woven into the relief, as kids are ceremoniously dropped to pony camp, crèche, sports. There are new rules. No buggies allowed in crèche. Offspring are to be handed over at door to be assigned pods. Children who heretofore were used to being corralled in their homes with their primary care givers must now all of a sudden, cope with being wrenched from the cocoon.

There are garish yellow signs festooning doors and hand washing stations have sprouted up like dystopian holy water fonts at every entrance and exit. Will crèche workers be masked? Will it be easy to let the kids back into the big bad world? What will the dog and cat think? They are used to having their co-cocooned hoo-mans about their personages for all day on tap cuddles and treats. Have we all become socially deskilled? Almost agoraphobic cocooners gingerly venture out their front doors like survivors of a war emerge from their bomb shelters. Many others are inexplicably tripping the light fantastic as if there's nothing to worry about.

The GP Consulting Room has borne witness to this crisis. It is a relatively small space, a crucible of sorts into which the world relentlessly funnels the coarse bedrock ores of humanity to us. We as GPs, take what is presented to us and try to provide the milieu and right temperature in our melting pots to smelt out the metals from the ribboned rock; so much undefined undifferentiated illness and anguish and torment comes at us to make sense of. There are diamonds in the rough and pure gold seams. Some metals are more pliable and more malleable. There is the inevitable transference and countertransference. There is the elation and honour and heart lift. There is the exasperation and drudge and the heart sink. There is the soothing routine of banal problems and then the reproachful jolt of the emergency. Out of nowhere, bolts the bizarre and the unusual. As with any mining, there are explosions and delays in production. Sometimes alloys are formed. There are meltdowns and landslides and tunnels collapses. Things get heated and cooled. Metal shows its tensile strength. The old miners' hands get dirtied and worn, their faces sooty. There are union issues. The communication gets muffled and stifled with all the protective equipment. Sometimes, the canaries down the mine shafts stop singing.

RTE aired comic relief. Anne Doyle's familiar face reads "Waterford Whispers" news reel with iconic comic solemnity. They resurrect moth eaten, sclerally icteric Zig and Zag. They could have both done with a rub of Jif and a decent febreezing. True to form, Covid profiteering Dustin has a Perspex scammer going. Ray D'Arcy is grey-bearded and bald. The nostalgia was anchored in a slap-to-the-face Tsunami of the reality of the passage of time. It was enough to precipitate an undignified public midlife crisis for anyone who grew up in the 80s and 90s. The presenters try desperately to compensate for the lack of a studio audience. It initially rings achingly hollow until things warm up and we ignore the echoing acoustics. We are jollied along with "The 2 Johnnies" and lice outbreak fleeing "Eamonn and Bridget". Christy Moore poignantly sings "The Voyage" into a 20-year-old Nokia phone and there is a heart wrenching zeitgeisty short animated film of a cocooning Granddad separated from their Grandchild. It captures the everyday Weltschmerz and loneliness wrought by Covid and Quarantine. The Granddad gets an ipad and learns how to face time! Hozier croons "Bridge over Troubled Water" out of a bleak Croke Park. The carefully socially distanced up lit musicians play in the dark, desolate pitch. The stands are hauntingly empty. Marianne and Connell from normal people have a "Sally Rooneyversary" confessional box priest sandwich harmonic epiphany singing "baby can I hold you tonight" and disappear to a life of bliss. They spoof the same now middle-aged, dressing robed couple, years later. "He in his kerchief and she in her cap" kind of pre bed scene. The heyday in the blood now tamed. He is offering beans and toast she is clutching a hot water bottle between languid pregnant pauses. We are reminded again of the human condition and our right to age (dis)gracefully and pan to our own middle-aged post Covid denouement.

First day of phase three lockdown relaxation begins to sour when CMO Tony Holohan warns about a concerning cluster of 24 cases. A lovely patient is replaying the videoed eulogy of their beloved deceased spouse's recent funeral on her phone. The day is bookended by RTE airing a very hard-hitting documentary about the Covid ward in St James' Hospital. The staff cry as they try to deliver dignified safe care to infected patients.

The patients and families beam to each other through computers wrapped in plastic. Nurses and Doctors defeatedly deliver bad and good news by telephone. Some patients get reunited with family. Some others deteriorate and need ventilation. Others die. When they pass away, the corpse must be masked, and the double body bagged. The family do not get to see their loved ones laid out. The stark lived horror of these ordinary lovely people and professionals strikes home. The compassion, professionalism and caritas of the healthcare workers drenches through their PPE. I think of the importance of the often-quoted palliative care adage “to cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always”. The joy and triumph of human connection somehow transcends all the gowns and visors and masks.

I think this week we are all a little spent. We continue to put the best foot forward. Even though this bloody virus seems to loom spectrally large on the horizon and uncertainty seems to be the only certainty. We distract ourselves with banana bread and “notionary” elderflower cordial making. In Paris, they show pictures of giant teddy bears strategically sitting in street cafe chairs to whimsically social distance customers. McGowan’s Pub in Phibsborough sets up perspex booths with old style phones so the singles can “mingle” from safe distances through pre-booked perspex panelled partitions. Flirtation has adapted. The “New Normal” might actually be fun and the phrase itself less anxiety triggering. “The Beekeeper of Aleppo” said the thing he loved most about his wife was “she laughed like we would never die”. That’s a skill we should all acquire and hone. We are going to need a sense of humour. Back bone, wish bone, funny bones at the ready, the only way out of this is through it. Mask on, hands clean and smiley eyes “SMEYES” a twinkling.

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