

Thoughts on Isolation by Stan Marks

Living through the Covid 19 Pandemic is like living in a jigsaw puzzle.

Trying to put the pieces together is no simple task. There is a renowned saying that people plan and God (he, she or it) laughs”.

At 91 years of age, it came soon after my wife, of sixty-seven years marriage died. I was alone, isolated like so many millions of people in Australia and around the world.

The personal challenges that I faced were exacerbated by the restrictions placed on me by a virus that altered daily life on Planet Earth.

Facing endless changes in everything forced me take stock of what the virus meant and the meanings of washing one’s hands, not leaving the house, total isolation, wearing a mask and being careful of what I touched or what touched me. In many ways like being a new-born. Being confronted by a different way of life.

How would I live through this period, without all the things that I thought mattered and took for granted; visits from family and friends, making up stories and playing with my great-grandson. A completely altered fabric of my life. And what it would mean if and when the virus was eradicated. Or even more pertinent if it never completely is?

I began to watch more and more TV and listen to radio broadcasts that had a continuous stream of information that might give me leads on my and the worlds’ future – I began to argue with myself.

What could I or should I do?

I started sketching, pondering colours, shapes and nature itself, however, I wasn’t destined to be an artist! So I took up the harmonica instead and was able to “play tunes” over the phone to my 5 year old great-grandson who lived isolated with his parents in a country town, a long distance from my home.

I wondered, could we really be headed for Armageddon as some in the media had suggested. I even pondered the Bible about plagues and threats to various peoples and religions, including Judaism throughout history.

I tried to put some perspective on what the “experts” were telling us, feeling that they had no definitive ideas of what was ahead.

I had to visit the dentist and was staggered as to how deserted the once vibrant streets that surround my home were and what was required of me to enter the surgery. Mask, hand sanitizer and only one patient in the waiting room at time. So different from my last visit before the lockdown.

The deserted Melbourne streets, reminded me of the film of Nevil Shute’s famous book “On the Beach”, a film about the end of the world, covered by radiation, after an atomic world war.

It ended in Melbourne where part of it was filmed. It was 1959 and the time of the Cold War between the USA, its’ Allies and the Soviet Union.

How different was the world then, when I helped host a cocktail party for the renowned Hollywood stars, including Ava Gardner, Gregory Peck and Fred Astaire, who were in Melbourne to film the movie.

What would the end of civilisation mean? I worked out numerous plots; including the possibility of Aliens taking over planet Earth. Would humans unite to stop the invaders? After all, there is no accounting for people and what they could or would do? And I kept thinking of missiles at the ready, germ warfare (like a virus today) and secret weapons we didn't really know about, in man's inhumanity to man, woman and child.

I even wondered whether we might have time to make special, modern boats like Noah's Ark to possibly save some civilisation to start a new world and learn from the current virus the possible warning it was giving us?

I became a member of a daily joke club feeling that my love of humour especially that of the absurd could be a help. After all I did believe in the "11th commandment" of 'thou shalt laugh, especially at oneself', but then I pondered over whether the virus really was anything to be laughed at and the use of the word "only"... 'Only' a certain number of cases, 'only' 10 deaths today...for many, 'only' has become a very lonely and frightening word.

It is also a time of stock-taking of my life, past, present and perhaps any future.

Really coming to grips with what, if anything that life was all about.

I pondered if this virus was really a "message" to all of us, a virus that does not discriminate but treats us all equally, no matter our race, religion, sex, age or beliefs?

I have been pondering the whole matter of climate change, whither civilisations and, above all, the environment now and for future generations, before it is too late.

How more seriously we all, especially our leaders and governments here and world-wide, should take the very future of our environments. The rising sea levels, ice melting, fishing areas and the whole existence of Planet earth. As an increasing number of people in various lands are questioning Earth's very existence. Could it be facing extinction, however crazy that may be to ponder. But is it?

I am currently reading David Attenborough's latest book questioning whither our way ahead. I wonder if we do enough world-wide through schools and young folks, our future leaders, to foster communications about all aspects of saving the environment, including for the animals habitats

My old school Brighton Grammar suggested I send a message to graduating Year 12 students on facing their final exams whilst living through a pandemic.

My message read....

What a year you have been through.

I wonder how as a Year 12 student at the "old" Grammar school, I would have got through it.

It would have been quite a testing time as you have found.

What can I advise you from my years and now as a very old boy but, hopefully, young in heart, spirit and even still striving in various areas.

Savour each day and remember none of us, no matter who or what we are will get out of it alive.

We are all, repeat all, destined for the same final destination.

Each of us has 24 daily hours, no more, no less. So, allowing for nature, health and the actions of others and luck (although we can help make our own luck) try and make them memorable.

You only get one chance at life so make the most of it.

Question and question. Don't just accept what you are told as the truth. And take little for granted. We live in an exploding era of science with so many wonders to explain. You can learn much about yourself as well as the world from science. And remember knowledge isn't wisdom. And a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

Communicate with others. Communication is among the most important features of life, more important than ever in these uncertain and confusing times. Learning to live together has never been more important and you can perhaps play a role in fostering understanding. We need to get to know each other better and realise there are many pathways to beliefs, faiths, values and hopes. Don't ignore the world outside yours.

Getting to understand other peoples, their lifestyles and daily lives is a most wonderful thing. Discovering how people lived in the past and now, can add so much to our lives. One of the greatest gifts is making a contribution to our humanity which suffers from power plays, hatred, and misunderstanding. Maybe you will play a role in helping to eradicate wars, ethnic cleansing and the evils that cause so much suffering.

A message to stop and ponder who and what we are and who do we think we are.

Value the importance of laughter and satire but not at the expense of others. It's so easy to be cruel, walk in other's shoes without any understanding and, above all, tell others how to live.

Perhaps one of you from Year 12 will make a special contribution towards peace, understanding or who knows what – Planet Earths' very survival. What a challenge.

Or perhaps a contribution to really advancing Australia Fair. A united nation bringing together all our cosmopolitan communities and indigenous peoples.

What a wonderful contribution this would be!

Try to be true to yourself and remember a little bit of laughter goes a long way.

You will face many challenges, some really testing your core values. Maybe what you have been taught at BGS will stand you in good stead.

Don't dismiss your dreams – they could give you a way ahead, as time goes by.
