

Snippets from my Coronavirus Diary

After a break of about two decades, I resumed keeping a Journal on Tuesday 24 March, which I aptly called the Coronavirus Diary. Most of it is far too personal to be suitable for publication. However, I've selected a few snippets here that may give you a little flavour of it. For reasons of confidentiality - and also to keep you amused as you try to guess who is who - all names were replaced with ***.

Wednesday 25 March

I'm still puzzled why the shops run out of pretty much everything except pizza. Why do people not stockpile pizza?

Saturday 28 March

Very briefly dipped onto the BBC website in the evening. Stumbled across an article about how to protect one's mental health during the coronavirus crisis. Its main suggestion was to take a break from the news - a piece of advice I have been following for the last 25 years!

Sunday 29 March

I joined the online meeting of Elders & Fellowship Group Convenors. I mentioned my late teens / early 20s period of depression, and it later occurred to me that this experience may be a blessing in disguise in the present situation. Unlike many people, I know exactly the tell-tale signs of crossing the fine line between mere sadness and slumping into depression; I know how to avoid crossing that line; and I even know (although this is the hardest bit) how to pull myself out of the hole once I've fallen in. I have a feeling that I may have to heavily draw on this expertise over the next few weeks.

Monday 30 March

Walked on my usual route via the Tithe Barn to Sainsbury's and back via the Strips. On my way out I saw ***, as she was moving her boat to Bath to lend it to someone who hasn't got a place to stay. Supply levels at Sainsbury's have somewhat recovered, and entire pallets of toilet paper could be admired in front of the disused cold meat and cheese counter.

Saturday 4 April

Far fewer people about than a week ago. At the Co-op (or rather in front of it), I had to queue up for quite some time. Made me think of the GDR when people heard that a shop sold bananas. I'm prone to mood swings these days. Felt okay throughout most of the day, but was in tears this evening.

Sunday 5 April

Loneliness is creeping in.

I cheered up in the evening, playing chess on the computer (much to my surprise, I won!) - and then seeing a message from ***, proving to me that I'm not forgotten.

Monday 6 April

After dinner, I watched the video of the Duck Race I recorded exactly five years ago. What a sense of nostalgia it gave me to see crowds of people gathered by the river!

Sunday 12 April

Joined the online Meeting for Worship this morning and ministered that Albert Camus' sentence "The Absurd reigns, and love rescues from it" has transformed itself into a concrete description of what is going on in my life right now.

Monday 13 April

Experiment with Light Steering Group meeting this afternoon. We did a short meditation, and what came to me was that what's gone wrong with the world is that we no longer accept death and dying as the natural, inevitable, final aspect of our lives. Rather than panicking about death, we need to come to terms with our own mortality and also - and this is probably a lot more difficult - with the mortality of those we love.

Wednesday 15 April

While I was sitting in silence during our usual worship slot this evening, I found it hard to believe that it is only four weeks ago that I gave *** that philosophically meaningful hug that symbolised with greatest simplicity the revolt of love against the Absurd.

Saturday 18 April

Only went outdoors for a short walk of about half an hour. It was nice to see many thankyou messages displayed for people who are usually ignored and are doing essential - and notoriously underpaid - jobs. Let's hope this appreciation will continue in a more tangible way in future.

Sunday 19 April

Joined the online Meeting again and, this time, ministered about my short story ["The Way of Hope"](#), giving a very brief summary of it and saying that I feel closer to Hope than ever.

Part 2

Monday 20 April

Once again some shopping for *** - who then stayed on in the Meeting House garden for a long chat. Very refreshing to have this kind of real life social contact.

Tuesday 21 April

Our first Tuesday afternoon Light group ended up having 35 participants - not bad for an event we only started advertising yesterday evening!

Wednesday 22 April

After sitting in silence this evening, I enjoyed my birthday beer - warm, as *** would have had it.

Friday 24 April

My first evening stroll for several weeks. Had almost forgotten what Bradford on Avon looks like when it's dark.

Monday 27 April

Contacted our hirers today about my furlough and had a few responses - not as many (yet) as I expected, but even so, it was nice to hear from some of them.

Wednesday 29 April

The day started off with the most exciting event in the Meeting House in all of April: *** came around to service the fire extinguishers.

Thursday 30 April

The day started off on a low note: *** has just succumbed to the infamous virus; This news prompted me to e-mail *** with whom I haven't been in touch for a long time.

Friday 1 May

Had a reply from ***. The good news is that he's fine and still going for walks. The bad news is that, apart from ***'s recent death, he's had to deal with more deaths recently - both caused by the coronavirus and by the measures to contain it (this last one apparently hit the national news, but I couldn't yet face to check it out).

Part 3

Monday 4 May

Very quiet at Sainsbury's today. Even quieter along the towpath. I didn't encounter any walker or cyclist all the way from Sainsbury's to the Beehive Bridge - which inspired me to take a longer route back via ***'s boat. This time I was lucky: *** saw me, and we chatted for a little while.

Wednesday 6 May

In the evening, *** came around for our little Meeting House garden Meeting for Worship. Lots of birdsong, pigeons flapping around, and other - mostly enjoyable - noises created an ambience very different from indoor worship.

Thursday 7 May

*** came around to check up on the Meeting House. I made her bring the recycling-box in and sweep up the feathers of a pigeon killed by a cat a couple of days ago.

Friday 8 May

Produced a special edition of the BoA Quaker newsletter this morning, and, after posting paper copies to those not on my e-mail list, I returned from the golden letterbox via the sailing club, Widbrook Wood, the towpath and the Strips. A little later I spent a long time of this VE Day bank holiday reading Camus in the peace garden.

Saturday 9 May

In the afternoon I went to Hartley Farm for the first time in nearly two months. The farm shop re-opened recently, but the café remains closed. It was a strangely quiet place without the café visitors and without any children running around.

Wednesday 13 May

I did some solitary sitting in silence at the usual worship slot. I had a strong feeling of being held by a network of love.

Sunday 17 May

I joined the online Meeting for Worship. Following on from my ministry two weeks ago, I said today that my life consists of making one small step to advance my life in the right direction, then wait, then taking another small step, then wait, and that remaining cheerful while waiting is the impossible I need to make happen.

Monday 18 May

I set off for my longest walk in a long time: BoA - Avoncliff - Freshford - Limpley Stoke - Turleigh - BoA. Took me nearly three hours - including a chat with *** while he was patching up some paintwork on his boat's roof. He seems fairly relaxed about his almost complete loss of income this year.

Part 4

Wednesday 27 May

Following dinner, *** and I enjoyed a Meeting for Worship in the garden filled with birdsong and only few human-made noises.

Saturday 30 May

Went to Hartley Farm this morning. Lots of family picnics on the grass there.

Wednesday 3 June

With 32 participants, "Wardens Talking" this morning hit a new record. Quite a few more Trustees and others from the employers' side joined in this time.

In the afternoon I circulated a Warden's Report containing my own version of how re-opening our Meeting House might work.

Thursday 4 June

My first cycle ride since the end of March - also my first time in Trowbridge since March. The railway station car park was almost completely empty, and in the much quieter than usual town centre, the first shops have closed for good.

Friday 5 June

The main project for today was to update our hirers about the re-opening arrangements. So far it looks promising that there will be a few things going on in July, although I expect the Meeting House to remain still fairly quiet until the autumn.

Sunday 7 June

I gave the Meeting House a good clean and a thorough airing, and now I have resumed my sloth existence, starting it off by watching more of the Švankmajer extras DVD. I should become a fully-fledged surrealist. Jan Švankmajer looks very happy in this French documentary.

Tuesday 9 June

Someone left some food and drink rubbish on our wall by the car park entrance and was shitting into our car park, next to ***'s car. No idea when this has happened, probably last night.

Thursday 11 June

The longer monthly version of Experiment with Light this evening. 24 of us there. I had an image of a snake shedding its skin and feel like leaving behind an old persona.

Friday 12 June

This afternoon I was zooming with QCEA. Over 60 people from many different countries (UK, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Czech Republic - and possibly others). The whole complexity of the coronavirus situation across Europe squeezed into less than 2 hours was a bit mind-boggling, but still some overall sense of hope.

Monday 15 June

Last night, after finishing my diary entry, I went for my first night-time stroll in over six weeks. I walked from about 9pm until 10pm. A glorious scene from Ashley Road: on the left an orange-yellow sunset, to its right a partially cloudy, high-contrast blue sky, and in the foreground a grazing horse.

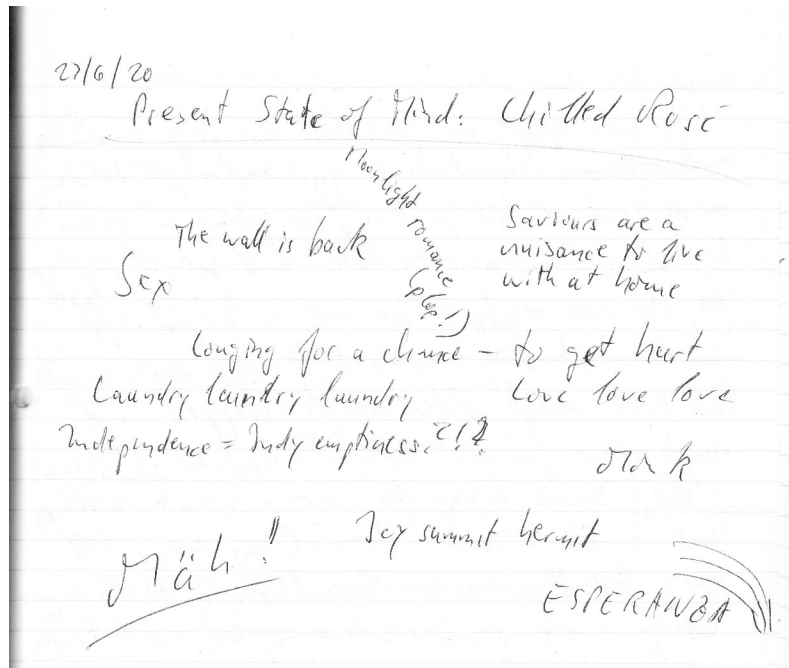
Final Part

Wednesday 17 June

The revolt of love against the Absurd has reached a new level.

Sunday 21 June

To avoid getting zoomed and skyped out, I skipped the online Meeting for Worship and went for a walk instead and replaced the usual *** Skype call with a short phone conversation. In the afternoon, I spent a couple of hours on Zoom for Area Meeting. 23 of us there, a similar number that we would have got if the AM had taken place at Devizes Meeting House as originally planned.



Tuesday 23 June

As can be easily seen from the above poem, I'm in a slightly confused state of mind and in an advanced stage of going through a bottle of rosé.

Wednesday 24 June

After watering the planters, another evening Meeting for Worship with ***. As usual, I was sitting on the bench between the olive trees, the only bench still bathed in sunlight during this time in the evening.

Thursday 25 June

Surrounded by damselflies, birdsong and the cacophony of very vocal sheep from across the river. A gentle breeze caressed my naked body, and in between lazing about, I read some more Nietzsche.

Friday 26 June

After lunch I embarked onto my longest journey since March: I cycled to Bath. The city hasn't changed too much. Still very busy, although there was a marked absence of the organised holidays bus loads of tourists. Cheap Street and Westgate Street are now pedestrianised during the day to help with "social distancing", and I took great pleasure in walking in the middle of the road there.

Monday 29 June

Trust the Light and continue to wait. For how long will this be the slogan to follow?

Tuesday 30 June

Experiment with Light remains popular. 33 today at the online Light group including people from Canada, the US, Germany and Italy.

Wednesday 1 July

Waiting to hear from *** again. Waiting to go back to work. Waiting for some sanity to return to our crazy world. Waiting, waiting, waiting - that's all I can do right now.

Thursday 2 July

“Wardens Talking” again. A new record of about 45 participants. I'm now less confident that the Meeting House will re-open soon.

Friday 3 July

In hindsight, it's just as well that I'm not already back at work this week. Spent close to 6 hours on Zoom today for the Experiment with Light Steering Group meeting.

Saturday 4 July

This morning *** did her own shopping at Christine's for the first time since March. Nevertheless she still came around for a chat in the peace garden - again in German.

Monday 6 July

Being back at work - and having seen *** and *** again - and all on the same day! What balm to my previously aching soul!

Wednesday 8 July

At 8pm I sat down by candlelight for some solitary worship. Almost as soon as I had settled, I was suddenly overcome by the realization that doing the “fuckin risk assessment for that stupid virus” (as I had termed it in a text message to ***) was an act of love.

Friday 10 July

Gilou's Café is open again and was very busy when I walked past it.

Saturday 11 July

*** caught me by surprise by suggesting to come to my place. We started off with some beer tasting (my honey porter home brew), followed by a lot of vinyl record listening.

Sunday 12 July

The penultimate hurdle for re-opening the Meeting House is taken: Business Meeting approved the dates I had previously suggested to House Committee.

Tuesday 14 July

Quaker Question Time. *** had a good fan club: Out of the 50 or so Friends from all over the Bristol/Bath/West Wiltshire area, I counted 14 from BoA Meeting.

Wednesday 15 July

One last time in the garden for Meeting for Worship with ***. Luckily, the slight drizzle that started around 7pm cleared up again.

Sunday 19 July

The highlight of today: After nearly four months, I took the “Temporarily suspended” notice away from our Meetings for Worship times in the Meeting House window - with a great sense of satisfaction!

Monday 20 July

In the afternoon I made my way to a dreaded Elder's duty: acting as one of two Elders at the funeral of *** who had killed himself a few weeks ago. In the end it turned out to be much better than expected. I enjoyed a beautiful cycle ride along the towpath and on via the village to Semington Crematorium, then assisted *** in a funeral that went as well as it could have done, under the circumstances, followed by an enjoyable cycle ride back.

Tuesday 21 July

Set out the chairs in the main meeting room this morning.

Wednesday 22 July

In the evening - tata! - our very first in-person Meeting for Worship at the Meeting House since four months ago. It was also our very first "blended" Meeting for Worship ever. *** came to quench his thirst for some stillness, and *** and *** joined in over Zoom. Very unusually for a Wednesday Meeting, we had three pieces of ministry. My own piece went roughly along these lines:

I've been reflecting about these last four months since our last Meeting for Worship here. I feel that we're now living in an Orwellian society. Giving someone a hug is deemed serious assault; avoiding someone by keeping a distance as if they were stinking to heaven is supposedly respectful - we may even get a "Thank you" for it. There's a lot we can learn from children. They don't suspect a deadly virus lurking on every gate, every door handle, and in every person they encounter. They still cuddle each other as they ought to do.

Thus ends my Coronavirus Diary.

Klaus Huber

Postscript 1

The Snippets from my Coronavirus Diary were published as a series in the Bradford on Avon Quaker newsletter from May to August 2020. In the middle of August 2020, I wrote the following article that made it into the September newsletter:

"Let's stay sane" revisited

Back in March, at the very beginning of lockdown, I wrote the article "Let's stay sane - A personal view on the coronavirus crisis" (published in the April newsletter). Heeding the advice "Think it possible that you may be mistaken" (Advices & Queries 17), I was reading it again to see if, about five months on, I still agree with my views back then. In a nutshell, these views were

- an insistence that there is no such thing as "saving lives", only postponing deaths, and that dying a natural death is a natural thing to happen rather than a total catastrophe to be avoided at all cost
- a criticism of the coronavirus death toll statistics as failing to mention the number of lives being cut short by anti-coronavirus measures
- that the world is trying to prevent one pandemonium by creating an even bigger pandemonium through large-scale destruction of our fabric of society and that the anti-coronavirus measures' negative effects on people's health, livelihoods and human rights far outweigh their benefits

- a faint hope (expressed in a postscript) that we might be able to hold on to some positive aspects of the lockdown (e.g. reduced pollution)

Thinking it possible that I may be mistaken seems very appropriate, considering that only few Friends share the views I expressed back in March (and probably fewer now than back then). Well, whether you like it or not, Friends, I still agree with myself. However, I have also found that my article from March missed out the most important aspect of this crisis: the spiritual aspect.

Our society lives in fear, and this fear dictates many of our actions these days. As Friends, we often refer to “that of God in everyone” as the core of our Quaker faith and of our view of our fellow human beings. Now society (and it looks like the majority of Friends go along with this) first and foremost sees the coronavirus in everyone, with all the consequences this has for our social interactions. The “new normal” is Orwellian Newspeak for trying to say that the whole society is now mentally deranged, suffering from a paranoia where we see the virus lurking in every person, on every gate, door-handle, and so on. We are brainwashed by the media into thinking that the virus is particularly dangerous because of the large proportion of asymptomatic cases - when, in fact, this large proportion simply proves that the virus is perfectly harmless for most people. The virus' relative harmlessness - and the knowledge that it may be present in people without them even knowing - further feeds the 'virus in everyone' view of the paranoid mind. The end result is that we, quite literally, have lost our human touch. We are now living in a contactless, sanitized society with hand-washing being ritualized in a way it used to be only for OCD sufferers. When one of the few people not (yet?) infected by virus paranoia follows an old normal instinct and hugs a friend they haven't seen in ages, the most likely result will now be for that friend to shriek away in horror as if they had just been touched by some kind of virus-spreading monster.

How on earth will we ever become normal human beings again, relating in (old) normal ways with each other? How can we disinfect us from virus paranoia? How can we return to a society where we can start new intimate relationships without having to breach umpteen rules and regulations? - To be honest, I have no idea how or when we'll be able to return to sanity. All I do know is: The revolt of love against the Absurd must continue.

Klaus Huber

Postscript 2

Holiday 2020

My original plan was to travel to Germany in April 2020, taking my bicycle with me on the train and combine visits to family, friends, and a school reunion with a cycling holiday along the rivers Neckar and Rhine. In the end, I remained for 16 months, from March 2020 to July 2021, within a 10-mile radius from home, only travelling by foot or bicycle - with one exception: in December 2020, I travelled a few miles by narrowboat. When I entered a spell of mild depression in autumn 2020, a friend offered to lend me her narrowboat to stay on for a week or so, an offer I took up in December, in between the second and third lockdown in England. The boat was initially moored up about 45 minutes' walking distance from home in Eastern direction, and, half way through the week, moved to a spot about 1 hour's walking distance from home in Western direction. The journey from A to B took an epic 5 hours. I used the boat as a base for some long and muddy walks, taking my old Pentax K1000 35mm SLR with me and a roll of black and white film.





I chose this picture, taken from Dundas Aqueduct, for the title page of the January 2021 newsletter of Bradford on Avon Quaker Meeting. The sense of not knowing what awaits you further down the line seemed perfectly apt for the time.



Postscript 3

The following article was published in the August 2021 newsletter of Bradford on Avon Quaker Meeting (the link given in the first paragraph is no longer working):

Snippets from my "One Year After" diary

Last year, I kept a "coronavirus diary" from 24 March until 22 July, snippets of which were presented in this newsletter (anonymised for the sake of confidentiality and your amusement). One year later, I decided to resume a bit of journalling here and there. The full collection of last year's snippets is available to download from <https://www.charlieblackfield.com/corona-snippets-all.pdf>

Friday 2 April

I came past ***'s boat, moored at Easter spot, very close to "my" Murhill mooring in December. At the next bridge, I had the choice of either staying on the towpath or returning via Turleigh. Still feeling sick of an overdose of stately homes [in Upper Limpley Stoke], I gave Turleigh's private tennis courts a miss, exchanging smiles and greetings with boaters instead.

Thursday 29 April

Things are re-starting: the Wednesday art group is planning to return in mid-May; *** and a friend of hers are organising another give & take in June; and, most excitingly, *** got back in touch about her wedding plans that she first mooted 6 months ago.

Friday 14 May

I joined "Wardens Talking" again. 28 of us. My question about re-opening the Meeting House kitchen triggered a lively and long discussion.

Monday 17 May

Texted *** this morning: "Cuddles are no longer illegal!!! x"

Saturday 22 May

I discovered 3 walk-inspiring e-mail messages. One of them was from JJ, announcing the re-stocking of his "egg kiosk" this afternoon - which inspired me to deliver some egg boxes and buy some chard today. Another one - subject line "Walkies?" - was from *** and resulted in a loose agreement to brave the predicted showers on Monday. And finally also a message - subject line "Walkies" - from *** that resulted in agreeing to go on an 8-mile walk this coming Saturday.

Thursday 17 June

Some normality has returned. *** comes again to my place for practising guitar duets, I enjoyed a ministers' lunch in real life yesterday, and nobody frowned when *** gave me a hug in the olive queue last week.

Wednesday 23 June

"Wardens Talking" this afternoon. A relatively small group of 18 of us. *** suggested that, once we'll be allowed to use "common sense", hirers should be presented with a "code of conduct", consisting of making sure everyone had their two jabs, everyone keeps at least 1m distance and wears a face covering. Aaarrgghhh!!!

Wednesday 7 July

Yesterday I did something I haven't done for well over a year: I booked a hotel room. 2 nights in Weymouth in early August. With free cancellation, just in case.

Klaus Huber