

The Philosopher's Café

It's really important for workers to acquire knowledge, like the cigar workers in Sheffield who hired people to read economic series to them while they worked in the factory, they also were trying to understand their social conditions. The most obvious thing when Covid-19 happened was the circumstances, historically this was unprecedented. There was nowhere to go, but you have time, you don't know how to spend it – this will give you the edge to look at yourself and ask yourself so many important questions which you would never normally ask. Especially existential questions. You could lose your life in the blink of an eye, you are dealing with the unknown at this time. All of a sudden, you are being asked by the state to stay at your home. When trying to process what was happening a lot of people on my street just thought this is Allah's will – they just stopped there, they don't want to think anymore. This does not produce any questions. People didn't want to question too much, it's just a kind of closure. During lockdown, you would be astonished, I had a long list of books in my mind, some very interesting authors. Derrida, Foucault, Edward Said, Demarcus, Mario Diani. I didn't read anything for the first four months of the first lockdown, I did something else. Every day I watched YouTube talks on public studies. I enjoyed them very much. I also watched many talks on YouTube on quantum physics. I was astonished by what I learned. So lockdown was an important opportunity to learn. I thought about how Covid affected people personally and collectively. The way the state implemented lockdown was to me too totalitarian. The origin of Covid was China, but they criticised China here, but they did the same as well here. Once I woke up, if I didn't have anything to do I could not stay at home. I got ready and just came to the café. I didn't want to talk to anybody. I was comfortable being around people. I liked to sit on Stratford Road. I would describe this street as a boulevard of cafés.

When the weather was nice it could put you in a state of reflection, trying to figure out what was going on. We were told you can't touch anyone, you can't shake hands, you have to keep a distance, even in your own home. It was historically a new situation. There were times you came down to the street from your flat and there was no one around, as there was nowhere to go, but you didn't want to go back to your home because you didn't know what to do. It was very bad. I was hoping to read Foucault – I read him in Arabic, but I started with one of his most difficult ones. There is another things. I don't know what to call it – alienation, maybe? The separation of bourgeoisie and working class – it claims to be based on economics. There is a cultural alienation that I can speak about that is applicable to people who come from another society. This cultural alienation is a positive thing. When I sat and watched the world go by during lockdown, it gives you the tools to ask yourself which are essential for your wellbeing. It opens your mind to certain things. You are in a different society, different culture, different system, so you have a different perspective. To maintain your wellbeing, you have to understand the society you are in.

Tolkien's Goalposts

I was a production manager for a broadcaster, and I was on site with a crew of cameramen and engineers overseeing the Liverpool Champion's League match with Atletico Madrid. That weekend was the last of the Premiership matches and at the time we'd heard about lockdowns in other parts of the world, primarily China. We weren't worried because it all seemed so far away, but I was sitting in the van with someone going back home, and he was coughing and spluttering so I did think – am I going to catch it? I was worried more primarily about my mother because we were continuously told specifically Bangladeshi people and the South Asian community were at the highest risk. When lockdown actually happened it was a strange feeling and we didn't want to meet any other family members, at the time we were told not to even touch hands, touch our face. There were lots of things that had to be considered, as I am a full time carer for my Mum. Lockdown meant no more travelling to work, and the good thing for me, I was still on full pay – I wasn't laid off. Essentially, there was no sports events. My company was getting money from the government of course, so through lockdown I got a de facto pay rise. I was staying at home, I didn't have any transport or petrol costs or train journeys to do. In many ways I had more money in my pocket. The mandates really impacted our lives. It was absurd that you could mix with total strangers inside a restaurant full of people but you weren't allowed to visit your friends or family. My Mum is a diabetic, takes insulin, three times a day via injection, takes a heart failure medicine, and other countless pills for kidney failure, so she was reliant on someone to help her like myself. So regards with lockdown the impact was other family members when they can't visit, see her face to face, they would talk via a window. That was strange, that was surreal, awkward – but we felt that it was necessary because just to protect her, more

than anybody else. During the earlier part of lockdown, my mother was taken into hospital for the very first time, which was really stressful for me, for her, and my family, and was very challenging for her. Lockdown rules were strictly observed, and there was a heightened sense of paranoia and anxiety anyway, so she was taken into A and E at the Queen Elizabeth hospital, and while she was being checked by the doctors we were kept waiting and I popped outside just to have a bit of fresh air, but I kept an eye on her through the glass. And then I saw that she was being wheeled away on a wheelchair, and I tried to go back in but an overt officious security guard wouldn't let me back in. I was unable to say goodbye to her. I tried to explain to them that my mother can't speak English, and she's being taken away and I need to be able to be with her, but she wouldn't let me in, and in some ways I felt like that might be the last time I see her. April 2020 – the weather was great, it was sunshine every day, it made people think that lockdown was the reason for it, that the weather was fantastic. We had blue skies, no pollution, so outside there is an absence of people. No cars being driven. No noise. It didn't capsule everything, it was almost as if an apocalypse had happened but nothing had actually been destroyed. My friend was putting on weight from his lockdown sedentary lifestyle, and we made a plan to train together. We took morning walks through Pickwick Park and Mosely Bogs, and trained most mornings for around thirty minutes. We would walk there and do a light run. There were goalkeeping posts still up in the field next to Sarehole Mill, the same place where Tolkien lived. We hung TRX cables over the crossbar, and did lots of different exercises. I didn't know how long my mother would be in hospital, but we ended up training for two months. This was really helpful for me as it helped me refocus my attention to other things, and the irony is there I was thinking I was helping my friend – but he was helping me just as much.

The Heron and the Mermaid

It was like literally throwing food at people – we had like hot meals in bags, and we would try to leave them on the floor, but half the time we were doing it without any people so you couldn't leave it on the floor cause they might not be able to bend down. When I started delivering people food, some people just couldn't cope with picking up the food and taking it inside, so I'd have to take it inside. You didn't really know what was happening with Covid and this was before vaccinations, so it just felt every time you were in somebody's home it felt very loaded and very scary, actually. We shouldn't be in the position that we're in as a society, in this country, to have food banks, so I can also be quite angry at this government who are responsible for all of this. But also I have to look at things practically and actually do some help. So we were delivering emergency food to people really that were very, very at the end in terms of the need that they had. And it was actually quite difficult because normally people go into the food bank and there's a better environment in there, and it's really supportive and it's nurturing for people to get comfortable. And it's very different, you're delivering food to people's home, and that's uncomfortable for them and it's uncomfortable for you. And you're in some quite difficult parts of the city as well, and I'm a single female, and it's more just about how sad some of the people were. So I had one man, he rang me thinking I was the food bank and he was crying because he'd actually been quite rude to me cause I was a bit late or something like that. And he rang back thinking he was apologising to the food bank, not to me, and he was really crying and he was probably my age, and I remember thinking that this is just awful that you're having to have me in this situation. So it makes you very angry at the injustice that there is in the world. Just seeing how desperate people were, it was really difficult. King's Heath is perceived as being a very affluent part of Birmingham

and there's obviously quite high levels of poverty and quite a lot of older vulnerable people as well, so we ended up delivering around 50 meals a day for the first couple of months, anybody that was delivering. So you kind of realised that you also have to be kind of quite 'up' even if you're not feeling 'up', you have to be this sort of happy person really, as well. One woman was shielding with her daughter who had a chronic health condition, and it was just the week before you could go back to the hairdressers, and I was like, you know, what colour should I go with now I can finally go back to the hairdressers? And we were talking about mermaid colours basically. When I turned up the following week when I'd been to the hairdressers, the woman stood there and she went "you're the mermaid!" and all she'd been doing was talking about a mermaid all week, and the only other person they saw was me. And just going for a long walk and talking about nothing, not even anything important, just randomly just jabbering on about whatever's in your head, you suddenly realise that's kind of quite an important thing. So we walked along the King's Norton Canal, or I'd cut through King's Norton, Bournville, all of that kind of area, and we used to walk all the way up to Shirley and that's part of the Birmingham – I know the parks and things and that – just having the freedom to walk along the canals I didn't even know existed was just wonderful. Also when you go through the canal from Brandworth, at one point there's this big canopy where the trees kind of go over, and it's just really green, and the water. And that's just incredible, the different nights. And also everyone had got dogs, suddenly everyone went and got a dog, my friend has dogs that we walked, she's got Rottweilers, they were beautiful. If you want to know what two metres looks like, walk with a Rottweiler cause everyone will keep their distance. And they are absolutely beautiful dogs. So we'd walk with them, and actually watching how excited they'd get about the scent and the smell. What I actually think

about was how quiet it was, it was so lovely. And every time you walk past somebody they'd always smile and say hello. There's a really famous Heron, I'm not even joking, there's like a big Heron – it's on everyone's Instagram. So everyone was seeing that on the walk quite a lot. I didn't realise it was a very famous Heron – I'm not really sure it was the same heron, but it's sort of such an amazing bird. If you've seen a Heron they're huge, they've got this amazing wingspan. It's like that thing you know, it's so boring to say I went for walks and I appreciated nature. Watched this massive bird fly off with a huge wingspan and you're like – 'how do birds fly?'. I don't want a lecture by the way, I know there's a whole thing about how birds fly, I don't want to know the physics of it. It's just that when you see a bird properly you stop and watch a bird fly, and this amazing wingspan, you're like, 'that's just fantastic'. I don't walk any more. We would do walks every evening and I loved that. And now it's time, cause you know, I was working then but you know I didn't work like I do now. I think I miss that people were quite compassionate, you know, I don't mean banging pots and pans but I think there was a lot more kindness and support for people, and it just feels like all of that has gone a bit out of the window when you hear people talk about – when refugees for example were being put up in hotels, people were really supportive about that, make sure people were safe. Whereas now it's all really antagonistic about 'why are we putting refugees in here?', and we've just forgotten all of that, so I think there's still a lot of kindness but I think people want to forget. I don't think you should forget things, we went through this extraordinary time and I think we should learn from it. And particularly actually I like that I'm very close with some people as a result of that, and that won't change. I also dropped a load of people, you know, cause I work in a sector where people are quite expedient, they're friends with me cause it's useful for them, and stuff like that, that's fine you

know, that's work. But if I haven't spoken to somebody during lockdown then I certainly don't presume that we have any kind of friendship now. I'm quite black and white about my friendships, my friendships are really important to me. But I did kind of do a big clear out of people.

Kurkude

Lockdown was very stressful – I was trying to obtain what is called my UK Settlement. To obtain this it's better if you have a good qualification and good job. During lockdown many things stopped. I wanted to become a document controller in oil and gas. There was a job in Scotland in Aberdeen, so I was studying online with university. When lockdown happened the portal lesson was suspended. This caused a lot of change and anxiety. I have three kids, and me and my wife are trying to make a better life. I was worried about money. We had to be very careful with the weekly shopping to look after our kids. We had to make sacrifices. My wife was very good. Our local shop is called Green Supermarket. The owner is Bengali. He is very good. He brought different items from different countries – Lebanese, Syrian, Sudanese, Kashmiri, Pakistani, and even Indian. We were feeling fed up because of lockdown. One thing that used to help with the stress is a famous drink from Sudan. I got it from the Green Supermarket shop – it's called Kurkude. It is made from dried flower petals – in English they call it Hibiscus. It tasted like cranberry, even the colour is like cranberry. Every morning we used to make it either as a juice or a tea. During the hot weather it's very nice. We'd make a whole jug, leave it in the fridge and drink it during the day. It reduces hypertension, it reduces blood pressure, it can make you chill out and relax. During lockdown after helping my wife with the kids, I would go for a walk in my local park in Wall End. This was also very relaxing, and I tried to go most days. It's very peaceful with a small lake – they have ducks, and goose, there are some beautiful plants and trees there. Some trees remind me of trees in Sudan that we call Brazilia, I think in English this tree is called Oak. So I really enjoyed walking through these trees. The trees are joined up at the top, like a subway – very beautiful. I really enjoyed walking

through these trees. So I used to look forward to coming here and going home at lunch time.

Mosque

It was very scary for everybody, as we were told that we're going through a very strange time, even we were told that never in the history, you know, this thing happened. Even during plagues and all this, people were still coming together and praying shoulder to shoulder. But there was a fear every time you go in a mosque, there was a fear, that maybe you will, you know, contract the Covid or maybe someone else will pass it on to someone else. So there was a fear of fear. The mosque is not far from here, it's only about three minutes' walk. Normally I meet a lot of people during my walk to the mosque, but during the pandemic there were very few people around. And as well we were told day in day out 'why are you going out', but that was the argument we had almost daily, every time you go out, because being a diabetic I am used to walking about hour, hour and half every day, but what I noticed during the pandemic, very few people were about. And those who were about they were never shaking hands. I remember instead of crossing the road and talking to someone we were talking to a person standing at the other side of the road, shouting at each other 'how are you?', 'what's happening?'. The mosque was built in 1980s, it was a factory turned into a praying area. Smith and Nephew used to have a big plant next to the mosque and there were a lot of small industries around that provided bits and pieces for the factories. Our mosque is not that big, a small mosque, around 100-150 people can attend, but during the pandemic there was less than twenty or thirty people, but they were all standing apart, one metre apart from both sides, which was very, very strange. In my lifetime the only first time I've seen people praying – normally our prayer is shoulder to shoulder. There was no hour to call formal discussion, no chit-chat at all, it was just hello and goodbye, you know, that was the normal. People were avoiding each other. Conditioned to be fearful of meeting other

people. But they were very strict. The mosque was only open five minutes before the time, then about twenty minutes after the prayers concluded. It was very scary. People were very scared. It really gets you when people on your road pass today. It was strange, very strange, and most of all surreal as well at the time.

A Mother's Faith

My mother was taken in and out of hospital, and it was becoming more and more frequent, so that first month of January and February we were in and out of hospital quite a lot, in 2020. And then come March, which is like three years this week, there would've been changes in her home life because she had a hospital bed at home. Her and my dad had to stay at home, pretty much, there were carers coming in and out without PPE. It wasn't picked up that she had bladder cancer, and hence one of the reasons why really she should've stayed in hospital, but that's another story. So on the week that she was no longer going to be taken in to hospital, we realised that the carers would need to come in more often because my dad was really struggling, and we were told it's not good for us to be in and out because we need to protect her and him as well obviously. So we decided as a family to step back, which was really difficult, but unfortunately Mum's condition got really quite severe to the point where she was sweating quite profusely and delirious. So they did take her in, and I remember my dad saying he'd never seen so many people in masks, and he just had to stand back and let them take her. Bearing in mind my mum and my dad had been married 50 years, and at that point he was saying 'I'll see you later', and he believed that he'd see her later, but he was not allowed to go back into the hospital after that. None of us were. We were ringing every day, every hour, to speak with Mum but she was heavy on oxygen. On good Friday we had a phone call from the registrar to say 'she probably isn't going to make it, and unfortunately we cannot allow you to come to the hospital to say your goodbyes'. I got in my car and I drove to the hospital because I knew that she wanted lemonade, and I had my mask on, and somehow the porter allowed me to walk through the hospital. The nurse opened the door, she said – 'how did you get in? Was you let in, or did you break in?'. I said 'I'm here, if you can't let

me in please make sure my mum gets these'. And I'll never forget that woman. So, it was Easter Sunday at 9 o'clock in the morning, I had a phone call, and the registrar said you and your dad and your sister and brother, we recognise it's always been you five, and we want you to come to the hospital to say your goodbyes. And nobody else. On that morning, we went to City Hospital, and it was the most beautiful day. We walked into the hospital, and the energy between my sister, my brother and my dad – I was carried on that day. There were no tears. So we walked upstairs, and my dad was really ill bless him. And he was sobbing next to my mum. But we were one of the lucky ones. The twelfth of April 2020. Easter Sunday. We were one of the lucky families, right at the very start. We sat with mum, with curtains closed, and we stayed there for two hours with her as she drifted away. Something I remember about my mum was, more than anything else, whenever we were younger – she always used to say to me 'I love you completely – but Jesus loves you more.' So I felt it was important, as mum went, that I whispered it into her ear, back to her – that I loved her – but Jesus loved her more, that she must take his hand now, and not be afraid, and walk with him. And her skin became radiant pearl, and that was the beauty of knowing that she went, and she is – I feel it completely – that she is at peace. So my husband, who is my life partner – I find it so difficult to call him my husband because I met him at school. We've been together for thirty five years now and he completely took me by the hand. And when we were allowed to go for walks, we went. Daily. Twice daily. At one point he took me and the kids to, which is round the corner from me, Warley Woods. But we carried on walking, we carried on with all these walks. Up the hills, round. I don't know how he got me walking because I felt like I had gained three, four, five stone. I couldn't walk, couldn't talk, couldn't – I didn't even want to go, I just wanted to sit. I didn't want to eat, didn't want to drink. I understand now

this is all part of loss and bereavement but the emptiness, that massive gaping hole inside of you, your stomach – I just couldn't lose that, it was just really pulling me. Calthorpe Park is really special to me, and seeing all the planting of the new trees, the quince and the cherry trees and the apple trees. My mum was like a pin when we were growing up. Really good posture, everybody knew her walking down the road by her posture. And there's this tree that's really straight, it's got one branch, and it's grown beautifully really, it's a quince tree. And every time I go into the park now I say that 'I can see that you're doing very well and you're flourishing'. We found out later that Balsall Heath was one of the highest hit of deaths, particularly amongst men, who lost their lives to Covid. It's really worrying because that recovery of a community, it is fear – the fears are still there, the worry is still there. And people are only just coming back for activity now, two years later, you know, so we've got a long way to go. When we came back in 2021, April 2021, we were ready to come back as a team. I made sure, you know, we spent time together as a team. And walks, and being out in green spaces. Cannon Hill park is one of those spaces, we walk together as a team, Calthorpe park where we're based in Birmingham, Balsall Heath – just to reconnect.