



Kensington Unitarians Lockdown Chronicle

Reflections from members and friends of our community, near and far, written through spring and early summer of 2020. The pieces below are in the order that they were received (or when the final version of the text was approved for inclusion).

The New Normal by Marianne Harvey (6th May)

London, Blursday, May 2020

A tentative paw is gently touching my face easing me out of a good night's sleep. Poppy the cat has recently taken to sleeping with me and she is an early bird by my standards. I hear the dustbin lorry collecting our blue recycling box so it must be Wednesday around 7.30 in the morning. The remnants of a dream linger and for a few minutes, it is just a normal day. I put the kettle on and soon the sound of an entanglement of paws tumbling down the stairs announce that Teddy, my daughter's little dog, all wagging tails and little muffled noises is ready for his morning run. He is delighted to see Poppy and licks her ears. She rather likes it but he also has a tendency to... "Teddy! Leave Poppy's bottom!!!"

I let them out in the garden and make myself a cup of tea. I feel stiff this morning and ought to go to my yoga class in Hammersmith at 10. Then, of course, it dawns on me that I will not be going anywhere and that it will have to be a "zoom session" because there is a "pandemic", the country is in "lockdown" and I have been "self -isolating" for - goodness me - 69 days so far!

"Why so many days?" you may well ask.

Rushing to Belgium

I rushed to Belgium in March to visit my brother hospitalised with an infection and high fever as his wife told me 'it is touch and go'. No one in the hospital was talking about the virus but we decided not to meet to avoid any qualms of conscience. Guilt runs rampant in the family (it's a 'catholic thing', you understand). I stayed at my sister's and was able to go to the funeral of an old family friend. It was a rather gloomy affair in a freezing cold church. As usual, everybody kisses everybody (3 times!!!) and I go and wash my face in the loo, feeling quite uncomfortable. My sister in law is there but her husband has gone to a meeting in Brussels.

I get nervous about the possibility of not being able to get home, buy a new ticket and come back after 3 days without visiting my sister in law on the way back as I would usually do. No one is wearing masks in the Eurostar or self-distancing - it is early days yet and no one is talking about taking precautions, but I instinctively keep my scarf in front of my mouth in the tube. I am ashamed to say that I discreetly change carriage if anyone looks vaguely Chinese.

Isolating at home

As I get home, I have a sore throat and decide not to get close to my daughter who lives upstairs and has a friend staying with her. Her partner comes back from the States early as their band's venues have been cancelled. He also has a sore throat so decides to isolate for of a week in the top room. Meanwhile the lockdown is put in place.

My daughter's friend has to get some medication at Ealing's crowded Boots where people are not self -distancing and coughing all over the place, so we all decide, from a distance, that we will not be mixing for another ten days. Eventually we feel that we are all ok but it takes quite a while before we stop shrinking back when one of us gets too close.

Food for 4 and 2 animals

Foodwise, we are lucky to get delivery slots online, as we were registered as customers already. Everything is either disinfected or put in 'quarantine' for a couple of days (apparently cardboard should be left 72 hours!!). Not everyone is that lucky and panic has set in online and in supermarkets. Toilet rolls, pasta, Dettol and flour are nowhere to be found. When we feel we have 'overshopped' we send the surplus to the Foodbank. Ealing-Covid-19 as it is called is an amazing network of brave volunteers who drop and collect and help. We show our gratitude by clapping every Thursday for the NHS and the amazing souls who work there. And the millions of 'keyworkers' who keep everything going! Come to think of it, I have not seen our 'Postman Pat' recently and hope that he is ok. I miss his 'hello darling!!!' I receive leaflets from people wanting to help. It feels really strange to be at the receiving end and not be able to do much.

Doing and being

I don't need to "WFH" (work from home) as I am retired but my days are full, what with texting and calling friends, using WhatsApp, Messenger and Facebook.

We are so fortunate to have a garden and I spend many an hour each day weeding, preparing, repairing and just being with such wonderful wildlife. More time is spent in French conversation lessons (I have a 'student' in Winnipeg!!!), an exchange of Italian/French conversations with my Italian class teacher; add to that daily zoom yoga, coffee mornings with the church and once a week a wonderful hour with Jane and a few others at the "Heart and Soul Gatherings". I also attend zoom meetings with my Friday afternoon Tea-Timers (where I normally volunteer). I try to retain a modicum of decorum especially for zoom meetings, making sure that the top looks ok but still wearing those favourite pink tartan pyjama bottoms that no one can see! It feels so good to see all these familiar and new faces and I cannot wait for the hundreds of hugs which we will all have. I wonder how many kisses will be 'de rigueur' in Belgium by then.

I choose not to go out at all although this is allowed for exercise but I am told that there are many "covidots" on Ealing Common and it is not worth the risk and stress.

It all feels rather strange but I feel blessed that I am safe here in my house, surrounded by my daughter and her partner and their friend. At first there were quite a few conflicts to resolve (some more loudly than others) but for now, we seem to have reached a cruising speed.

In Belgium not all are saved

Thank God my sister who lives alone is ok and my brother is now better (he suspects that he did have the virus). His wife is a nurse responsible for blood collection in the region and I feel so much love for her gentle determination to continue this vital work as well as looking after my brother. News that my brother in law unfortunately got the virus came as a bombshell: he was under a ventilator for 3 weeks but sadly did not make it. We prayed for days... My sister in law also got the virus but was able to stay at home and has made a full recovery. I had hoped against hope that our family would come out of this period intact and whole and now it all seems so much more real. Only 10 people were allowed to attend the funeral but there will be a memorial at some point to honour his life.

Meanwhile

So, yes, there are sad moments and tears flow more often and I feel more vulnerable, more fragile at times until someone makes me laugh, a real belly laugh which tells me that I am still me and that the old girl has a while to go yet!

Time to play with Teddy now, walking up and down the length of the garden and losing and finding balls endlessly. Poppy has been out for a while and does not respond to my calls. Panic and fear of loss sets in: where is she? Has she gone to the front? Best thing is to get busy. I look for some twine in the shed to tie up a wandering jasmine, and a rather fat cat jumps in and rubs my legs. Phew... I bring her in and Teddy jumps around her with delight. "Teddy..... TEDDY !!! LEAVE POPPY'S BOTTOM ALONE !!!"

Lockdown by Liz Tuckwell (12th May)

I spent the first few weeks of the lockdown, decorating our box room. When I opened the can of paint, I realised we'd picked up the wrong colour. At that time, you couldn't buy paint so we decided to go with that colour. So, our box room has pale pink walls instead of cream ones.

I've been editing some stories to submit, two of which have been accepted for anthologies, so that made me very happy.

We've also been tackling our rather neglected garden so it's looking a lot nicer and we'd been spending more time in it, doing things like having a glass of wine and playing Scrabble. It's also been so quiet, I've been appreciating the birdsong more. A family of foxes also like our garden, which is great for watching the five fox cubs play but not when they leave litter all over the garden!

I now seem to have one or two Zoom or WhatsApp or Facebook meetings almost every day now; church coffee mornings, poetry meetings, Esperanto classes, a quarantine quiz, and writing groups.

I also went to the Greenspirit meeting, which focussed on the festival of Beltane. I very much enjoyed that. Sarah played a short video about May Day and we discussed our experiences of May Day.

I've been going to most of the coffee mornings which have had up to seventeen people attending, not only from the UK but also France, Rumania, Canada and Australia. It's given people a chance to see familiar faces, check in and have discussions about various things not always the lockdown.

My Lockdown Chronicle by Carolyn Appleby (13th May)

I live in Hayes in leafy London Borough of Hillingdon. My home of 22 years is an end of terrace bungalow. Next door is empty so I can play music loudly and yell when I feel like releasing emotions.

I was outraged at the lockdown being initiated and defiantly went on the train to Oxfordshire and met my sister on 19th March, which is my birthday. We had a good day and in the process we re-balanced and cemented our previously difficult relationship. Since then we have happily been in touch with each other a lot. I spend a lot of time in communication with others too, including individuals at Essex Church plus old friends around the country on the phone, which is my preferred way.

In my private spiritual life I spontaneously pray often, send Reiki healing and meditate sometimes. As has been the case for about 10 years, I have two-pronged religious allegiance. These are with Essex Church and Uxbridge Quaker Meeting. Unusually for me, at present I attend Meeting for Worship with Uxbridge Friends every Sunday morning. As we don't have any paid staff members in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) I have been helping run the pastoral/spiritual side there for many years and late March set up a scheme to ensure Friends stay in touch, especially for the most isolated people. It is good for me as well as good for them to do this work because I have realised how important having purpose is in my life, along with the gratification of knowing I'm being useful. In addition I have discovered a new skill set I didn't know I had by deciding to bring out a magazine for the presently defunct M.E. Self Help group, which is a slow effort but will happen.

My third voluntary focus is shifts at Samaritans. At first they were twice a week and nowadays usually weekly. Unfortunately they keep coinciding with the many inviting events online for Essex Church, though I have very much been enjoying some of the Zoom coffee mornings and Heart and Soul.

Lastly, for myself I have had the good fortune to be able to go out. I love going to the supermarket and beyond, to which I cycle or walk and looking after my home and small garden also take quite a bit of time and exercise opportunities. I think the amount I'm exercising is hugely helping my mood staying up practically all the time. I had been sure I'd feel lonely but with my exercise and the amount I'm staying in touch with people this is far from the case. Thanks to the lockdown I'm being punctual far more often and saving a lot of time and stress in not travelling. However, I do miss going to all the people and places I so love visiting, such as Essex Church.

In the Same Boat? by Harold Lorenzelli (10th May)

They say we are all in the same boat and that's partly true, although for some of us the trip is trickier than for others. We are told to count our blessings even if for some they may be in short supply. Some conversations are easier than others. It's definitely a time for gathering in, more of an inward journey perhaps. Nature has helped. Spring never looked so fresh and the wild life goes about its business as if all were well, maybe wondering what happened to the usual crowds at lakeside and river banks. I wonder how it will all be 6 months from now. Will we have slipped back into our old routines? Will the daily grind have pushed out of mind the joy of anticipated reunions? We have learnt so much, so far, from this dreadful scourge. The value of a kindly look, a warm embrace, easy conversations when silence was shared comfortably, worn like an old glove. Music has been my mainstay, soaring melodies that uplift the soul and take you to unexplored regions of the heart. I hope all of you have found solace in some quarter. We will share one day our vision of hope once again. Many blessings to you all. Harold

Greetings from Heidi Ferid (10th May)

I welcome this opportunity to share. First of all I want to express how grateful I am that both John and I and all our friends and family, are well. I feel I have adapted to a different life-style, of course I miss some things especially our Sunday morning services. I listen to Sarah's podcast, I like it but it is of course not the same as the real thing. I struggle with Zoom and hope to take part in the coffee morning soon. I have enjoyed phone calls with several members of our congregation, I also keep up with Facebook to some extent. John and I are part of the vulnerable over age group, so we have to be extra careful. I have had help from neighbours with shopping, but I do a fair bit myself, I feel safe in the small local shops and so far I have only once been to the big supermarket. Most days I go for a walk on the heath, sometimes I see friends but always talk from a safe distance. I have been reading a fair bit, starting with Dickens 'Bleak House', a long read and a fascinating comment on 19th century England. I started Hilary Mantel's The Mirror and the Light, but stopped because I feel all the characters are pretty horrible and I need something a bit more cheerful. I also spend time painting and I have reworked some of my old canvases. I attach two paintings. I hope you all stay well, much love, Heidi



Notes from Lockdown by Margaret Marshall (12th May)

I have never experienced a time like this being on my own. It has been good to be reflective on life. Celebrating the good things and grieving the loss of close people. Sarah's Thursday meeting on 'Death and Dying' was a releasing moment - that night I slept until 10am the following morning! Never done that in my life. My boarding school and farming life at home drilled getting up early into me. Singing has been so helpful at this time. I was glad to do a church singing class on Zoom and some private lessons on WhatsApp - people say they feel better for singing. I give thanks for my wonderful neighbours. Harry and Anna opposite me have a lovely dog Alfie and every day they walk Charlie - he is a 2 year old and pulls - I've had a bad back for 7 months - getting better. On Thursday N.H.S. clapping days quite a few come out - small road. I get called upon to sing which brings everyone together - on Captain Tom's birthday it was 'You'll never walk alone' and last week 'Over the Rainbow'. Earlier I did 'We shall overcome' which we then sang in Zoom singing class for church. The fact people have time to communicate and show their care is a positive outcome of this time and time to share the sadness of the loss of so many lives. Thank-you Sarah for the reflective podcast you give us every Sunday - nice to know lots will be listening.



Lockdown Chronicle from Leicestershire by Howard Hague (12th May)

It's difficult to believe that it is now six years since we moved from London to Aston Flamville in Leicestershire, to be nearer Gill's family in Hinckley after we had both retired (and also nearer to my brothers in Sheffield). In the present circumstances of lockdown we are fortunate in that Aston Flamville has a fairly rural location, even though we are only a couple of miles or so from Hinckley. We have a small garden with open views at the back, and the garden has been taking up quite a lot of my time recently, especially as the weather has been conducive to pottering outside. From time to time we have sheep and lambs in the field alongside, and they are always entertaining. Not so long ago I had to ring the smallholder who owns them to say that one of the sheep had got its neck stuck in the wire fence. Clearly the grass was greener on the other side! He told me that it wasn't the first time this had happened. Also there are a lot of footpaths around the area that we have been exploring, going out most mornings for our exercise. Gill's niece has very kindly been doing our main supermarket shopping, though we do go up to a local shop about a mile away to get the newspapers a couple of times a week.

We are both involved with the Great Meeting Unitarian Chapel in Hinckley, Gill as a trustee and myself on the committee. We have not had a minister for about two years, and currently there are no 'virtual' services or other activities taking place, though we are informed about online events in chapels elsewhere in the East Midland area. However members of the congregation are keeping in touch by phone, email, text and social media. We are all looking forward to when we can get back together again, as I'm sure Kensington Unitarians are as well, though that may still be some time off. I have listened to some of Sarah's podcasts, and have found them calming and helpful. Even though we haven't managed to get back to Essex Church for a while, we keep in touch with Sarah, Jane and Juliet from time to time, and enjoy receiving the newsletter. I first attended the church in September 1976, when the congregation was actually meeting at the premises of the British Humanist Association in Prince of Wales' Terrace, just off Kensington High Street. At that time the 'new' Essex Church was still being built, and eventually had its first service on 24 July 1977, led by a visiting interim minister from the USA, Rev Bob Palmer. For most of the time that we attended, Gill and I lived in Greenford, where property was cheaper than either Ealing or Harrow. Although it was London suburbia, we were close to the attractive Horsenden Hill area of open space, and the Paddington arm of the Grand Union Canal. I still miss my Tuesday walk down through Paradise Fields to the Westway Cross shopping park, especially when Costa Coffee opened there!

With regard to helpful words and music at this difficult time, I recommend the poems of Mary Oliver, including 'Roses', 'Angels', 'On not mowing the lawn' and 'I happened to be standing'. I have also re-discovered the music of John Denver, and have used his lovely 'Sunshine on my shoulders' in services taken at the chapel in Hinckley over the last year or two. In fact I'm listening to it as I write this – very relaxing and reflective. There is a lot of time for thinking at the moment. A lot of commentators have said that they think this pandemic will have a big influence on our actions in the future – less flying around the world, less rushing about, reduced pollution and waste. I'm not so sure, with the possible exception of more working from home where possible, which seems to be quite popular and makes sense. I hope that future governments will start to support farming and agriculture in a more positive way than in the past and realise how important it is that we produce more food at home instead of flying it round the world. After all, if the Netherlands and Kenya can produce food and flowers in greenhouses and polytunnels, then so can we. With our very best wishes from Leicestershire to all at Kensington Unitarians.

Drawings From Lockdown by Eliz Beel (14th May)





Mini drawings + Introprint of little objects I've found placed around my flat during these weeks of Lockdown. Following on along the now quite well-known practice of prisoners-of-war or with those in acute medical isolation, of creating quite detailed artefacts out of papier mache, mosaics, matchsticks and the like, I suppose, I too, attempted to make some sense of Lockdown time creating mini-drawings. My comparisons, here, with these mini drawings were of various small objects I have stationed about my flat. Through drawing these I was able to meditate on something of what their real presence was meant to be about. Generally, these objects I possessed had been crafted by Souvenirs Artisans. These artisans, whoever they were, never seemed to find any limit in what they choose to recreate in miniature: whether it was the most massive of public monuments, or even well-known cultural icons or renowned public figures. Clearly, either explicitly or subconsciously, these artisans are implicitly encouraging us to experience the sublime within the comfort and privacy of our individual little hands.

My Experience of Lockdown by Juliet Edwards (15th May)

I should say at the outset of this piece that I am well and I have enough money. I think I would be writing something very different if I didn't feel well or if I saw myself as vulnerable.

I am 76 and have been living on my own in the family home for the last 5 years.

The last time I was physically close to both daughters who live in the U.K. was on Mothering Sunday (March 22nd) when we met in the local park each with our own packed lunch and sat 2 meters away from each other. Sarah, my eldest daughter comes "visiting her elderly mother" most Saturdays and sits on the stairs while I sit in the kitchen at least 2 meters away. It is lovely for both of us to be with a real person, even without the normal hugs.

I structure my day by meal times. Breakfast around 8.00, Coffee at 11ish, Lunch at 1.00, a cuppa and a sticky bun at 4.00 and Dinner at about 7.30. I am eating better meals than normally, because I am not trying to fit food in, so that I can go out to meet a friend or go to a film or a meeting at church. I have realised too that it's better to cook something that will last for several days. I was rather pleased with a lasagne I made that lasted for four meals. I go shopping at Waitrose in West Ealing, which gives my car a 6 mile round trip. I discovered that I am allowed to go straight in (being elderly) no matter what time I turn up. I do wear my mask when I go into shops and I like Waitrose because it has wide aisles. I try to shop once a week and make it last even if I end up making some odd combinations at the end of the week. When I need milk I go to the filling station across the road where I can pick up a paper too and avoid the queue for the little Sainsbury's at the bottom of my road.

I appreciate Sarah Tinker's podcast on a Sunday and I think the Zoom church coffee morning is excellent. It's lovely to, virtually, see church friends. I like 'Heart and Soul' too, but not too often – in the normal run of things we only have it once a month. As I am Treasurer I have been pretty busy too. We have been preparing the Annual Report for 2019. Who would have anticipated how our whole lives have changed and how church life has changed. No lettings, investments losing value, our fortunes a little redeemed by some generous donations and being able to furlough Jane, Jenny and Gitana. Jane, Jenny, Sarah and I have all also taken a 20% cut in salary.

I prefer to listen to the radio rather than read a book, though I like reading short articles in magazines and newspapers. I watch afternoon T.V. which doesn't take much concentration such as 'Father Brown' and 'The Chase'.

I like to knit if I am watching T.V. in the evenings. I am also enjoying the evening concert on Radio 3. They are repeating some very exciting concerts. I have mentioned before that I have a book called 'Poem for the Day' and I read the poems out loud, sometimes several times over until I can read the unexpected words and find out how the poem scans.

There are times when because we have had to "stay in, stay at home" I think that I must be ill rather like the time when I was 7 and had had my tonsils removed and my mother insisted that I must stay in until I was better. Then I realise that I am not ill and that I am just one of the many people taking precautions against corona virus. I am allowed to go out for a walk, go shopping and go to the pharmacy – live life within the village of Acton.

Thank goodness for the telephone, my mobile, emails, letters and newly discovered Zoom. Family, friends and I keep in touch as much as we wish. I find I am sent so much entertainment on the computer that I have to delete most of it as it becomes overwhelming. I prefer to have time to be quiet and to reflect on thoughts or memories that come to my mind, quite often when I go for my walk.

I think we are immensely lucky that we are tackling this virus in Spring, going on Summer with the beauty of nature surrounding us. It will be a good deal more challenging if the limitation that avoiding the virus requires continues into Winter when it becomes cold and dark.

Uncertainty and acceptance in the days of Covid by John Humphreys (15th May)

When I first came to Kensington Unitarians a few years ago, it was partly through curiosity but also to explore how much my science based atheism was hindering me to develop a deeper relationship with my spirit/Higher Power/soul/true self.

The changes created by the arrival of this new coronavirus have been many and varied but being unable to spend time within Essex church has confirmed in me how much I need the shared fellowship of spiritual enquiry – in the silent physical space, ministry, music, singing, listening, laughing, and slowly building close new friendships.

I am so fortunate to have a supportive wife sharing my physical isolation and we have new opportunities to strengthen our loving relationship as external distractions have lessened. Daily online Yoga classes and regular walks to our allotment have been the structure around which our routines revolve. I am enjoying being a boy again building and painting a complex model ship.

I am so grateful for all the opportunities to maintain contact via the weekly podcast (I am writing this while listening to Bach cello suites! – thank you so much Abby for your playing), the virtual coffee morning and the wonderful church garden WhatsApp group. I can zoom with my choir and of course have an on line life with friends and family.

But my involvement with the church has helped so much in accepting it is ok to feel uncertain about what comes next. How will I feel not to be able to continue to explore man hugging with Brian until we are both immune, to practice social distancing when the building reopens etc, etc. But as Sarah quietly and repeatedly tells us, I hope I learn lessons that will serve us all on this small planet home.

Lockdown Joy by Pat Gregory (17th May)

I've spent my lockdown with my husband John in our second floor flat in Shepherds Bush. We have no garden or balcony but we do have an allotment which is about half an hour's walk so that has been our exercise and time with nature.

I love the church community so have enjoyed being able to keep in touch through podcasts, coffee mornings and I also joined the Death and Dying conversation hosted by Sarah which was something I would like to happen again.

I do zoom meetings, parties and quizzes with family and friends so I am more than grateful for this technology which keeps us connected. But I really miss the hugs.

I am an introvert with a tendency to be reclusive so this time has been mostly enjoyable for me. I do yoga everyday and spend time in meditation and I've loved the no-pressure lifestyle and the chance to just be. It's been a space for me to look at what serves me in this precious life.

Lockdown Chronicle by Estelle Pataki (17th May)

After a lucky escape from Pristina, Kosovo where I worked in an international project, I got home with the last flight between Pristina and Budapest, just one day before Pristina airport was closed. The journey between Budapest and Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) was smooth, alone in a first class compartment. Two days later the border between Hungary and Romania was closed and we were locked down. I spent alone 9 weeks in a small flat in a concrete block of flats in Kolozsvár, Transylvania. My only view from the window was the opposite block of flats. Parks being closed, and living in a jungle of concrete blocks of flats I missed all the spring blooming and sunshine. On sunny days the sunshine got into my flat between 8 and 9.30 am. My project activities were suspended until international travel will be possible again, thus losing my main source of income.

In spite of all this, the lockdown had plenty of positive outcomes for me. I was able to dedicate my time to building my online personal development business. I also created my own 'virtual England', not only reading and listening to novels in English, or visualising my future life in London with lots of historical balls and volunteering at historical sites, but also participating in online events of Kensington Unitarians and with Mrs Bennet's Ballroom's historical dancers. Travel interdiction has robbed me of all my dance opportunities in Budapest and London, so I started online Flamenco classes with my former teacher from Budapest. All this, combined with personal development techniques I also use with my clients such as meditation, visualisation, tapping, affirmations, free writing has helped to maintain a positive attitude towards life and future during lockdown.

Art Project: Variations on a Glove Theme During Lockdown by Marianne Harvey (24th May)



Photo 1: A whole world to heal

Photo 2: A return to simplicity at Easter

Photo 3: Danger and joy a part of life

Photo 4: Will this be remembered?

Photo 5: Charity ended at toilet rolls

Photo 6: Fear of everything and everyone

Photo 7: Some took and some gave away

Photo 8: The poignant beauty of it all

Lockdown by Jenny Moy (25th May)

Check-in

Unlike the congregation, who haven't been able to enter the church during lockdown – I've been here almost all of the time. After being the resident Warden here for more than 10 years it's very strange (and nice) to have my personal living space effectively expand from a basement flat to the whole church building and garden. It's such a blessing to be able to visit Kensington Gardens every day and the weather this Spring has been almost entirely benign and sunny – so at least the natural world has felt welcoming, while we're mostly cut off from the human world. At the start of lockdown I started the "Couch to 5k" NHS running app – naively hoping that lockdown might end before I reached the end of the course. I'm now on week 8, with just one more to go – and the church won't re-open before 5 July at the earliest, so I'll need to find some kind of follow on programme to keep up my momentum. Maintaining fitness has been one of the main challenges of lockdown for me. I used to attend an Ashtanga yoga class at the church and they've been continuing on Zoom, so I drop in there sometimes. My main physical activity for many years though has been Contact Improvisation dance, which isn't possible without touching, so I don't know when I'll be able to start doing that again – I miss it and the friends I connect to through it hugely. Food-wise, I feel very lucky that the farmer's market behind Waterstones has kept running on Saturday mornings, so I've been doing most of my shopping there. I'm finding that shopping less often and thinking hard about exactly what to buy (plenty of time for reflection in the queue!) has made me appreciate food much more – and the people who make it possible for me to get it. The market stewards have a particularly hard job, with queues often stretching three quarters of the way round the block and people needing to be reminded to stay 2 metres apart while they're inside too. They keep smiling though and it's nice to see them regularly walk up and down the queue to make sure over 60s all know they can go straight in without waiting.

Activities

I've been regularly joining the Tuesday coffee morning – where I particularly appreciated hearing regular firsthand reports from Australia, France and Romania. It's easy to become insular when you don't travel more than a few miles from your home for several months – so it was nice to feel connected to the wider world. I also loved the session where we all spontaneously shared a soft toy (you had to be there :-)

I'm ashamed to say that even though I've lived at the church for more than 10 years, I never attended a heart and soul evening in the library. I'm now a regular at the online version though and it's nice to see several other congregation members there. I deeply appreciate the preparatory work Jane puts in, the thought-provoking readings and her very firm, but gentle holding of the space. However, the "heart" of Heart & Soul for me is the reflective space created by the times of group sharing. I feel like I'm getting to know everyone (including myself) at a deep level and also generating much needed healing energy and understanding for the world. I'll definitely try out the "real life" version too, when that's available again.

The third activity I participate in is one I started myself – the 'Spring at Essex Church' WhatsApp Group. Here's its 'Group Subject' description, which I think is fairly self-explanatory:

"Although the building is in lock-down, the garden continues to bloom. Jenny & Sarah are still resident at the church and Roy lives nearby, so they're teaming up to post a photo here each day – to help those who love this place keep a sense of connection while they can't visit physically".

As well as Roy, Juliet, Jane, Michaela & David Talbot have all posted garden photos and we've had some bonus bees and goslings as well as plants. The group currently has 15 members – and soon I'm going to have to rename it 'Summer at Essex Church'. Here are a few of my favourite moments so far <https://share.icloud.com/photos/0k4eT3OFGFG6-Xmj75hRCeM4w>

Creativity

One of my main forms of creativity has been the photographic WhatsApp group (see above) and another has been knitting. I've also been continuing a course of Gestalt therapy – adapting this to Zoom has been a challenge, but I've made the most of the opportunity to use the church space regularly on Thursday evenings. My therapist is familiar with this building, so we start each session by connecting through texts in which we describe the space here & our place within it. These started quite mundane, but more recently have evolved to something like poetry – here are some examples

"I'm under the piano, warm and snug amongst piles of knitting and balls of wool. Hiding from the rain and the dark outside. With me are bear and rabbit, silently playing hide and seek among the woollens. I can see the whole of the church, it seems cold – I'm glad to be safe and sound under the piano."

"I'm standing inside the church, my back to the closed doors, looking in, looking from one place to the next. I can't seem to settle on anything. The space between places seems more figural to me, the dust floating amongst the light and shadows."

"In the church, the three skylights are huge columns of fire piercing through the building. I lurk in the shadows. In your house, I am a hungry ghost, hovering by the drawn blinds, unable to see in."

"The door to the garden is open. Ambulance sirens wail outside. Echoes of singing linger near the ceiling. I sit in the corner, with my glass of water. Over my shoulder, in the other room, you are quietly packing things away. Later we will sit and eat together. Meanwhile, I knit, watching the last of the evening sunlight leave the wall. It doesn't feel important to go outside again before dark, but it's good to know I could if I wanted to."

"I'm standing by the glass doors to the garden. I can see out into the light, but I'm drawn into the church. I can hear the wind outside and notice the stillness inside. It's peaceful. I'm glad I'm inside. I'm aware of you knitting somewhere high up in the rafters, up with the stars and purple blanket. I want to fly up there too."

"I'm in the church, in the corner just to the right of the door. The windows are behind me. I can hear traffic softly going by. I want to be under the piano with rabbit and carrot, but I'm hot – and also want to be able to move around the space in the fresh air. I'm excited to be in both places, by the window and under the piano, at the same time."

"It's strange to return somewhere you knew in childhood – and at a different season. It's warm now, warm enough to want the back door open for that reason – and just for this half hour, the sun is briefly at the right angle to shine in through the narrow front window. I wait without impatience. The space seems bigger than I recall: there is the fort we made together, there is the corner where we used to sit. I look down on it all from the raised stage. What will we play today?"

"I remember the stories we used to act out with our toys on the tabletop. Now it feels like we are the toys, being moved through the world against our wishes. Will they make us fight? Or kiss? Will something get broken? Eventually, there was usually a happy ending – but sometimes the game would be interrupted before we could reach it. The sun is no longer in exactly the right place to shine through the window – but it is still warm (& I have a jumper). I pick up my knitting and wait for you."

Hello from Lockdown in Northfields by Brian Ellis (26th May)

I'm running in two time zones 'lockdown' and 'old church', and in the latter it's time to send in a Newsletter poem – enclosed. It's either prescience or luck but I've been practising for Covid for some time now. I've been living alone, I've no close relatives, I receive a fruit and veg box weekly, I'm retired with regular pension, and however I came by it I have a personality profile (Myers-Briggs INTJ) which jogs along pretty well under lockdown. I am one of the fortunate ones for who the present situation has not caused too much distress emotionally or physically, but like everyone I miss the real presence of the people in the activities I'm involved in. But we do have the technical abilities to connect with each other more or less at will and having been introduced to zoom, and despite the sometime quirks of the internet connections, it's been a real help to keep in touch through Heart & Soul, coffee mornings, Thursday at Three and especially the Sunday podcast listened to spot on 11.00. A big hug to everyone who needs one and I hope we will all meet again soon.

(Good afternoon, Sir, how are you?.....Would you mind not sitting on that bench, it's against the current lockdown regulations.....Thank you, Sir, have a nice day.....)

Poem by Brian: 'Your Favourite Tree'

gently lean gently
into the trunk
take its passivity
in friendship
your different hearts
will hear each other

reach up reach
its hand will take you
along its most
searching branch
to the furthest leaf

lying below the sky

listen quietly listen
the wind will whisper
eternity is above you
where both your lives
are from
where both your deaths
will go

Lockdown on the Isle of Dogs by Jane Blackall (3rd June)

Me and my dad have been in lockdown for nearly 12 weeks as I write. My last day out and about was the 12th March and dad stopped gallivanting a few days after me. Dad is in his 80s, and we both have underlying health conditions which would likely make the complications from Covid-19 very serious if either of us were to catch it, so we thought it best to take precautions for our own safety even before the official government advice to do so (we're continuing to use our own judgement as we are sceptical, to say the least, about the reasons for the recent relaxation of the lockdown and anticipate a second wave on the way). We've observed a strict lockdown and haven't even been out of the house for daily walks in all this time. Our next-door neighbour has been amazing in getting shopping and prescriptions for us and recently we've been able to get deliveries. Luckily we have a small garden and that has been a total Godsend, especially given the unusually sunny spring, so I've been out there a lot planting and weeding and watching the wildlife. I've planted to attract bees and butterflies, and we have sparrows, tits, and goldfinches visiting our bird feeders, and a fox is a regular visitor. A family of great tits nested on our shed nest box and fledged last week. Keeping in touch with dear friends by email, zoom, and social media has been so vital during these unprecedented times too. I've found myself getting into deep conversations about the ethics of difficult decisions and the impact this time is having on us all.

At the point when I decided to stay home I felt a strong calling to do something constructive and on that first weekend I put out a call on social media to see if any friends would take part in an experiment and see if we could make 'Heart and Soul' (the contemplative spiritual gathering that we've been running monthly at church for 7 years now) work as an online gathering. We held our first H&S on Zoom on Sunday 15th March, which went really well, and ever since then I've been preparing a new one every weekend and then repeating it on Tuesdays and Fridays. I've promoted them online and they've been open to all comers, from anywhere in the UK or worldwide, Unitarian or not. I've slightly lost count now but in the 12 weeks since I started I have had well over 100 different people come along to my H&S sessions and there is now an ever-growing team of fellow Unitarians who are taking the session plans and offering these gatherings for more and more people (notably some who were previously unable to attend Unitarian gatherings because they don't live near a church and others who could not get to church in person for health reasons etc.) It's also proved to be an accessible kind of gathering where non-Unitarians who would be wary of attending a regular service can dip a toe in the water. I'm proud that something that we started at Essex Church has now spread so far and is proving valuable to so many during these challenging times. It's also gratifying to see deepening bonds between people from different congregations (and non-Unitarians) which likely wouldn't have otherwise happened. Also the discipline of preparing a new gathering and hosting three sessions each week has given my life some regularity and a real sense of purpose in the midst of all the anxiety and turbulence that is in the air.





Lockdown Chronicle by Sarah Tinker (5th June)

Having to close our building back in March was one of the toughest times of ministry for me and I don't think I've fully processed the change even now, two months later. This time of lockdown has highlighted how much I value in person contact with others in our Sunday services – especially singing together. Despite our closed building, this has been very much a time of work for me, more work than usual. And not being able to leave London as a way of having a break has challenged me to find new ways to relax whilst still in this work environment.

The natural world has been kind to us, hasn't it. What an amazing few months of spring weather we've had. And with a slowed pace of life, I've spotted so much more than usual; such beauty all around. The reduction in traffic noise and traffic fumes has made life sweeter. Notting Hill's streets have been so quiet, that walking them has been a great pleasure, appreciating the trees as they go through their spring changes. The cherry blossom was quite something this year and so many shades of green to be seen as the leaves unfold. Now the mighty plane trees are fully in leaf and I'm grateful for their shade as the sun's rays gather power. I've been fortunate to spend some time in Epping Forest. What a remarkable resource that area is for Londoners, with ancient woodland and heath, endless paths and bike tracks to enjoy. I've learnt to identify hornbeam trees, plentiful in the forest. There are ancient hornbeams in Kensington Gardens too I realise, with their gnarled and twisted trunks. That many of us have had an opportunity to slow down and notice the world around us is a pleasing benefit of this time of pandemic. Yet what an uneasy contrast with the fear and suffering others are experiencing or the stressful working conditions of those running hospitals and care homes. Terry Tempest Williams wrote that 'perhaps the most radical thing we can do is stay home, so we can learn the names of the plants and the animals around us, so that we can begin to know what tradition we're part of.'

I've been a bit of a slow adopter of online ministry but I've seen its capabilities during these months. We've had Margaret Marshall running her Finding Our Voice singing classes for us, with Lark and Kate zooming in from Texas. Billy in Sydney, Estelle in Transylvania, Charlotte in France and Mary in Nova Scotia join us for Heart and Soul sessions and for the church coffee mornings, along with congregation members, and friends from around the country. We've shared favourite poetry in groups and our creative writing. Our West London GreenSpirit group have been using Zoom to celebrate Beltane, and soon the Summer Solstice, together. It's great to see Jane Blackall developing ways for Heart and Soul gatherings to be run by other facilitators around the country. But remember, you experienced it here first at Essex Church! Jenny Moy our warden has been caring for the church garden in our absence and her *Spring in the Church Garden* Whats App group has now metamorphosed into *Nature Carries On* – a chance for us to share photos of the natural world as it, like us, progresses through the year.

During this time of enforced isolation I've appreciated all the theatres, galleries, museums and musicians who've brought us cultural treats online, many without charge. I'm still working my way through the Metropolitan Opera's on demand catalogue. Musicians connected with our congregation have so graciously contributed music for our Sunday Messages. Thank goodness for music and writing and art. They've all helped to lift my spirits, just as the natural world has, in this upside down time we are journeying through. And if nothing else, I hope I will remember always from this time the privilege that it is to have work, a pay cheque, a place to live, a car to travel safely in, friends and family who keep in touch, a free at the point of use Health Service and basic services that still function in our society.



Reflections on 'Heart and Soul' by Marc Viera (written on 11th April)

I had no expectations from Heart & Soul online. I was probably more curious than anything, as I've never been to one in person. It was restorative in a way that I was not expecting. I didn't realise that just the sight of a few forgotten familiar friendly faces could be so satisfying. It was also invigorating to see potential new acquaintances, as there is a hard-to-describe evenhanded closeness to the platform that discourages the natural cliques that form in person. It was even more rewarding to learn during introductions that these new faces were in other parts of the country and the world. Unease gently fell away when Jane's calm and nourishing voice wafted over the lighting of the chalice. Somehow, against all expectations and against all logic, the mix of familiar and not-yet-familiar people revealing glimpses of themselves to the group, blended with just the right music and just the right bits of silence, I found myself in the midst of a truly sacred space, with all the tenderness and vastness, which words cannot capture, that all sacred spaces have in common.

A Message from Sydney by Billy Jackson (5th June)

A day after lockdown started to ease here in Sydney my thoughts are focused on what we or specifically I have learnt from this. Otherwise it's been a colossal waste of time. This reprieve is of course tenuous but I can't see people tolerating a second full on lockdown. The cost has now gone from counting cases and deaths to being measured in personal loss, with business failures and record unemployment. Here they report there are now more people committing suicide because of the effects of the lockdown than dying from the virus.

So for me the biggest lesson is the value of friends and family. I have been able to reconnect with estranged family and friends worldwide but the best thing has been being able through email and zoom to connect with my family at Kensington Unitarian church. It's truly my home church. You probably have no idea that finding this church has saved my life. My hope from this is that we learn how important we are to each other. I wrote a song the other day about the lockdown and I will share what I think are the most important lyrics to me.

*But at the end of these days
Will we change our ways
Or revert to how it was before
Will we degenerate
Go back to "Greed is great"
Or will we value one another more*

We can all say we have learnt from this. I can just say this for me: I have learnt to treasure those who I love and who love me. To nurture and protect that love. As the "good book" says - there remains Faith Hope and Love but the greatest of these is Love.

A Message from Nova Scotia by Mary Spurr (5th June)

Ten years ago I moved back to Canada but sometimes look at my photos from the UK. I'd found a needed time of sweet healing and growth there. And of fellowship within the Kensington Unitarian church. Though raised Unitarian I was "from away." You welcomed a stranger in. I remember the warmth and kindness of community, beautiful music, small groups, and wonderful walks.

Sometimes in life we're drawn on to a new path. In London I had found that. A home.

This spring I was to fly back to the UK, my first visit back in ten years. I'd been packed for a month! There were people and places I so wanted to see again.

But the world began changing. A health outbreak, spreading from China to Italy and so on. I clung to hope I might still go, till I had to accept that I couldn't. So deeply disappointed. But changes continued. Work stopped and suddenly most of normal life was put on hold, everything uncertain.

Somewhere in that first month of limited movement, few options, of anxiety and ennui, of upsetting news...I started searching past my feelings of helplessness, needing to find small gifts "here and now."

Chopping a red onion to prepare a meal felt like meditation. Calm. Purposeful. Without hurry. Such a simple thing. Beautiful.

Choosing what to put on my bulletin board...the face of a dear elderly friend,

a quote or two, a drawing I had done.

Photos of loved ones and sweet moments I drew round me for company and comfort.

On social media music from ordinary people began reaching out to embrace others. One I will never forget: an evening lullaby, an invisible choir, an empty street in Siena, Italy.

I was isolated but not alone. Comforted.

Across the world we were in this together.

One day I noticed how good the air smelled. When had a city Spring last smelled so fresh? Small but amazing gifts. Less traffic and noise, less busyness. Calmer. City life on a gentler, human scale. Walking to get groceries I noticed some people kept their eyes averted. Some others (like me) welcomed eye contact, a smile. Acknowledgement. We are here.

Life won't be quite the same, nor will we. It won't be going back to normal. We know now we can live differently. We can adjust to build something better. But what? How?

One of the pleasures I turned to amidst lockdown was painting. I worked on two. A street scene and the memory of a dreamscape from years ago. To focus on creative work brought a relief. I could influence something.

Looking up this morning, from writing, I noticed with fresh eyes a felted picture on my bulletin board. I had pulled it out of a box of keepsakes last week when I'd gone looking for photos and things to lift my spirits.

The felted picture is a simple image, a full moon and 7 identical houses except the last one is pink. How hadn't I noticed the connection to the painting I'd just completed?

When I was attending the Kensington church, I participated in a community art project led by Jane. We felted squares to contribute to a wall hanging. I remember our group, each working through their ideas. Like a quilting bee, it was social, fun, lovely, and all our contributions welcomed. Jane pulled our pieces together into a beautiful tapestry to grace the church.

The felted piece in front of me was one I made on my own afterwards, over ten years ago... continuing the art play by recalling a dream.

A lovely coincidence. A returning.

Though in a different way than planned, I've begun 'visiting' London friends on video chat and have participated in UK fellowship once more thanks to Zoom.

Small gifts. Blessings.

Thank you all.

