

The Brendan O'Connor Show

Feb 6, 2022 | Dr Tony Bates | Emerging from our Covid-Restricted Lives

Lockdown 1: we felt *lucky* - The centre 'held' & we discovered a new appreciation for 'essential workers'.

Lockdown 2: we felt *angry* - Government opened up too soon, our parties were premature. We lost faith in our 'parents' & realised they weren't perfect.

Lockdown 3: we felt *weary* - Uncertainty exhausted us and we got used to being disappointed.

After living through this emotional roller-coaster, suddenly we are being invited to poke our heads out from behind whatever rock we've been hiding and resume 'business as usual'. This is a big step and one that can be expected to provoke in us a wide variety of emotions.

Some people will be delighted. About time! Some will feel huge relief and joy as they re-unite with loved ones and friends they haven't been able to visit. Some will have learned that they need people more than they realised, and be clearer now about the relationships that really matter. Some may have discovered they have more contacts than they have energy and time to maintain these relationships. People may be faced with choices as to whether they want to go wide or go deep in terms of their social networks.

What is true for all of us is that we are a different person to the person we were before Covid. Previously we may have lived much of our lives on automatic pilot. Now we have choices to make about how we want to live. What happened and what couldn't happen during Covid made certain things very clear. The absence of certain freedoms, and easy access to key relationships highlighted what really matters.

In some ways Covid made things simpler. For the past two years we only have to tune in to our appointed leaders and the shamans of public health who told us how to live in the days that followed. Maybe we didn't like being told what we could and couldn't do, but over time we got used to it. And perhaps there was a certain comfort in having someone else make those hard decisions. Easier than waking up every morning to an existential crisis, where we have to ask, "How am I to live today?"

We could also take comfort in knowing that we weren't alone in restricting our everyday lives; we were part of a much larger community of people, part of a tribe, who for the most part were living life at the same pace. There was safety in numbers.

Now we are being asked to make choices about how we want to live. We have to reclaim inside ourselves the authority that we temporarily out-sourced to the experts.

We will have to risk-assess where we go and what we do on a daily basis. Do we enjoy a day out with friends which we all could badly use versus us risk not being able to attend some important event in our lives, because we are in self-isolating? What will be an acceptable and appropriate balance of working at home vs working on site?

These are tough calls, without the soothing voice of the good doctor to tell us what to do. And especially when the decisions we have to make will affect others Don't be surprised if we find ourselves hankering after the 'good old days' when life was simpler and lockdown gave us a cast-iron alibi for staying put.

So, as we pick up our lives again and make some hard decisions, two questions are worthy of our consideration:

Q1 "How did it feel to have someone else make crucial lifestyle decisions for me?"

Q2 "How does it feel now to take back my authority and make choices about how I want to live?"

Growing up is important. We have to grow to survive. Growing up is the only chance we have to come to terms with the complexity of our lives. It is only by growing up that we find our own voice.

Taking up our authority is one of the most exciting things we can do as adults, but it can be daunting. We need to be courageous enough to admit there might be a better way of dealing with some things than the way we do; we need to recognise that a change of course may be indicated. It can be lonely to choose to change some aspect of our lives. Most people may be doing A, but we may decide that doing B is more appropriate. We have to let go the warm fuzzy feeling of being one of the gang. It's so much easier to follow the crowd

When we choose to change in some way, big or small, there will always be something we need to let go. Every step we take involves gain and loss.

We can expect pressure to "get on with it - to get back to the way it was before and pick up where we left off" . This may not be nearly as simple and straightforward as this as it sounds. There is excitement now at having things to look forward to. But the anxiety that Covid stirred up in us hasn't gone away.

Covid has tapped into a deep existential anxiety that lurks in the back of all our minds. We are not here forever, these bodies are given to us on loan. The time come when we will each have to give them back. Normally we cope with this anxiety through projects that bring meaning to our lives and through creating someone or something to outlive us and be our

legacy. But when our basic existential anxiety is dialled up, it takes time to settle down. While Covid hopefully will be downgraded as the threat to our lives, it will be hard to turn off. It's very likely that this anxiety will be transferred to another concern, world war, climate catastrophe.

As we re-emerge into a new chapter of our lives, there are new opportunities, new challenges to take responsibility for our lives. But some of our decisions will need time. There may be a lot of emotion in us that will take time to settle down. Big decisions need a clear head and preferably a peaceful heart.

We need to connect with what we have learned in the past two years, to respect how hard they have been and how they clarified what's important and what we may want to hold on to and strengthen in our lives. When we take time to notice what is happening inside us emotionally, what we want to hold onto after Covid and what we need to let go, our decisions are less likely to be made out of fear, or impulsivity.

Finally, let's acknowledge what Covid revealed most importantly about us. We are vulnerable creatures, prone getting sick, experiencing heartbreak, feeling overwhelmed, feeling alone. No matter how insulated we may feel we are, none of us gets a free pass when it comes to vulnerability. Covid has perhaps made us more keenly aware of this and at the same time given us a new opportunity to come to terms with this truth. How we come to terms with our vulnerability makes a huge difference to how we live. If we deny it, run from it, resent it, we suffer in all kinds of ways. When we accept it, we live our lives differently. We are more gentle with ourselves, more patient with others, and slower to judge.