

Dear Matilda,

Unlike some others, isolation mindset began for me three days before Christmas 2019, when the coiled snake of breast cancer struck again after nine years. The last dance with the determined serpent took a severe toll after a too-high dose of chemotherapy resulted in an almost fatal fight with pneumonia.

January 2020 dawned with hints that a virus in Wuhan China may be more serious than first thought. A mishmash of contradictory and confusing information and advice from various levels of government and media, in Australia and abroad, warned that the risk for older people and those with an established medical condition like cancer was severe. The anxiety level in the Neil household rocketed when the first news of COVID-19 headlined with heartbreaking scenes of people on ventilators dying from pneumonia. My daughters immediately reversed roles, ordering me to stay inside, cocooned. They worried at every sign of ill health, taking me to hospital emergency where after undergoing several tests, including a brain scan, doctors concluded, a virus but not COVID-19!

In Australia, anxiety levels have been high for months. We are still recovering from the most horrific summer of bushfires in my lifetime. Widespread discussions of the economic and social consequences to rural towns and the general tourism industry fuelled concern. Climate change, a topic on everyone's lips although many politicians and people wanted ignorance. Sadly, COVID-19 has eclipsed many of these important conversations.

Our economy also struggled with rising unemployment, massive underemployment and families living with insecure work, casualisation of jobs and contracts with limited tenure, but now reels from the effects of bushfires, plus the shutdowns caused by coronavirus. I fear the worst fall out is still to come regarding the impact on society despite various levels of government trying to address this unprecedented global catastrophe with Job Keeper and Job Seeker Allowances, tax relief and grants to businesses.

For decades with a job teaching creative writing in community houses, I lived with restricted contract and casual work and if breast cancer didn't end my working life, the stage three lockdown because of coronavirus will - it is one of many jobs in the arts and sports area deemed non-essential and will struggle to be revived afterwards when people are short of money. I will adjust and cope but fear family, friends and neighbours all impacted in different ways will be worse off.

At 67 years of age, and after a struggle with the incompetence of Centrelink (a Federal Government agency), I am now on the Aged Pension, so still have a regular income. The payment is not super generous but after years of insecure work and the probability of my course not being funded regardless of COVID-19, I am fortunate. I have a small income stream from husband John's superannuation and my own contributions since his death, but it has taken an almighty battering along with the accounts of many others. Financial worries on top of a health crisis (what I experienced with my first bout of breast cancer that occurred in the months following the GFC) will definitely increase the personal catastrophe scale! Fingers-crossed the pension still gets paid and what is left of my superannuation savings recovers rather than disappears. However, I still consider myself lucky, I own my house and have no rent or mortgage to pay. Many folks will have neither home, pension, superannuation, or savings!

In quiet moments, walking our dog, Josie each day, memories of the Global Financial Crisis and the aftermath of mastectomy play in a depressing loop. I'm sure others are coping with

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similar, if not more tragic, triggers. At least this time the lumpectomy was not as severe or the hospital stay and recovery, as expensive. To be honest, I fear more for my daughters' future than my own. They are young and I can't imagine what young people are feeling about the future right now on top of the present.

Drawing on memories from the 70s, I can remember the anger and fear I felt about the Vietnam War tragedies - a boy from high school one of the first Australian casualties, a national serviceman, so yes, little more than a boy. I remember too, the Cuban Missile crisis, the fear of the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the threat of a nuclear war making the future seem bleak. Talking with my parents about their experiences during WW2 living in Scotland and Northern Ireland. helpful for perspective. They survived the roller coaster of air raids, food shortages, black market, senseless deaths, heroism, the recovery after peace with traumatised returned prisoners of war, the rebuilding of cities with better housing, the creation of a national health system... The 60s brought an economic downturn, fluctuating employment, migration and starting again in a new country...

There are no accident in my philosophy. Every effect must have its cause.

The past is the cause of the present, and the present will be the cause of the future. All these are links in the endless chain stretching from the finite to the infinite.

Abraham Lincoln.

Always swings and roundabouts. Every generation has its challenges and perhaps each time an ever-so-gradual shift to a kinder, fairer world if the next generation better educated. By having meaningful conversations, encouraging young people to learn from history and past mistakes and examine what can be achieved and how; by encouraging calmness and kindness, I want to give my daughters hope, because hope for a better world is what is needed.

Focussing on the positives is my aim to survive this pandemic crisis but always remaining aware of the negatives and working out how they can be fixed! To be part of the solution, not part of the problem!

It is heartwarming to see families playing games in the park, walking or cycling together where previously, it would have been only one parent - usually the mother. I've observed more men pushing prams around the neighbourhood in the last few weeks than before. The initial panic buying and hoarding causing shortages, particularly of toilet paper appears over. In the midst of that, one of Anne's friends dropped off two rolls of toilet paper, because he was concerned about my health; others offered to share if needed. Kindness blossomed.

Not all increased social observation and interaction, even from a distance, is nice with unseemly fights in supermarkets for toilet paper and other desirable goods such as flour, rice and pasta, but viral videos showing the worst of human behaviour counterbalanced by people singing from apartment balconies in Europe, USA, Australia, and the magnificent UK salute to their NHS workers. Heartwarming good deeds and uplifting examples replicated quickly and give hope the world will still be caring when the pandemic is over.

Australia has been luckier than most countries - we are an island continent with a small widespread population and despite some leaders failing and government missteps, there have been good decisions made regarding health and helping those in need. Most people have accepted the lockdowns and have modified their behaviour.

Daughter Anne is fortunate to still be employed and not have suffered the pay cuts some of her friends have endured. She can work from home but that has its challenges as she shares a tiny apartment with a teacher also working from home. The opportunity to walk in a nearby

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park a relief for them both but many of the support mechanisms and activities previously used for stress relief don't exist or have changed. This new routine of life 24 hours together needing extra cooperation and negotiation. A rearranging of furniture in her bedroom created a minor disaster the first week when Anne spilt a hot cup of tea on her foot. Thank goodness she rang me via FaceTime, not only for sympathy but some old fashioned treatment advice to save a trip to A&E. This shift to working at home brings up a lot of issues - the cost of heating and electricity, Internet use and reliability, the hours people work, self-regulation of breaks, ergonomic and health and safety issues, and most of all emotional wellbeing.

Online education happening all over the world but we must remember the disadvantaged schools and students. What of students who don't have parents at home, or access to technology, who struggle with English, are in youth detention or foster homes, live in remote communities, or are homeless? What of teachers not capable or unable to access the latest technology or without the skills to teach effectively online? What of students that need social interaction with others to motivate learning or have a disability?

Mary Jane lives with me and has been my angel, grocery shopping and ferrying me to and from medical appointments, despite coping with Stage 4 Endometriosis. Her income massively cut because as a computer teacher in community houses and also privately tutoring, she has no work. The people she cleans house for are still paying but depending on how long the lockdown lasts, realistically, that money may end soon. She just started her own design business Maryjanecreates with cards gaining traction just as the shops and markets deemed non-essential. She hopes her new Etsy Store will help but the explosion in online businesses and the economic downturn will test her mettle. By Spring, perhaps the lockdown will be over and most suburbs in Victoria, will be open for business but at the moment the prospect of allowing mass gatherings still a long way off. Mary Jane keeps working on her art and looking after me but we know the Arts sector will struggle if the economic situation after coronavirus is as dire as predicted. She is also one of those with a chronic illness whose regular appointments and scheduled treatment have been cancelled because COVID-19 takes priority. How long will it take hospitals to adjust and deal with the growing backlog of health conditions currently deemed elective surgery or of secondary importance? What of the pain those patients are coping with now?

In a post-coronavirus economy, the rich and poor divide, those employed and those not, the healthy and the ill... divisions already existing ...will be exacerbated and as a society we have to be prepared and hopefully use this time to work out better solutions than offered in the past.

On a personal level, I miss the regular walks with my dearest friend, Lesley and the cuppa afterwards in our favourite coffee shop where we'd chat and support each other through health and family crises, discuss and vent about political and social issues, and most importantly, laugh a lot. Lesley picked me up from the ultrasound biopsies in December, and although not confirmed I knew the cancer was back just by the demeanour of the staff. She was the first to cop the outpouring of grief and fear!

Lesley and her daughter, Leesa, own *The Little Bookroom*, a bricks and mortar bookstore. Almost a decade ago, they bought the iconic institution that has been around nearly half a century in Melbourne. They nurtured the niche market of children's books, authors and illustrators but it has been extremely difficult these last few weeks because of lockdown. However, Lesley assures me after initial fears, they are 'treading water' and with the tremendous goodwill they have created in their local community, plus amazing Lockdown adaptations like

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home deliveries, pick-up orders, and an active social media and online presence, staff have been retained and the business will survive. It helps that they can access government support.

Our get-togethers now via text messages and phone calls while we walk in our own suburbs. A poor substitute for coffee, cake and chat, but wonderful we can uplift each other by describing how with so many people out walking, there is less car traffic and pollution, families are playing, cycling, gardening or just looking out windows to wave and greet each other. Our world seems to have reverted to the kindness we remember from the childhood neighbourhoods of the 50s and 60s. My doctor and her receptionist agree as eyes twinkle above PP masks!

I put a bear by my mailbox for all the children who go on a bear hunt - one of the many viral activities social media has spawned. Sitting at the computer with the window open I hear excited exclamations of discovery from the passing children, and smile. Locals have dressed up in fancy costumes to put out their rubbish bins, retired teachers have adopted students as pen pals in their street, sharing helpful tips and answering questions by popping letters in mailboxes. There are lots of creative videos sharing expertise and tips from cooking, to games and activities to see people through isolation 'stir crazy'.

There is a viral kindness phenomenon, a movement of tens of thousands of people across Australia online offering to help others in their neighbourhood with shopping for groceries, picking up medication or just checking in on the phone or social media to ensure everyone is okay. Again a deep belief in the need for connection offering hope for when the isolation and lockdown ends, we will be a kinder society.

Meanwhile it is difficult to cope with lack of physical contact of loved ones and even friends. Greg who has cut my lawn since John died, recently lost a stepdaughter in a car accident. She lived in Tasmania, has left a partner and two children. Because of the limit of people who can attend funerals and 14 day quarantine restrictions travelling interstate, Greg and Suzette could not attend the funeral. I stood the recommended social distance and wept as he shared the painful tragedy. All my natural instincts ached to gather him close and let him weep with me.

My daughters have a close friend who is a nurse and currently on permanent night duty in the Accident & Emergency Department of a local public hospital; her partner, a policeman. Mary Jane and Anne have sent several care packages for Leah and Mary Jane taught Leah's aged parents how to Skype and FaceTime so they can keep in touch because realistically they will be the last families able to physically get together.

I make and receive regular phone calls to friends, acquaintances and some ex-students at risk of ill health because of isolation. In some cases the conversations longer and more intense than when we were face to face. People share stories of cleaning out cupboards, tackling garden and renovation tasks, family history projects, typing up travel diaries and numerous other activities put on the back burner or ignored are started or completed. Time suddenly, seems infinite. Others confess to high anxiety only relieved by watching hours of crap TV shows, old DVDs, re-reading favourite books, overeating or dwelling on grudges and worst case scenarios reported in the media. Through my blog *Up The Creek With A Pen*, I post lessons and activities to inspire writers and non-writers to cope with this difficult time.

Mary Jane walks Josie too and so like some other pets, COVID-19 has a plus side for dogs who love having their owners close. The first week of the general lockdown with workers laid off or working from home, Mary Jane walked by a group of apartments cheaply built with the ubiquitous front wall of mainly glass windows and doors. A large flatscreen TV beamed while

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the man sat watching without drawing blinds or curtains. Mary Jane returned home and told me with a sardonic smile, 'Everyone in the street saw he was watching hard core porn!'

Oops!

On the plus side, I've heard children's laughter and giggles through open windows, the strains of practice tunes of musical instruments and smiled with delight at the positive chalked messages on pavements and the rainbow drawings in windows.

There are changes to how we do things I hope will remain after the pandemic is over. I can now have Telehealth appointments with my doctor instead of traipsing up to the clinic and sitting in the waiting room. This will be wonderful in the future if just needing confirmation about medication or a minor follow up. There are strict cleaning regimes in place in public buildings and shops, which hopefully will continue. The world may be healthier if people take more care of what they touch and stay aware of how easily infection transferred.

I ordered groceries online and it was such a positive experience I know if I need to do this - even to give Mary Jane and Anne a rest from caring for me in the future - it can be done.

Technology has been a saviour and I'm aware of how privileged I am in this regard. Being able to FaceTime my sister in NSW and my daughter Anne plus share photos and videos with friends here and overseas is a huge plus when practising social distancing and living in lockdown. The girls have also organised ZOOM sessions of movie and trivia nights or just general fun conversations with friends in all corners of the globe.

I'm grateful for having access to technology and being able to use it. Making regular calls to people like an ex-student with emotional and mental health issues to help ease extreme anxiety. One is a widow with no children who suffers from loneliness relieved by retail therapy and coffee shop catch-ups with friends. She barely manages text messaging but can use email, however, lacks the ability to Skype, FaceTime or Zoom. There are others like her who suffer because of lack of technical knowledge and equipment. If the pandemic has shown one thing, it is the importance of the worldwide web and associated technology.

I'm also grateful medical expenses are limited because of Medicare and the State and Federal Governments commitment to health funding and Telehealth. If I'm unlucky enough to become a victim to COVID-19, and fortunately Australia appears to be flattening the curve so that may be a rare 'if', but if it does happen, living in Melbourne I will have more than a fighting chance. My fear and anxiety is for my daughters and their future and other young people who may be disheartened and think the future bleak. I wish them the resilience of past generations and those in other parts of the world suffering more than Australia, not only from this virus but war, poverty and effects of climate change.

Mairi Neil
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