

17 October 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I do a lot of walking around our neighbourhood. Walking in Wortley Village has always required some vigilance. As well as dealing with pushy, noisy cars, pedestrians must sidestep the droppings a dog owner has, you know, 'missed', avoid the crack that tripped them up the last time, and skirt the deep puddles and patches of ice – that sort of thing,

Since the pandemic descended, walkers have been sidestepping, avoiding, and skirting around each other too.

Today, as a fellow pedestrian came towards me, and I towards him, we did the Covid Dance, a sort of 'Allemande Left and a Do-Si-Do' wherein we shuffle two steps off opposite sides of the sidewalk, bow our heads in mutual acknowledgement, and carry on with our journey. It's over in a matter of seconds.

Today I thought, "Why am I still doing this?" I've been vaccinated. Twice. The chances are very high that the other person has been too. It's not going to get any safer than this. Isn't it time to be 'normal' again?

Phobias and Baby Steps

Maybe it's still too soon. Who knows? But the pandemic menace is much less menacing than it was a year ago. *That* we know to be true, even though our behaviour may say otherwise. Yes, there's the dastardly Delta variant, but the vaccinations have changed everything in very positive way. Or they should have.

I think we're more Covid-phobic than we realise. It's understandable. We've had eighteen months of it. The pandemic has never fallen from the front page of the news. We've heard many stories of people dying from Covid, or suffering from long term maladies because of it. That is all serious and real. Part of me feels this keenly. You do too.

But when I ponder a return to 'normal' in my own life, or the pleasure of crafting a new and better 'normal' for my life, another part of me kicks in and thinks, "If not now, *when*? What are we waiting for?"

A year ago, long before anyone had been vaccinated, more people came to worship. But now, even after vaccinations, there are fewer. This is true in other

Churches, too, and in other sectors of society – especially the ones we think of as ‘voluntary’.

This tells me that an insidious phobia has now got hold of us. Our caution and vigilance about social-distancing, masking, and all the little safety rituals we’ve devised, are now ingrained and habitual. Even though we’ve complained about them, and wished out loud that we didn’t have to follow them, they’ve made us feel safe. To begin to undo them makes us feel unsafe. It causes anxiety, fear, and irrational phobia.

One way out of an irrational fear is to take small, voluntary steps against it. But they must be voluntary and they must be small if it’s going to work.

Some therapists are adept at helping people with this. Suppose a person seeks their help because they have an irrational fear of elevators. They panic at the very thought of entering a suffocating closet hanging from a cable in a dark, narrow shaft. The sensation of ‘rising’ makes them nauseous. The irrational fear of ‘falling’ makes their palms sweat and their heart race.

“But it’s not irrational,” you say. “People *do* die in elevator accidents, you know!”

That’s true. So, not completely ‘irrational’ then. Granted. But the fear is *all* out of proportion to the reality of the risk, isn’t it? So, irrational in *that* sense, yes?

To treat this phobia, a kind therapist might say, “Forget about getting on the elevator. We’re not going to do that today. But what *can* you do? Do you think we could stand together in the doorway of the building and stare across the lobby at the elevator? Can you bear to do that with me?”

“Yes, I think so.” And they do this together for the next few days.

Then one day the therapist says, “Today, let’s walk up to the elevator door. We won’t get on the elevator. We’ll just approach it the way someone would if they *were* going to board it. Can you bear to do that?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Soon, they’re approaching the elevator and pressing the button, waiting for the door to open, but not yet boarding.

Finally, there comes a day when, together, they enter the building, walk across the lobby, approach the elevator, press the ‘up button’, wait for the door to open, board the elevator, let the doors close behind them, and ride all the way to the top floor. Just like ‘normal’. Without any fear. And all it took was baby steps.

We can do that in the face of Covid, can’t we?

In the spirit of taking a baby step, I can tell you that if you do come to worship in the sanctuary, you'll find that the Hymn Books, Psalters, and Bibles are all back in their proper place. Why not check it out?

I want us to inch back, step by step, in the weeks and months to come. Just baby steps, yes, and they must be voluntary, but one day they'll all add up.

You know, I'm not that bothered anymore if they don't add up to the same old 'normal' that used to be. I didn't like a lot of the 'old normal' anyway. I'm excited, instead, to craft a new and better 'normal', one we can really live and flourish in, together.

This and That

On Sunday, October 31, the Eve of All Saints Day, we will celebrate Holy Communion at long last. We'll read aloud in God's presence the names of those who have died, and remember them. Another baby step.

Marjorie Howell is preparing a new edition of *Hark the Herald*, Elmwood's newsletter. Why not write something for it? Take a baby step and dare to tell us something about yourself: a poem, a limerick, a story from your life. It could be sad, or funny, or poignant, or all of those.

The deadline is October 29. You can send it to Marjorie at this email address: scot65can@yahoo.ca

Yours in the faith,
Andrew