

April in Madrid

By Mireia Sentís

Today I celebrate a true quarantine: exactly 40 days without leaving the house! (My husband provides for all exterior needs.) As so many people, I had to cancel a planned trip, in my case for a long stay in NY. And was I lucky: the borders closed before the confinement was official. So I avoided finding myself imprisoned without ALL my toys at arm's length! Who would have believed only a few weeks ago that I was going to be so busy, creative and productive at a time when I only should be horrified, depressed and worried?

For the last three years or so there had been only one topic in Spain: the Catalan separatism. The country it seems was going to be (yes, future tense) totally ruined and dismantled because almost half of Catalonia was fed up with not being properly listened to by the central government. Or better said: the separatist 14% that was not taken into account soared, because of the government's policies, to 49%. But that "virus" was almost welcome. It allowed to cover over the big problems of the country: an extremely corrupt political class (Catalonia included), a worrisome underemployment, the enormous economical gap between the very rich and the poor which increasingly includes the lower middle class and an economy based almost exclusively on tourism. It is not that all of this has come to a stop, but the overriding topic is another one. The same TV and radio talk show "experts" who gave their opinion about the Catalan "problem" (and made it worse) are now busy talking about another virus, but with the same noisy information. I'm afraid they have not learned what these unknown times should teach us: to focus on the real problems of the planet and to think thoroughly how to redress or replace a system that has proved obsolete and terribly unfair. A situation, overall, that is working like a boomerang.

Are we going to be able to change our modus vivendi? On a totally smaller scale: am I going to? As a believer in degrowth theory, am I prepared to loose what I view as freedom: mobility, privileges and multiple choices in almost any area? I look at it this way: have these up to now 40 days been more difficult than usual? Besides the worries of an uncertain and bleak economic future and the pain I feel for the situation that the great majority of people is going through right now, my day-to-day life has changed maybe for the better. Since I've always worked at home (except for a few years here and there), the scenario hasn't changed that much. But the silence –oh the silence- has brought an inner peace I did not know was in me. I think it is this peace that has allowed me to set a routine that due to the lack of external interruptions I have maintained; no excuses

admitted. And I really did not expect to enjoy a routine, something I have been trying to avoid my entire life! Does that mean we are always doing things we consider interesting and enjoyable and are really only stressful?

Among my routines: reduce communication in any format to the minimum. Daily papers only once a week, quick visits to them on line every other day but monthly publications with in depth information (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, for instance), sustained. TV and radio news, out. No reading of any text gotten through WhatsApp or any of the similar sources and instead read those recommended by people I trust. No belonging to any group online. Calls and Skype only with close and interesting friends or family. One hour of "sports" per day: 20 minutes of more or less boring calisthenics and 40 delicious ones dancing. I am thoroughly enjoying music that I had not listened to in years. Misplaced and forgotten CDs and tapes (yes, tapes) have become an incredible source of pleasure. And I find out that dancing is far more effective in cheering me up than any other form of exercise. At 8pm sharp, everyday sun or rain all the city breaks into the sound of applause. We all open our windows and thank in this manner all those who openly expose themselves to the virus, taking care of the sick, driving to distribute supplies, opening their shops so we can eat and buy any good or get a remedy at the pharmacy... It is a beautiful bonding moment with neighbors we hardly would recognize on the street. It is important that we open our windows so they know we are ok and vice-versa. My home overlooks two different streets, so I have to run from one end to the other knowing nevertheless that the different neighbors probably think that I am selfish and cannot stay 5 full minutes clapping my hands for others. After that comes a present: my sister who is confined in Ibiza sends via WhatsApp a different picture everyday; beautiful and very well constructed photographs of nature. It is the "green moment" of the day, after which my husband and I translate a poetry book from Catalan to Castilian. One page a day. Just one. The perfect length to enjoy and discuss the various possibilities languages offer.

So apart from watching a documentary once in a while, reading a lot (*La Peste* included, *bien sûr*) and taking care of the usual (book publishing mainly, which in itself is so absorbing) the idea I had when social distancing was announced, that maybe the day would have too many hours (how naïve) launched me on a "virus project": *Erótica C-19 narraciones*, a book consisting of 19 erotic writings done during this enforced isolation in the manner of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Early on, almost with no exception those asked to participate, said they couldn't imagine assuming an erotic persona. Too depressing times, they declared. And now they are thanking me: they have taken pleasure in the assignment and most of them have continued to write. I find that the creative sector of society is proving very resilient

and almost every day I have a new "work offer". It is not easy to comply with them all, but I feel we have to do it. Solidarity in whatever field we are involved with is so important right now, because with what we are doing we are already shaping the post-virus world. For instance a platform called #salvalopublico is doing a campaign in order to rescue public services which are increasingly falling into private hands. A number of artists have been reached in order to do so. A new poster is shown everyday. I have chosen to ask for free education and sent my poster a few days ago. This is only a tiny example of all the initiatives that explain why I said at the beginning that I was busy, creative and productive.

But... will these forced spiritual exercises make us realize that cooperation, -REAL global cooperation- is the only way out? Will solidarity go on in the aftermath? Shouldn't we fight together against a possible future more militarized and with more surveillance? The world will be so much more digitalized (what an effort is everybody doing right now, from home, in order to not stop EVERYTHING!) that even more people than before will be left out. Will the universal basic income and a really inclusive health care system finally be adopted without many ifs? Will the model of more money in less time (which means the gain of some is the loss of others) shift? How come we are all working so much without money being involved in the scale it was before the pandemic? Did we need a monstrous scare like this plague not only to rethink the path we were following but also to force us to change, to redress it?

Maybe all these questions (the list could be longer) belong to utopian thought, but right now only radical -and scary- changes offer the hope of a possible and better world. May we all be able to adapt to a new reality. Erri de Luca wrote these lines at the end of a poem called "After": "...money will disappear, shells will return, humanity will be scanty, mixed and gipsy and will walk on foot. As swag it will have life: the greatest wealth to transmit to our children."

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