

Valuable, not Vulnerable

The shadow of Coronavirus has suffocated the world. But as a physically disabled woman, the world has opened up for me.

With a squeeze of a button I see National Theatre productions on YouTube. Daily I have rediscovered Melissa Etheridge rocking from home. Jason Byrne is sweating workouts through Instagram; I have dusted off my dumbbells and he is inspiring my exercise. I have collaborated with Gary Lightbody, beaming from his LA rental. I run a book club through Zoom; isn't it interesting to see other people's décor? Normally I cannot access their homes.

I am WhatsApp video-calling friends, friends whom I normally text. I have taken up jigsaws; the last time I did one was forty years ago! I have signed up for a writing class with Google Classroom. I celebrated *Poetry Ireland Day* with live readings on Facebook. I am wondering – what will I do next?

In fact, what I feel is given to me, in these extraordinary times, is choice. Normally I am limited by access, expense or transport, but now feel I am on a level playing field with everyone. It has been interesting to hear people complain about how they cannot go anywhere and have a fear of isolation – that is my normal!

There will have to be questions raised about how the UK government disseminates news and advice. A week into the lockdown I phoned a friend with a learning disability who asked me, "What is a pandemic"?

There has been a lot of new words bouncing off the tongue. But then I thought, what is offered to people for whom English is not their first language, and do not follow the mainstream media, or could not comprehend a flyer? What is good for disabled people has beneficial ripples for everyone.

My sister has been confined to bed in her nursing home since this began. She cannot use the phone, so I have been sending her letters. I got a letter from her, saying she is well. She thanks me very much for my letters and pictures, though I note, she did not mention my poetry! Wouldn't it be great if all care homes had internet access within each room, as a minimum standard? This pandemic has highlighted nursing homes as vulnerable in a financially driven society. We deserve more.

Businesses, I am hoping, will appreciate they can think 'outside the box' in identifying different ways they can run a service, so it can be more inclusive, that we are valuable not vulnerable. We will no longer accept a shrug of the shoulder, or pointing to the wheelchair as blame for not receiving a service. Spring 2020 is a turning point and we can see what can be achieved and should not accept less.

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