

# My Year of Barefoot Walking:

## Pandemic Pluses and Possibilities

In this pandemic year, each morning I have spent a few minutes walking outside with bare feet around the garden. That is one beginning: because stories require beginnings. For the pandemic, that beginning can be different places, different circumstances, different dates. From Wuhan in December 2019 to Italy in February 2020 to New York in March 2020. Plenty of opposing opinions, plenty of contrasting voices. Great uncertainties and many nuances. From lockdown sceptics to those in favour of masks, from coronavirus deniers to Cassandras warning of health services being overwhelmed.

In Greek mythology, Cassandra was cursed to utter true predictions that would not be believed. Maybe some of those now rejecting vaccines perceive themselves to be Cassandra voices. Regardless of perspective, there could be general agreement that the pandemic has been a disaster. The coronavirus death tolls have been huge; latest figures are that about 3 million people have died. The economic repercussions of lockdowns have also been huge. Numerous consequences: from the many suffering Long Covid to those whose livelihood have been devastated to all those who have experienced increased fears.

In the UK, after three lockdowns and at least 125,000 deaths from coronavirus, the March 2020 predictions from Imperial College look remarkably prescient. These predictions stated that with no control measures (such as lockdowns and social distancing), three quarters of the UK population would be infected by coronavirus and 500,000 would die. At the time, they were accused of wildly exaggerating this crisis. Now it is clear that claims a year ago that coronavirus was just another flu have certainly not dated well.

## Reflections

After this year of pandemic and coronavirus, reflecting is important. What can we learn from this disaster? In a public health crisis, what is needed are strategies to lessen harm and minimise risk. Very rare are magic bullets. Much more common are what could be called multitudes: the many different approaches. How we move, what we eat, how we rest. Obviously, tactics like wearing masks do not stop coronavirus just on their own. But they can be a tool; like vaccines can be a tool.

I am not a fan of pharmaceutical corporations nor am I a fan of state powers. Most of my adult life, I have campaigned against corporate profiteering and centralised authority. What is obvious is that public health emergencies demand collective strategies. What is amazing in this pandemic has been the high levels of social responsibility, care towards others and recognition of relationships. Neighbours supporting neighbours. Scientists stepping out of silos. Co-operating and collaboration. Truly heart-warming in these heart breaking days. Much of the anti-mask/anti-vaccination perspectives are rooted in fetishising individuality and rejection of communal solidarity. Muscular libertarianism rather than awareness of interdependency and mutual aid.

Amongst these difficulties and arguing voices, one constructive path is looking for pandemic pluses. By reminding ourselves of pluses, this can help us to appreciate what we have. An essential element in this equation is acknowledging the terrible pain that many people have

experienced during the pandemic. Some people incredibly challenged by what has happened in the last twelve months. Lives have been lost, indispensable rituals such as funerals substantially diminished, anxious waves overwhelming many.

And yet still: what are the pluses? I frequently ask this question during classes/ workshops/ trainings that I have taught during the pandemic. A range of responses: from connecting to nature to growing veg to more time for meditation. Quieter roads; more bicycle lanes; people unionising so that labour has a stronger voice instead of being merely on the menu.

## Interesting Sensations

For myself, a significant plus has been that barefoot walking in the garden. I recognise the privilege of having a garden. In the garden, there is a meditation path made from bark chip. Interesting sensations on the soles of my feet. Each morning — whether sunshine, rain, snow, ice — I have walked that path. A great way to wake up. An act of grounding: feet to earth. Becoming more earthed. And also an act of invigorating. There are about 200,000 nerve endings in each foot and the feet are constantly transmitting information to our brains. A quarter of the body's bones are in the feet. Nearly a fifth of the body's joints are in the feet.

Neuroscience of feet sounds a bit bonkers but does have real grounding (pun intended). Being barefoot helps to stimulate the sixth sense of proprioception (how we perceive our body's orientation in space). Norman Doidge wrote in his excellent *The Brain That Changes Itself*: “If we went barefoot, our brains would receive many different kinds of input as we went over uneven surface.” It is that great teaching from the pandemic: everything connects.

According to reflexology, the feet have reflex points that can correspond to the nervous system. Reflexologists claim that massaging these points can improve sleep and lessen migraines — and more. Or just feel wonderful. As can walking barefoot. Without the pandemic, this would not have become part of my daily practice. I have walked barefoot in the past (such as many do on the beach); but not with this regularity: each morning, out there with feet bare walking on the earth.

I have other pandemic pluses. Not wearing a watch nor using an alarm clock in the last year. More consistent journaling and a much greater connection to the local area. Ironically in these months of disconnection, I feel more intimately connected to the area and the people where I live.

## Disco Dancing

Then there are pluses such as disco dancing in yoga classes (pre-pandemic, I stated that music was *never* played in my classes). For some participants, this has been a pandemic plus. One person wrote: “Disco yin — who knew?!” And the online teaching experience. Pre-pandemic, I had stated that online teaching was something I would not do ... and from mid-March 2020, it has been the only way that I have taught.

Plenty of pluses. These are great reminders of human adaptability and human resilience. People talk about more space for contemplation and more time for exercise. More work–life balance; more meals with family; sound of birds in the morning; watching the seasons change; learning to wait for things such as haircuts; literal finding of new paths. The sheer simplicity of slowing down. Many insights have arisen from getting off the hamster wheels of just keep going. One example is querying a daily commute totalling four hours. The pandemic has been a potential pressing of the pause button. What do I value? What do I want?

Going back to 'normal' is not much of an option. To be honest, pre-pandemic normal was not great for many people. And then the pandemic has been this sledgehammer to many lives. As well as pluses and possibilities, there has been much pain.

It is important to dream. To raise our aspirations. As coronavirus becomes more normalised (as likely will happen), a hope is that what we have learnt through this pandemic process is not forgotten. A suggestion is writing down pandemic pluses. Creatively using this pressed pause to consider what we aspire to continue. Maybe living life more lightly. Being sustainable in more areas of life. Realising that consumerism is a covering up of misery and alienation.

Human society has changed enormously in the last 200 years. What changes might we like? Starting from what we want is a good place. Knowing that life is "ten thousand sorrows and ten thousand joys", we can deeply appreciate the joys. Recognising the pluses and the positives. Who knows what may happen next?

Norman Blair

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[www.yogawithnorman.co.uk](http://www.yogawithnorman.co.uk)

To receive my monthly newsletter, please email me at [yogawithnorman@gmail.com](mailto:yogawithnorman@gmail.com)