

April 2021 Blog

The Lockdown Diaries: Born Again

By Dr Dwight Turner

Narrator: Matt Murdock is blind, so he misses the prettiest morning of the year. All he gets is hissing pipes and an East Coast chill that goes straight for the bones. Matt Murdock is also Daredevil. That's why his life is about to fall apart.

At the time of writing, England (as opposed to the rest of the United Kingdom which has set its own rules and timescale) is due to exit all lockdown restrictions on the 21st of June 2021. When we entered the first lockdown around the 16th of March 2020, no one could have forecast that some fifteen months later we would only now be edging towards the denouement of this disastrous time which has been the Covid-19 pandemic. Again, at the time of writing, some 125,000 people have lost their lives to this awful illness, and families have been ripped apart by this viral, economic, and psychological behemoth, which a mere two years ago no one had heard of.

As a psychotherapist, it is of course the psychological which I am most concerned with during these times. Observing my own practice, I have had increased numbers of individuals and groups approach me for help during this time, the awareness of this massive impact causing so many so much tremendous pain. This is no different to myself. During this period, I have taken more breaks from work than ever before, feeling the need to rest and recharge my batteries more regularly given my increased workload. It is important therefore to recognise the impact had upon ourselves not as practitioners, but as human beings, especially as a pandemic knows no distinction between race, class, gender, or person. It is indiscriminate by its very nature and as we have all seen will strike at will wherever it sees fit.

This month's blog is therefore a partly personalised journey through the last year. It takes into account the cultural impact of Covid-19, the psychological, and some of the internalised impact of this cultural crisis and event, framing it against the backdrop of the process of an Alchemy of death and rebirth, whilst looking for the messages of hope, the nuggets of personal or psychological gold, which will be shrouded in the shadows of such an event, but will nonetheless still be there.

Matthew Murdock (AKA Daredevil, after the destruction of his home): There's nothing left. So, you know. So that's why. It was a nice piece of work, Kingpin. You shouldn't have signed it.

Heroes hold a hugely important role in the archetypal psyche of a culture. For example, in their paper on heroes, Zehnder and Calvert stated that, 'human civilization has a long history of collective pain and has long produced cultural scripts about heroes who triumph over evil and serve as examples for how society itself can own its dark impulses,' (2004, p. 124). The importance of the hero is that society has always needed something to look towards during a time of crisis. During the rise of Nazism in Europe, the creation of Superman involved the character of Clark Kent being given the Hebrew word for 'Voice of God' as his Kryptonian name, a name designed to bring hope (Saunders, 2011).

Heroes have also played a huge role in providing me with a sense of hope when things were most desperate. For example, I was probably no more than 17 year-old when I first read Frank Miller's

seminal graphic novel, *Born Again* (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987). A rare story amongst comic books, this one involves the betrayal of its hero, Matt Murdock, by his former girlfriend, who for some heroin sells his identity to some crooks. This information though finds its way back to Daredevil's worst enemy, the Kingpin of Crime, William Fisk, who in his obsession with the Man Without Fear, decides to dismantle Murdock's life sending him down a spiral of desperation and despair.

That there was going to be a period of cultural despair, and that we might need heroes, came when the virus first reached our shores and people started dying from its horrific impact. This impact, this fear, was not just an external one though, as my dream below recognised;

Dream Entry: 5th April 2020

Scene where I am with a group of black men and women in the garden at my parent's house. We seem to be having a party. One of the women though has an infection in her right hand, and all up her arm. She has to bury it in the garden in order for the arm to be saved, meaning as long as the arm is buried then she is fine. Another woman though decides she wants to walk over the arm. At first this other woman resists, but then she feels she has to do just this and walks over the arm, knocking it and freeing it from where it is buried in the earth. Like an angry child the arm then wakes up distorted and growing and it keeps on expanding until it takes up the whole garden. The rest of us scatter as the diseased hand gets out of control spreading from the garden to the road, to then take over the whole city. As I race to the West of London with a female friend, I hear news that the hand has spread out across the whole of the South East of the UK. I am aware that others from the party are running to the East, South and North. As I run through the countryside, I see the sea in the distance, blue and inviting and I recall I have never been to Cornwall before.

I recall that I was going to take a break during that first week of lockdown. I had been working the previous weekend and just wanted a week to be in my own space and do whatever I wanted to. Yet, Boris' announcement that we were going in to the first lockdown right then scuppered that. I was annoyed, but I was in less of a desperate position than many others around me. The first wave had hit, and chaos was about to ensue.

Narrator: Now with all the joy of a malicious child, the Kingpin tortures the fly.

We all witnessed the panic buying of toilet roll from the supermarket shelves, toilet roll, pasta, canned goods, and anything else people felt they might need in their home/bunker during the coming existential apocalypse. As Pouso (2020) recognised, the anxiety provoked went deep, but the behaviours were another factor. These behaviours are apparently nothing new and are explained by the idea of herding and hoarding as posited by the University of Technology in Sydney, who stated that 'evolved instincts dominate in stressful situations, as a response to panic and anxiety. During times of stress and deprivation, not only people but also many animals show a propensity to hoard.' In going on to explore the idea of herding, they also state that, "our propensity to follow others is complex. Some of our reasons for herding are well-reasoned. Herding can be a type of heuristic: a decision-making short-cut that saves us time and cognitive effort,' (2020, p. 1) meaning that there is a safety in coming together and all mimicking the behaviours of others. We don't have to think, in fact this is not about thought, as instinctual herd animals this is about acting in a collective way that keeps us safe.

This reaction against the threats to our very being were amplified though by the very fact so many around us were dying. The trauma and tragedy within our care homes, for example, where so many

have sadly died during this whole pandemic. As the Nuffield Trust report which stated, 'between mid-March and mid-June there were 19,286 care home resident deaths where the coronavirus was mentioned,' (2021a, p. 1). That this was a large fraction of the total numbers of deaths occurring around us during this period was truly shocking and rocked many to their core thereby exacerbating their already heightened anxieties.

Yet, these challenges were not just related to those placed within the community. In Hestia's incredible report on the rise of domestic abuse within homes where couples were now forced to stay together 24/7, they stated that their, 'domestic abuse support app Bright Sky was used 67,685 times during lockdown, and a 38% increase in people trying to access their domestic abuse support services during the lockdowns,' (2021b, p. 1). It also wasn't long until papers emerged discussing the rise in maternal mental health during lockdown (Dib et al., 2020), or the increases in suicidal feelings (Fountoulakis et al., 2021), and even from a more culturally specific angle the increased levels of depression with the BAME community (Unknown, 2020).

The pandemic had taken a massive hold upon us culturally, and its impacts were universally felt. Yet, with any event of this magnitude, there would have to be a psychological impact wouldn't there?

Wilson Fisk (Kingpin): There is blood, and bloody evidence of a struggle. There is a shattered windshield and evidence of a safety belt severed by the windshield glass and what must have been a hideous effort of will. There is no corpse. There is no corpse. There is no corpse.

Whilst the pandemic brought with it a kind of existential dread which also led to increased buying of books by authors such as Camus (2002), whose work on a town riven by a plague became once again the book to buy during this period, there were a good number of psychotherapists who saw the that psychological aspect of this period needed facing as well.

One of the first authors to recognise the importance of this stage was, Hollis (2020) who quite rightly pointed out what this pandemic and these lockdowns were about from a psychological perspective. This would be an intense period of solitude, and of shadow work, where one could go through the pain of it, whilst working on whatever unresolved issues lingered in the darkness of the psychological depths at the same time. This echoed the words of Storr (1988) who saw the importance of loneliness as a route in to the shadow, asking questions such as do we look for co-dependent relationships as a means of avoiding ourselves?

This would be a time to finally take that road less travelled. Yet, what Hollis also realised, and what I have witnessed, is that whilst I and many others are used to plumbing the depths of despair for the realisations and the gold hidden therein, there would be a majority for whom this was the anthesis of their very lives. Defences would be activated against such an intense and elongated exploration. People would find themselves eating more out of proposed boredom, or over drinking or using more recreational substances than they had done previously when they were otherwise occupied by work and/or family. They might buy things they did not need, engage in risky behaviour, or even enact the reactive formation of the denial that anything earth shattering was actually happening.

For the individual though, this would go further. For her, the anger she felt when provoked by an annoying friend or partner, she would realise, was always there, previously hidden but now seemingly the worst it has ever been not because of said provocation but because there were now no distractions from her workplace to hide this aspect from herself. For him, the sadness and depression which he had previously defended against by using layers of socialising and other activities, was now front and

centre now he was at home, on his own, and wallowing within the depths of his own isolation. For them, the anxiety of having to leave the house which they had daily endured using drink and occasionally drugs to cope with said distorted feelings, now exacerbated by the lack of an outward world but with the realisation they now are only left with an addiction. The fallouts, the breakups of close relationships, the unexplained overactions and disagreements, the anger and rage acting itself out taking people towards a precipice of self-knowledge they would either fearfully plunge over or in most cases fearfully resistance against.

Yet, whatever the resistance the unconscious still spoke up. Sleeping patterns were often disturbed, with people either struggling to sleep or retiring early into the evenings as they were worn out from doing so little. This made tiredness a constant, with irritability its companion, whilst for many others their dreams became more frequent and often times quite bizarre in their metaphorical content. Even my own dreamscape became a patchwork of images and metaphors, and I took to studying them, working with them in my therapy and on my own, recognising finally that I was undergoing some kind of alchemical exploration or maybe even transformation and that I needed to stay with whatever was going on for me.

To say a small amount about alchemy, within the world of psychotherapy this is a term often initially used by Jungians to map out the process of psychological reintegration of the shadow by exploring the myths and archetypal symbols held within dream imagery. This was a topic explored well by Marlan (2005), and my own exploration of the dreams of the other, utilised alchemy as a means of mapping a process of transformation (Turner, 2016). To say a bit more about alchemy, Jung recognised there were four stages, nigredo, albedo, citrinitas and rubedo, and how they presented out in the culture as well as within in the dreamscape became an important route to exploring just what changes were taking place and how deeply they went (C. G. Jung, 1963). The first stage, nigredo, involved a conflict between the ego and the other, or the shadow in this case. This stage recognises that the ego would fight to retain control and would resist any challenges to its self-othering superiority (Homer, 2007). The stage of albedo though involved the shadow breaking in and the ego relenting in order to begin the process of reintegration of said shadow part, whilst the citrinitas stage was the merging of these opposites into a new coherent whole. The final stage, rubedo, involved the expression of this newfound, or newly rediscovered, aspect of the Self outside in the world.

It needs to be said that this is not just a singular process and that these alchemical cycles can occur over and over again in a process of individuation, that we are always breaking down to break through, and that most of the time this painful process can feel like it knows no end, or that we fear that we will never make it to finish line. So, it is true that like the Knight's Sword in life, in this pandemic, we are constantly being forged on the blacksmith's fires, constantly being plunged in his cooling waters, constantly being beaten with his hammer on his anvil, in order to eventually become the perfect fighting weapon. Yet it is hard to have faith when so many are suffering.

Matthew Murdock (Daredevil, as he falls to his lowest in the gym his father used to use before he was murdered by mobsters): Everything else in my life is gone. Except for the lesson I learned from my father. Never give up.

During this period, I was struck by the number of colleagues who reported their own difficulties with lockdown. Moments of depression and acting out were commonplace as their own shadow selves rose to the surface unbidden. I myself recall feelings of anxiety every time Boris Johnson held a news

conference about the next stages of these lockdowns. I couldn't sleep, sometimes couldn't eat, and often times felt emotionally wrung out.

Diary Entry: 14th Nov 2021

When I was 14, I wrote the first volume of these journals. I did so to highlight just how lonely and suicidal I was back then. I was alone and I really didn't see any point in living life. No one in my family paid any attention to me, promises were made which were never kept, and this absence of any relationship, of any truth, was so regular an occurrence that I gave up hope within my own family. I often felt so actively undermined that I lost all faith in myself never mind in others. The sadness of being 14 and so lonely has come up now I think because of COVID-19 and the varying lockdowns. With the first lockdown it was all new and I was starting out in a new relationship. Then George Floyd was murdered, and I was busier than I ever have been before. So now I guess is first time I've really had to stay with the hell that is lockdown. The first lesson? That of Scapegoating. That of holding of all that is not me from my family, my adopted culture, means that I have always been on the outside. It was a technique that my XXXX used against me as a weapon and is something I know cultures use against the other to control and as a form of abuse.

Abandonments, bereavements, living in difficult environments. The felt realities of all of these ongoing challenges became paramount for so many. Emotions were heightened because on one level there were no distractions. The day-to-day distancing from self that we all engaged in pre the pandemic was gone, that work, that travel, that visit to friends, they had all disappeared and all we were left with was us and our own thoughts and unprocessed materials. We had to sit with the depression, our anxiety, our families, our fear of intimacy, our fear of being alone, our anger, and our own abusive selves. For many though our defences worked overtime to protect ourselves; we struggled with sleep, we didn't eat as well, we over drank, overate, over bought, over sexed, as an avoidance from the projected dangers of just being. We binge watched Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus, the BBC, ITV, Channel Four, Brit Box, anything just to keep us from our bodily self, from our self.

Maggie (In the Church Mission): The fever grows in him. No earthly force can stop it. He has lost too much blood. His body cannot fight. He will die. But he has so very much to do, my lord. His soul is troubled. But it is a good man's soul, my lord. He needs only to be shown your way, then he will rise as your own and bring light to this poisoned city. He will be as a spear of lightening in your hand, my Lord. If I am to be punished for past sins, so be it. If I am to be cast in hell, so be it. But spare him. So many need him. Hear my plea.

Faith is a strange thing. It is easy to lose it during a time of crisis, and most of us don't even have to do so given that it is so easy to ignore most of the traumas going on around us for the majority of the time. When we walk past the man living on the streets, or when we watch something horrible going on halfway across the world, we thank our stars that it is not us, and go on with our lives, whilst those suffering, or some of them at least, pray to their god and try to find some kind of hope in the belief, the faith, they have in said deity. The book of Job (2016) in the Bible, which is just one version of this metaphor, speaks of this really well. Job, who is tested by the Devil itself, loses everything, is infected with illnesses the like of which have never been seen before, and finds his faith tested to a greater degree than ever before.

When life tests us, like it was for us all during this pandemic, and like it was for me during this time, it can feel most unfair, like the devil itself is knocking on the door begging to be let in. Transformation can feel like this as well. We resist it because we are afraid of the destruction it will wreak on our

lives. We don't want to lose partners, friends, jobs, our positions in life. We want things to remain the same. When we feel dragged down into the depths of despair, it can be counter-intuitive to believe that we will come out better, stronger, or in a better psychological space than when we entered into said depression. It doesn't make sense to believe in faith, and the idea of blind faith can be terrifying.

Yet, this isn't about the powerlessness of blind faith, and this aspect was one of the most interesting aspects of Jung's Answer to Job. This is about the fight to retain one's sense of faith. This is about the internal struggle against giving up on something deeper and believing oneself as god, whilst staying humble enough to recognise at the same time that one is cared for, held, that it is ok to lose faith and regain it as ultimately we win (Carl Gustav Jung, 2002).

For many this conflict meant rejecting the lived reality of life during a pandemic, or the narcissistic retention of a fantasy of how things were before, said enforced myopia an avoidance of the pain of said situation. Whilst for me, and I will argue for many others as well, the pain of existence exacerbated by the isolation of lockdowns meant at times even I lost faith that there was a route out for myself from all of this. strangely, the guidance of my dreams spoke otherwise.

Dream Entry: 21st Jan 2021

I am indoors somewhere playing football against what initially seems to be a superior team. As they press forward, I steal the ball from them run up the field and score a goal. The other team then kicks off and as they pass the ball around, I take it again and score a second goal. We change ends, as there is now a break. The next half starts, and my team this time presses forward to the point that I score a third goal. The other, previously superior, team looks shellshocked at what is happening to them. They thought they would win, but now realise that I can, or we can, win this game now we are 3-0 up.

Ben Urich (Reporter): As for me, like I told you, I'm a reporter. I'm going to find out where Matt Murdoch is, and what he has become.

That there was so much fear of the external and the internal is without doubt (Francis et al., 2002). I like to think that Cho's paper (Cho, 2006) were it written today would have recognised that the narcissistic retreat provoked by said fear was there to avoid the death anxiety provoked by such deadly circumstances. This activating of Thanatos, this mass psychic trauma which we have all been swept up in, should never have been underestimated and is nothing new. Whereas Freud (Freud, 1930) saw the distress of a civilisation in the years in the run up to World War II, what we were unable to recognise there were the similarities in our differing eras.

In the present era though, none of us could have recognised the impact that lockdowns would have upon so many of us. The elderly who were on their own, being shielded by relatives and loved ones if they were lucky, versus those who tried to form bubbles but could not. The solitary confinement endured by prisoners in the penal system in many ways became a mirror for the world we now resided within (Haney, 2003). This isolation was not just literal, it was also existential, and this dive in to the depths of the shadow morass which was the 2nd Wave of Lockdowns enhanced this (Helm et al., 2019). The darker nights of Autumn, the promise of a five-day Christmas reduced to just one, meant we were being forged, or forced, deeper and deeper, closer and closer, towards the shadow material we had tried to avoid by Eat(ing) Out To Help Out just a few weeks before. We risked our lives for our

economy, but then had to stay home to save the NHS, before risking our lives for a better Christmas for the economy, before staying home to save the NHS.

Yet there was still gold in that darkness. That relationships, that our neighbours and our community, were what made us existentially happy became one of the greatest realisations of this period. That disconnection from the complex nature of life, the running around, commuting, buying lunch at Pret and dinner at McDonalds, taking in a movie at the IMAX followed by drinks and a dance at a nightclub in Soho. All of this was suddenly replaced by the safety, or the sanitary nature of, Zoom calls with friends and family, with those who cared most about us, who checked in with us about how we were, were we ok, did we need anything, could someone deliver some food for us at a moment's notice. They were there as we struggled with our mental health, with our increasingly poor sleeping habits, and with our reserve against eating.

Haig (2015) in his book talked about how this world, this Capitalist world, is designed to depress us with its constant wants and needs. Whilst during this pandemic, what was realised was that we had rediscovered what mattered to us most of all. In fact, in an interview conducted by myself on the nature of happiness, I recognised the importance of a simple hug, of touch, of a quiet drink in the pub with a mate, of a phone call with those closest, as the things which mattered most of all, as the things which made us happy (Jackson, 2021).

This though ran counter to the powers that be that needed us to travel, to go to work, to eat out, to buy, to spend, not to save, not to sit at home, not just to buy from online suppliers based abroad. They didn't need us to be ourselves. They didn't need us to individuate.

They needed us back.

Matthew Murdoch (Daredevil, as he hears Nuke approach Hell's Kitchen): I thought I'd have to be more patient than this Kingpin. I thought I'd have to wait weeks for you to get sloppy like you did with my house.

Hope arrived in the form of the vaccine toward the end of 2020. This countered the whisper of happiness so cruelly blown away over the Christmas period. The despair of so many families that their arrangements were disrupted by the rise in cases, followed by the plunging into further darkness of a deepening winter lockdown. Support bubbles wobbled or burst, whilst many retreated even further into their shadow or their despair. Some sort out the comfort of their families, keeping them as close as possible, whilst others engaged in the narcissistic fantasy of pseudo relationships online knowing full well that these government restrictions meant they were not going to meet anyone anytime soon.

The second lockdown rolled into the third and another 16,500 elderly people died in care homes around the country (Unknown, 2021a), whilst by January 2021 the daily death toll around the country had reached 1500 per day. Staff were struggling under furlough, whilst healthcare professionals fought daily to keep themselves together whilst supporting their clients, their patients, and the staff in their charge. And all the while they did so whilst the deniers whispered their denials, or whilst the blinkered fought against the realisation that everything had changed, that everything had altered inexorably.

This was mirrored by the struggle between those who recognised the inner work necessary to get through the loneliness and isolation of this lockdown versus those whose defences came up, who were more narcissistic, more protectionist of their families and friends, rejecting the morally and socially constructed adaptations of their culture for the more instinctual survivalist roles of their species.

Ben Urich (Reporter, witnessing the attack by Nuke): My name is Ben Urich. Hell's Kitchen is under attack by a One-Man Army. Matt Murdock is trying to negotiate a cease fire. Unilaterally. I shouldn't call him Matt. Give the man his due. He's wearing the tights. He's Daredevil. The Man Without Fear.

Diary Entry 10th March 2021

I think one of the worst things I have endured in my recent past was the repeated personal and institutional reinforcement that I was bad, evil, that everything I did was wrong in some way. Yet, I woke up this morning realising my inner ethical drive to help others says something different. Helping you all those years ago, or even helping a good friend who was being abused by her partner at Christmas, these were not things I had to think about. These were actions I took because they were the right, the moral thing to do.

That inner morality is what makes me who I am, and I recognise it is that which kept me going when I fought for the rights of my family in court all that time. It was this inner morality which when things were particularly desperate kept me from walking to Beachy Head and ending it right there and then. It was this morality which people when people ask me how I survived so long kept me going way beyond that which others might have. It was this morality which meant I ultimately won.

This is the morality of the hero, or an archetype which I have been drawn to since I was a child. It is this morality which I find most attractive in the Daredevils, the Hulks, the X Men and many others. It is this morality and this strength to keep going which makes me who I am. So, when you push me, when you remind me of the gifts of love I receive in return, I do appreciate it, I do hear it. I hear the words that say I am a good person who tries to do good things for many, and who regularly touches many with his deeds, his ways, and especially his words. So, I wanted you to hear my thank you for all that you do for me. I won't forget it (my morality won't let me, the bastard).

For him (for Daredevil) there is no left and right. For her there is no anti this or pro that. For them there is no position of prominence over the other. There is only the moral imperative to do the right thing. There is only the ethical drive to put self in harm's way to protect those around him, no matter what their political, cultural, or personal position happens to be. That inner drive to see the worth of both or of all positions and to guide itself a path through them always remembering to do what is right.

This inner morality is only reached through this shadow work I now realise. The very same shadow work presented by the opportunity that is Covid-19 and these lockdowns. It is this which has called to me through the pain of this period, through the distress and the tears that have been lockdowns one two and three.

So, whilst so many take up arms and rage against the other, that inner truth, that wellspring of morality driven by something greater, treads an intersectional path where no one aspect of our cultural dyad dominates it, and where the hypocrisy of one's own split positions is acknowledged. Where the exclusions of BLM and RTS are acknowledged, thereby shining a light upon the plight of LGBTQPOC and working-class women simultaneously.

This intersectional ghost sits at the core of this moral fight against the laws of a land which exclude and marginalise. It is a conflict against the survivalist relationalism of an inner morality versus the individualistic narcissism of the instinctual. It is that which is being called forth from the source, that which is designated to guide and protect us as a community, as a species, versus that which believes in the survival of the fittest and the marginalisation of those who are not as a means forward.

The narcissistic wound speaks from a space of fear and reactionism. It is denial, it is anxious, it is paranoia, it is controlling. It is isolationist. The moral is relational. It is a simple route but a difficult one. It is being with friends, it is loving those who love us, and asking forgiveness from those we have hurt during our anxious narcissistic rages provoked by this pandemic. It is owning our own immaturity and narcissism whilst walking that difficult path back towards a more moral a more simplistic existence. So even whilst it endures its own pain, the moral holds it, it sits within it, it learns from it, and all whilst supporting those outside who need it, be they neighbours, friends, or anyone else. It stands up and supports. It knows that without those others it too will not survive, that strength, that survival, comes from community.

Daredevil: My name is Matt Murdock. I live in Hell's Kitchen and do my best to keep it clean. That's all you need to know.

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