

Getting through the Pandemic

My Garmin Heart Rate Monitor is my unjudging friend. It tells me my Intensity Minutes. You are supposed to do at least 150 Intensity Minutes each week to maintain basic fitness.

Before the pandemic I was a software engineer working for the Head of Pathology at Edinburgh University. I was based out at the Vet School, co-located with the Veterinary Pathologists there, and I was regularly walking around the Bush Estate during my lunchtimes. It was nice to get out of the office, into the fresh air and get my heart beating a little faster. I was hitting the target most weeks, and then the pandemic hit.

I'm still a software engineer working for the Head of Pathology, but now I'm based in my spare room. My spare room was my "music" room before the pandemic, but is now also my "office" too, having supplemented the guitars with a desk, chair and computer. Work and Pleasure literally in the same room.

I started taking my breaks walking around Bonaly Country Park where I live. I'll remember the colours of Spring 2020 most of all; the walks started in the dull colours of winter, and by the time lockdown lifted, we were in summer and everything had come back to life again, with the accompanying palette of vibrant colours.

Back to normal soon, we thought, we could move around and soon we'd be in the actual office again. I kept walking though. Was it pride that kept me ticking off that weekly 150 minute target? Or was I enjoying the fresh air? Or was it daily escapism from the terrible pandemic? Or just marking time? It was probably a mixture of many things.

And what of Summer 2020? I don't really recall that much, to be honest. Perhaps we were relieved by some semblance of "normality". I do recall one thing though – we only visited a café twice, and even then, only ate a cake and drank coffee al fresco. Restaurants and indoor gatherings seem even now, to be needlessly risky.

It was good to see the hills again and visit the high places. The views from the tops seemed particularly poignant – a reminder of the insignificance of the individual? This emptiness perhaps reflected the daily statistics – how many thousands have died so far? Who are these people? Who were these people?

Each individual "excess death" is somebody's brother, sister, wife, husband, mother, father, uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather, nephew or niece. A number on a screen stands in contrast to the vast emptiness of the existence I could see from the top of a Munro.

COVID has thankfully kept its distance from those I love. For now. Some things you try not to dwell on.

My wife has sisters who were all shielding due to medical conditions. Keeping them safe during the first lockdown gave some sense of the personal. Those statistics could be them; and it could be me too, as I'm in the 9th JCVI "At Risk" group.

Am I lucky I have no close relatives of my own anymore?

Then came Autumn, and the inexorable rise in cases and deaths once more. The inevitable lockdown beckoned. But when would it be? We should act now and buy some time? No, more waiting. More and more restrictions. Finally, Christmas was on the Horizon, and a break. But once again, No. A New Year came and with it a new lockdown, at the darkest, dullest time of the year. This was going to be tough.

But my unspeaking friend still reminded me of the required 150 minutes. Summer had turned into Autumn, with its leafy dampness and attendant mud. My walking seemed to be getting me permanently sweaty, muddy and dirty. Why walk and get filthy? I'd be just as well running and getting covered in mud? So, I ran.

The pandemic was challenging me, so it was time to respond with my own challenge, this time to run 3 times a week for 7km each time. I was already walking 3 times a week for my 150 minutes, what would running 3 times a week do? Could I double my goal, and give my unspeaking friend 300 minutes a week?

The end of October came, and I made the plunge. I decided to up my fitness. I've always been plagued with sinus problems, and seem to get more than my fair share of colds, colds that seem to degenerate into sniffing and sneezing competitions in which I'm the only competitor! I started running at probably the worst time of year to start any physical outside activity. Frost, then snow and ice made for tricky progress on top of the short days. But I persisted. What else would I do if I gave up? "When the going gets tough, the tough get going", so they say.

13 weeks later it was the end of February, and winter still held its grip. I had kept going. I'd managed to keep up with 3 runs a week. I didn't think I had it in me. I'd surprised myself. I decided to keep going for another 13 week "quarter". I had hit my goal of 300 Intensity minutes a week, so what else could I achieve?

I'm now on week 5 of my second block of 13 weeks. I'm now trying to increase my effort to exercising on every weekday, but I'm staying with 3 runs a week for the time being, and instead adding 2, 15km cycles as well. My knees are a problem, as I'm worried 5 runs a week will take an undue toll on them. I had a rock-climbing accident 12 years ago, and as a result, I smashed my left heel; I have a limited range of movement in that heel. I believe this means other joints in my legs and hips now take a higher level of load as a result. My right knee is occasionally sore.

But I feel stronger and fitter these days. I look different. My leg muscles are definitely bigger! I still get colds, but they don't hang around anymore. I look forward to getting out in the fresh air every day, whatever the weather (unless its exceptionally bad. – gusty, strong winds and heavy, squally rain are the only real "show stoppers" so far), and going for my run or cycle.

We are now coming out of lockdown for the third time, with the difference of a vaccine being administered. Science has come to the rescue of our physical selves.

But what of our mental selves?

There is another side to this story.

I am a “resting” Pilates teacher too, having qualified some years ago, and let it lapse after returning to Computers. I have also discovered Yoga in the past 6 years, and made a very good friend in Tali, my yoga “guru”. And through Tali I have met 2 Pilates teachers, Rachel and Amanda, who all share a Pilates/Yoga studio together. I’ve been inspired to return to my Pilates mat, and explore the more spiritual side of my Yoga practice, during the pandemic.

Rachel started Pilates classes via Zoom as the studio has been closed for almost the whole of the past year. I’ve been doing 3 Pilates classes and a Yoga class a week. This has been my social life too – I feel I know people I’ve only ever met over Zoom. Incidentally, I have a work colleague that I’ve never actually met too!

Yoga has taught me how to deal with the mental side of the pandemic. It’s hard to explain, but you simply observe the outside world from your mind’s eye. You observe your reaction to your perception. You place that observation and reaction in a mental box, and put it on a mental shelf. You simply acknowledge that interaction, and refuse to be governed by it. You give your conscious mind only so much time to think about that “box”. The unconscious mind goes to work in the background. You cope with bad news, and you celebrate good news. Nothing is in charge of you. You wag that mental tail only when YOU decide; the tail does NOT wag you!

The pandemic has probably got another year to go. We will be wearing masks and socially distancing for the foreseeable future. I have no idea when, or if, I will be back in the office. “Commuting is my favourite activity”, said no one, ever! New variants will emerge, vaccines will be tweaked, and boosters administered. Only a fool puts a timescale on all of this. We will be forced to go at the pace of the country with the most incompetent leadership. We will be safe only when the whole world is safe.

I will keep Running, Cycling, doing Pilates, and practicing Yoga. I have my unspeaking friend always with me.

“Change is never painful. Only the resistance to change is painful”. The Buddha

Mike Wicks

31st March 2021