

We're all having an existential crisis

Kiran Sidhu

I've just finished a three-way video call with two friends on Whatsapp. We're entering the fourth week of lockdown and the conversations we are having are becoming noticeably less enthusiastic as weeks progress. What links us as well as our topics of conversation is our collective ennui; the feeling of being mentally tired when there's a lack of stimulus. And this isn't limited to my friends - a collective ennui has gripped the country. It presents itself in the small moments of stillness when we search for the right words when someone asks what we have been doing in our day. However, something exciting is happening in the midst of all this stagnant cloud of disinterest. Something rather compelling is taking place - we're all having an existential crisis.

Paradoxically, in this space of uncertainty and constraint, we have been given a curious freedom. The lives we had, filled with our usual routine of doing the weekly shop, meeting friends or the take-away coffee we had on our way to work - have disappeared. This dismantling of our conscious and unconscious patterns of behaviour is rude and abrupt. Our 'props' in life, the things that defined us, have been done away with; the human scaffolding that once held us together is no more. We have become strangers to ourselves; set adrift in some dystopian wasteland made from the people we once were; the landscape of our lives - once fertile and evergreen. We will now be reintroduced - not to each other - but to ourselves. With social distancing and our routines dismantled, we will all be revealed to ourselves in a mass undressing. Who are we when we are no longer ourselves?

Introspection is a natural byproduct of lockdown; it's finally being able to listen to the solitary beat of your heart minus the polluted noise that you once thought was so necessary. And in this forced hiatus, seeing myself laid out bare like a badly organised picnic, I have wondered what makes me, well, me? My friend's question, 'what did you do yesterday?', a question that in usual circumstances would be innocuous, is now a direct question upon my existence. I have become overly conscious of how I'm spending my days. This fretting of mine has been compounded by French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre's words: "You are nothing but the sum of your acts." With this in mind, what I choose to do in lockdown, feels burdensome; after all, I am what I choose to do. So, what am I choosing to do? There's an undeniable responsibility here for me to fashion myself in some way. Although it's perfectly OK to sit and watch TV on the sofa in this pandemic - after all, these are unprecedented times - it's just not how I wish to shape myself. My existence is malleable - and this is giving me anxiety. Sartre called this anguish 'angoisse', adding: "we are condemned to be free". There is nothing more to a pen or a chair than its obvious function - its purpose established and fixed. But unlike inanimate objects, you and I have the ability to actively shape our existence. Sartre said with no God to give us purpose we must define ourselves. Much like Nietzsche pronouncing "God is dead": the death of rigid ways of thinking and doing things. We must call into question all the things we have become accustomed to. Replace the word 'God' with the word 'work'. Covid-19 has released us from our usual framework - we must redefine who we are.

Lockdown has diverted us away from habitual actions - we no longer walk a preordained path. The equations we lived by are no longer feasible. There is no path. It is obvious that our own personal set-ups in life hinder some of this newly acquired freedom, some of us have children - others have not. Some of us live in high rise flats - others have vast gardens. But, even within the parameters of realistic choices, we're often constrained by the way in which we have become accustomed to seeing ourselves. We build our own cage. And in doing so, Sartre would say, we were acting inauthentically; denying our freedom because of the personal anguish we feel in the face of it. An authentic person, on the other hand, would embrace this ineluctable freedom and be responsible for it. We wouldn't make the excuse of not having the time to read the book that's been sitting on the bookshelf, or that our work or career kept us from doing the things we wanted: something Nietzsche would call 'life-denying' habits. We assign value to the acts we choose to do. If I choose to do one thing rather than another, I have automatically given the action I have chosen value. By choosing to be a writer, I have inadvertently told the world that being a writer is a worthwhile career. Being acutely mindful of how every act is a snapshot of who I am, I have filled my days with a variety of things. I have been trying to learn a new

language; I'm been using Youtube tutorials on how to play the piano; I've revived an old hobby of mine - glass painting and I've been taking long solitary country walks.

As well as thinking about Sartre, I have been thinking about Nietzsche's idea of the Übermensch, sometimes translated as Superman; a self-creating and self-overcoming individual: someone who is able to self-style within the absurdity of life. I feel this period in lockdown is life-affirming. I am injecting value in it by embracing the chaos and re-affirming what I find to be valuable. There's a sense of 'becoming' and going beyond what was before; the old comforts that stitched us together. I am happy for all these things that I am doing to singularly stand-up as a representation of who I am; a multifaceted person muddling through life.

I feel a unique kind of freedom in lockdown that I have never felt before. Even when I have taken time off work, it's envisaged, planned and measured. But, in these days where I often forget which day it is and life itself has gone skew-whiff, both the outside world and my own existence feels free-flowing, rather than something set in stone. I am free to reinvent myself or at least amplify the person that I am. Like the Talking Heads song Once In A Lifetime, I have asked myself whether I really needed a new car that now sits dormant in my drive. As I sit in my study writing this article, I'm asking myself is this really the life that I chose? Am I right or am I wrong? And how the hell did I get here? I've stepped outside myself and seeing myself as part of the world as much as any other object.

Language app Duolingo says that the number of online users have skyrocketed since lockdown. Open Culture has offered free online courses from physics to ancient history. If the empty shelves in the baking aisles in supermarkets is anything to go by, we're all baking. We have the opportunity to whip ourselves into a new existence. We're finding ourselves to be strange in this new world where there is no blueprint; wondering why we followed certain acts and rejected others. I wonder what Sartre and Nietzsche would say to the declaration: it's the end of the world, as we know it. I think they would both encourage us to embrace the chaos and make something worthy.

Some experiences, in their greatness, maim us. We may not have lost a leg or an arm in this period of lockdown, but we have lost a major part of us - and that's our everyday lives. We've been propelled into the unknown - where things are the same - but radically different. A major shift in our psyche has taken place. But, in this collective ennui, there's a hidden freedom.

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