Coronavirus and Allotments

I don’t remember there being a spring so lovely. Day after day has been dry, sunny and warm. There has been sufficient nip in the air to remind us that it is still early in the year, but no frost to damage the blossom or tentative early shoots. It’s as if Nature is having a laugh at humanity; sending a life-threatening virus but also the most perfect Spring imaginable.

Lockdown is not easy. Being able to go to the allotment has been my salvation – both physically and mentally. I am a retired person with lots of room in the house and plenty of things to do, but severely miss my activities and my friends. On the allotment I can be outside without worrying about social distancing, get rid of frustrations with digging, exercise with enjoyment, have a bit of a chat and social contact, albeit at a distance, restore mental equilibrium by a closeness to nature and affirm life, hope and the future by sowing seed. It restores me; two hours down there and I can face the rest of the day.

What has changed on the plots as a result of the advent of Coronavirus? Not a lot. There are notices on the gate from the local authority advising NAS guidelines. There is a flurry of surgical gloves and/or hand sanitizer at the gates and taps. There’s a bit of self-conscious shuffling away from other plot holders (Is that 2m? Am I being rude edging away?) but we are used to talking plot to plot at a distance.

A week into lockdown I was stopped by the Police going out of the site gate and asked why I wasn’t at home? I explained about allotments – collecting food (rhubarb and purple sprouting broccoli) as well as getting exercise, how plot holders were good at social distancing and that Michael Gove had said it was fine to go to the allotment. The policeman peered into the site and seeing cars asked me Had I driven there? He eventually let me go. A couple of weeks later there was an article in the local newspaper from a senior councillor saying that plot holders could carry on using their allotments but should abide by NAS guidelines. There is a City Council logo on the site gate notice sanctioning our site use and there have been no more queries about using the plots. There are other UK sites which have not been so fortunate. We are very aware on my site, even though we are self-managed, how easy it would be for the Council to close the allotments and consequently, are very careful to observe all lockdown issues and NAS guidelines.

The site is busy. It’s not just the usual spring busyness. People have huge, unprecedented chunks of unallocated time. All those jobs there was never time to do, have suddenly become possible. I have dealt with the external paths, removing ancient carpets and perennial weed, dug out a golden hop plant with roots like octopus tentacles and am finally digging a pond. I am not alone in finally getting projects off the ground. Everyone I speak to is doing the same.

A month into lockdown, the long-term jobs are nearing completion. For the first time ever in the Spring I am not running to catch up with the things which must be done. I am going to the plot everyday for a couple of hours but I am pottering and enjoying the sunshine and watching the progress of my seedlings and just enjoying the allotment in a way I have never done before. There is so much trouble and misery coming out of coronavirus and it feels as if the world has gone crazy, but the allotment is a place of purposeful activity and hope. I hope the peace and restoration it brings me will have some impact on the world outside the allotment gate.

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