

# Life & Times

## Love in the time of Corona

It was my first day back at work after a week of self-isolation, and I cherished the ability to return to my work as a GP. The minute I stepped into the surgery, I could sense a mix of exhilaration, determination, and composure. From the receptionists to the doctors, all of our ordinary activities took on a new meaning. It was the energy of we-are-in-it-together, the energy of solidarity.

Only a week ago, I spent the day in bed feeling apathetic, nauseous, and weak. I experienced a long spell of disorientation and agitation — it was not coronavirus though.

Let me go back a little bit. It all started when, like many other times before, I went to my friendly local café for a black Americano and round of toast. Except this time, my breakfast came with an extra serving of 'go-back-home-foreigner'<sup>1</sup> from one of the other patrons. He was convinced that 'foreigners' and 'migrants coming in boats' were responsible for coronavirus as well as for all of the other infections in the UK. To make sure that I understood the depth of his feelings for those like me, he added: 'You wanna hear it in English? Pliss off!'

One of the other customers, a regular like me who knew I was a doctor, rushed in to save me: 'No, no. This lady is doing good work in this country.' I surely am. I work for the NHS during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Still, both men were right. The foreigner in me should 'go home', and the doctor in me should continue to help in the NHS. I am both the beast and the beauty. Who I am is worth nothing, but what I do is worth everything. That is the narrative that has been woven together by the UK government for some years.

Perhaps now you have some sense of my feelings of disorientation and confusion? Having our political leaders slap me on one cheek and kiss me on the other, I cannot feel unequivocally proud of the NHS like other members of the staff might.

Erich Fried, an Austrian-born poet, writer and translator once wrote: 'Those who love half of you do not love half of you, they do



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*not love you at all. They want to split and trim you,*

*they want to amputate and mutilate you.'*

To be sure, the bond between me and the NHS started loosening when we started excluding some of the most needy and vulnerable in our society from universal healthcare,<sup>2</sup> when we let the Home Office branch out into our health services. And again, there is the rub — I cherish my patients, but I am profoundly disappointed in our leaders. I say this to the relevant decision makers: You should have mobilised more strongly to resist policies that fragment the NHS and jeopardise social cohesion and solidarity.

Whether it manifests itself in a local café or in a set of deceptively-worded national policies, the upsurge of racism is personal to me.

### THOSE WHO ARE ALONE SHOULD MATTER

In times of crisis, we rely on social capital. However, solidarity is not a switch you can simply turn on and off at whim. Solidarity as 'shared practices reflecting a collective commitment to carry "costs" (financial, social, emotional and otherwise) to assist others'<sup>3</sup> requires nurturing and maintaining through trust. '[T]rust is a form of mutual recognition of intrinsic self-worth.'<sup>4</sup> Recognition, in effect, is a form of love.

Ultimately, I was forced to consider a single fundamental question: How do I love? How do I love in times of a pandemic when I have been

pushed to the margins before corona and I will almost certainly be kept there during and after corona, too?

Once the haze of rage receded within me following the incident in the café, I realised that I can still love from the margins; in fact, I can love more forcefully, more passionately, more clearly from the margins. When I am pushed away by hate, when the ties with systems loosen, I find myself where it matters most and with those who alone should matter.

I remember my oath to medicine as an art of healing. I remember my commitment to the ethics of justice and care that will survive politicians, governments, and transient policies. I remember my enduring love and gratitude for those patients who, day in and day out, humble me with their trust.

I call on you to speak up now. Demand that government suspends the NHS charging regulations of 2015 and 2017 that restrict access to the NHS for anyone suspected of having an irregular immigration status.<sup>2</sup>

We are redeemed by solidarity. We are redeemed by love in the time of Corona.

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