

A Safe New World

by [Andy Thomas](#) (August 2020)



New York Corner (Corner Saloon), Edward Hopper, 1913

Back in early March 2020, it had been impossible to imagine what was to come in such short order. It feels rather appropriate, therefore, to begin with a quote from *The War of The Worlds*:

It seems to me now almost incredibly wonderful that, with that swift fate hanging over us, men could go about their petty concerns as they did. –H. G. Wells

A week or so before lockdown, I was in a pub beside Oxford Road railway station in Manchester listening to a friend tell me of reports of “panic buying,” something which I hadn’t even thought about until then.

From the railway station in the distance came the sound of shunting trains, ringing and rumbling, softened almost into melody by the distance . . . It seemed so safe and tranquil.

“It wasn’t unreasonable of people,” she suggested, “to stock up on food if you know there’s going to be a shortage.”

A shortage!

I am rather glad she said what she did because it prompted me to go home and place a large supermarket order just before panic hit.

I don’t watch television and my exposure to mainstream media is limited. And so, it was in another pub a week or so later, that I saw the first press briefing on the developing pandemic, as it was being called. The government’s approach, as described then, seemed reasonable to me—they couldn’t stop the virus from spreading, we were told, but we had to delay its spread so that the hospitals wouldn’t be overwhelmed until a level of herd immunity developed.

I continued to watch as a BBC reporter went on to pressure a government official over the “need for lockdown.” Other countries are locking down, she was demanded, so why aren’t we? However, he stood his ground and replied (paraphrasing slightly from memory), “We live in a liberal democracy and prefer to trust people to act responsibly.”

I watched also as the BBC interviewed one random person after another, cajoling each to express their emotions and fear. However, something had struck me about what [Boris Johnson had said in the briefing](#). It was this:

And it's going to spread further and I must level with you, level with the British public, many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time. –Boris Johnson, 12th March, 2020

There was a time, I mused, that governments would urge people to remain calm and not to panic.

Keep calm and carry on. –British Government, 1939

But here we had a Prime Minister telling the public that, in effect, many of us were going to die. If a member of most families was going to die (which is how I interpreted his words on first hearing) then, I wondered, was it going to be something like *Russian Roulette*? One person in six perhaps?

I think this was the only moment I had any real fear of the virus itself.

On March 26th, the government collapsed and folded under media pressure, or at least that is how it appeared. The previous notion of “herd immunity” simply vanished and we were all now under effective house arrest. The economy was to be shuttered and all social activity deemed illegal. It later transpired that this thinking had been influenced by the numbers spat out of a computer model, one which gives different results depending on which computer you run it on. This was the model written by Professor Neil Ferguson, a man who in 2005 predicted there would be 250 million deaths from bird flu.[\[1\]](#) In the end, there were only 292 recorded fatalities over a five-year period.[\[2\]](#)

Nevertheless, this was “The Science” and, as such, beyond question. Things which were unthinkable only weeks before came to be. The words of ministers and bureaucrats instantly became “The Law.” The police urged people to spy on one another and report any ne’er-do-well who ventured outside without authorised reason.[\[3\]](#)

A day or two prior to lockdown, I had taken a stroll around Media City, the home of the BBC in Salford. I love Salford, but the BBC not so much. Salford was once the heart of the industrial revolution and the home of play-write, Shelagh Delaney. However, much of it has been demolished, including the once-bustling Salford Market and docks. The dock area is where the trendy but soulless BBC buildings now stand.

A reporter and camera crew were interviewing people on the plaza as I passed. I made my way to Costa Coffee but found they had turned all the chairs upside down so no one could sit down. I wandered around the corner to a coffee shop which was still allowing people in.

This would be my last social experience, if you can call it that, for many months.

As I sipped my coffee and read my Kindle, the reporter who I had passed earlier came in with her camera guy. I watched and listened as she interviewed the staff.

"How concerned are you?" the proprietor was asked, rhetorically.

"Very concerned," came the predictable reply.

"So you're concerned and frightened then?"

"Yes, very."

I recall it because it felt wrong somehow. It had reminded me of something which happened at primary school when I was 9 years old. It was the early 1980s and the teacher had just pulled up a stool, on which she sat, as she informed us that she had something very serious to tell us all. I can quote her words because I remember them quite well:

"There is a nuclear missile pointing at all your heads," she said to her class of 9-year-olds and, "Any second now you could all be dead."

I was sick with fear as I walked home from school that day. However, as the days passed and nothing happened, the fear subsided.

Well, for the first month or so of lockdown, that is exactly how I felt. I would wake with a sickness in my stomach, like I had swallowed a rock the night before. To say that I was “concerned” just does not cut it. I was frightened, terrified even—just not of the virus.

Whatever fear I had of the virus was subsiding quickly as *nothing happened*. The “R Number” went up, went down and went back up again, but the fact remained that the Nightingale Hospitals, which had been so hurriedly constructed, remained empty and were later closed.[\[4\]](#) A hospital ship brought into New York had been sent away again.[\[5\]](#)

What I feared were the consequences of what was being done in the name of “lockdown” and the need to “stay safe” —a fear which I feel is being borne out now.

I don’t know where the virus came from. I’m not a virologist but I could understand that it represented an unknown danger. As I have said, I found myself accepting and agreeing with the government’s initial response—in fact I remember thinking to that Boris actually deserved some support from the media on this instead of their unremitting anxiety-inducing narrative.

I suspected that the economic implications of what was being done would be catastrophic. I’m not an economist either, but I do understand that the economy is more than just abstract notions of deficit and GDP. It represents people’s livelihoods and dreams. It is the system by which we live. I also have certain insights of poverty and social deprivation and all that goes with it—not just a tightening of the household budget, but the intolerable psychological stress of those at the bottom of society, the trauma, family breakdown,

alcoholism, drug addition, gang culture and the ruined lives of children who grow up to relive the cycle years later.

Something my history teacher at school had once said while we were studying the Weimar Republic began to haunt me. I may have to paraphrase slightly, but it was basically this: "When people become desperate, they look to extreme political solutions."

Over recent years, I've become somewhat aware that technological progress combined with politically motivated social policies have had the effect of hollowing out the fabric of society—that which binds people together. This is an important topic and deserves a separate discussion, but the family in the western world has been broken. Working class people and culture have been discarded. Long established communities and ways of life have vanished.

My first experience of the Internet was in 1989. I am a programmer and was a relatively early adopter of social media in the early 2000s. You might think, therefore, that I would suggest that we look to life online as the future. But I do no such thing. I have come view social media as an insidious phenomena which, in its current form, is a threat to human well-being. It does not foster connection, but divides people into ever smaller bubbles of perceived reality. This is another deep topic which deserves separate discussion. Moreover, it is no substitute for authentic human socialisation and it disturbs me that so many seem to think that Zoom is the answer to lockdown.

It disturbs me also that schools and nurseries are enforcing and expanding bizarre and cruel social distancing regimes on children who are, by all accounts, almost immune.

As far back as 11th May, the UK Chief Medical Officer himself, Professor Chris Whitty, [gave a press briefing](#) in which he told us that the virus is harmless to all but the

most vulnerable. I can accept that this might not have been known in March, but once that it was known, was it not insanity to continue with it?

Why are we, even now, implementing bizarre and useless social distancing measures which can serve no effective purpose other than to continue the charade?

An elderly friend of mine has, like me, been confined to a single bedroom flat for months on end. She spent much of her early childhood in an iron lung, having contracted pneumonia. She never complains. She is indefatigable. However, she rang me during lockdown and I could tell she was distressed.

She explained that her phone was playing up and her laptop had failed, thus cutting off much the contact she had with her family and the outside world. She had been struggling to complete an online application using her old phone in order to apply for emergency food (the only way to apply was online). Her laptop was vital for her and she used it to play solitaire—hour after hour, day after day, during her confinement.

I managed to get out to her and gave her my old laptop and phone.

Another friend of mine, also in her 80s, told me that she does not want to spend the time she has left in solitary confinement. She wrote the following recently:

I left my house and was shaken to find the garden so overgrown that fierce bushes made it impossible if you are disabled to get to the bins. Masked and gloved I went to a small shop and the realities of our draconian new way of living drove me back home. I can only accept so much reality after four months of isolation—I saw my fifth great granddaughter born into these very difficult days and all my great grandchildren are my consolation and,

yes, though I was plunged into a depression, I know that I must make the effort to reengage with life as it now is.

Both of these people are tough and independent. They will survive. However, I hear horror stories from others of those they know who are breaking down, having been reduced to living in squalor, or succumbed to alcoholism or have “kicked off” in supermarkets.

The 4th of July was the first day in a long time that we were permitted to visit a pub or a cafe in the UK. It was the first time I had reason to go anywhere other than, perhaps, to walk around outside or to stand in a Soviet-era style queue outside a supermarket.

I met up with the elderly friend I mentioned earlier for coffee. The first place we tried had a big sign outside saying, “Welcome back!”

“Great!” I thought. The front doors were wide open and the lights were on. However, the outside gate had a padlock on it and there was no way to get in. We could only marvel as we gazed at the sight of the inside of a pub through its open door. So we found another bar nearby which was really open. There were even people inside!

But things had changed.

The staff were kitted out in a manner suited to handling hazardous waste material which I suppose, in a sense, we now are. At the counter I asked for two coffees but was told that I cannot simply ask for what I want any more, but must be asked.

The world is mad, I mused, silently.

After we parted, I took a walk around the centre of Manchester and found myself in a backstreet pub where the landlady was having a mild breakdown.

"No one is respecting social distancing," she complained, all flustered.

As I went to sit down, three guys asked me to join them and I was pleased to accept. After all, almost any company is better than no company. All three had been locked up under lockdown and went on to tell me how much they had drank during the period. Two of them had put on two stones each, apparently.

One was an accountant and the other a data analyst.

The data analyst guy said he was ashamed to be in the pub because he might be spreading the virus but added, by way of justification, that he was "weak" and so, presumably, that made it OK for him. The accountant, however, agreed with me that the long-term consequences of lockdown will be catastrophic—far more so than the virus.

The third guy, an NHS worker with an NHS badge around his neck, was dying of alcoholism before my eyes (I know the signs). With skin glowing red like the dying embers of a fire and egg yolks where his eyes should have been, he sat in his chair with great lengths of spittle hanging from his mouth. For a moment things began to look very serious when he developed breathing difficulties. However, he recovered enough to carry on drinking.

A little later we stepped outside for a smoke and got talking with another guy, but my attention was drawn to an elderly man with a walking frame who was unsteadily making his way up the street.

I remember hearing the words, "Trump is great," and my reverie was interrupted when all hell broke loose.

"If you like Trump, that makes you a fucking Nazi," the data analyst I was with was now screaming at the guy we had been joking with mere seconds earlier, "and I want to punch

you in the face right now!"

Have you noticed how people cannot have discussions anymore?

The moment someone expresses an opinion which strays outside another's "safe space" of thought, they explode in a torrent nuclear abuse. Well, that's what had just happened.

I have learned to disconnect, so stood back from the ensuing fallout which I was expecting to become a brawl any second but didn't, and smoked my roll-up while I watched the old man make his way slowly up to the pub where we were.

He was wearing an old-fashioned suit; the kind old men wore forty years ago. I tend to notice small things and saw that there was a bag fitted to the underside of his walking frame. I wondered whether it contained his shopping and whether he too had been in solitary confinement all this time. Given that he could barely walk, I wondered how much effort it had taken for him to make his way into the city centre on our first legal day out.

His progress was painstakingly slow and so, by the time he had made it to the pub door, the commotion had ended a minute or so earlier with the two protagonists telling each other to "fuck off!"

He was struggling to get his walking frame over the front step when the landlady appeared from inside the pub. But instead of offering a welcoming face, she blocked his way.

"You can't come in, we're full!" she told him tersely.

In reality, the pub wasn't full at all, but under the *new norm*, half empty is the new full.

"But I can see people coming out," he replied weakly, in absolute dejection.

"It doesn't matter. We're full!"

How truly alien and vicious is our *Safe New World*!

We are now firmly in the grip of a dark age—not just of medieval plagues and social upheaval, but one which is a dark age for human relationships. In this risk-averse neurotic age, our humanity is being stamped out in the name of "staying safe."

For me, the first two months of lockdown were the hardest. I took up smoking again and regard it as a good thing. It has really helped and I won't be taking any health lectures.

But then a strange thing happened.

I found myself letting go of "hope" and there was a certain comfort in this. Like many, my financial plans have been shattered, but I have accepted this.

I see the cultural fabric, that with which I grew up, disintegrating all around but I am no longer expecting a rational end to things or a return to "normality." I'm not, for example, looking to authority for an end to the madness, but expect more of it. Nor I am expecting public institutions to stand up in the face of the mob which seeks to destroy them and erase the past. Rather, I find a certain sense of calmness in the acceptance of the idea that the world is in the grip of powerful psychological and political forces which have a life of their own. Things are going to run their course because there is nothing left to stand in the way.

And so, as I have started to look toward what is to come *after*, I find myself with a new kind of hope for a brighter age yet to come. However, I cannot help but feel that the years before it will be very bad indeed.

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[3] *The Sun*, 28 March 2020 / ITV News, 26 March 2020,
<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11278436/cops-brits-telephone-snooters-form-coronavirus-lockdown/> and
<https://www.itv.com/news/calendar/2020-03-26/humberside-police-creates-online-portal-to-report-people-not-social-distancing/>

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[5] *USA Today*, 23 April 2020,
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Andy Thomas is an independent software author and writer with working class roots in the north of England. He is what the

liberal elites dislike: working class and largely self-educated. He holds a degree in Physics and Space Physics and began a career in spacecraft engineering but later moved into programming and telecommunications. He was among the first generation of school children who learned to program and was enthralled at the prospect of machine intelligence at a very young age. However, he regards much of what passes for “AI” in modern times as a nihilistic anathema. In more recent years, he has become interested in culture and the world of human affairs having rejected fashionable ideological notions of domestic violence. Instead, he subscribes to the understanding of inter-generational family abuse as offered by the works of Erin Pizzey. The current focus of his work is that of financial algorithmic trading. Despite this, or perhaps in part because of it, he is motivated by the philosophical implications of science, the nature of nature, and the things in life which hold “value” and all that that means.

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