

Paris Comes Alive

The young flock to cafés, but the old remain cautious.

by Theodore Dalrymple



Paris is slowly coming back to life. It is even possible to see the exhibition of Turner watercolors at the Musée Jacquemart-André, provided that you book in advance, have your temperature taken as you enter, wear a mask, and keep a distance of a meter from other art-lovers. I never really liked crowds in art galleries anyway.

But it is the terraces of the cafés that have really come alive. Looking at them, you would never know that anything untoward had ever happened. They practice no social-distancing measures, not even the pretense of them. The only noticeable difference is in the demographics of the customers: hardly a person over age 65 among them.

I can't quite make up my mind about this. There must surely have been a pent-up desire for normal social life during the long confinement. One of the most important compensations for living in an expensive, crowded city—often in a tiny home—is precisely the possibility of such a social life. Nor should one underestimate the power of amnesia to heal the wounds of an unpleasant experience.

But are these joyful crowds, gathered ten round a table, being foolish and irresponsible? Will their behavior lead inevitably to a recrudescence of the disease, with a consequent, even more painful, re-confinement? Or are they, on the contrary, behaving sensibly?

For the vast majority, the risk of serious illness is vanishingly small. If you exclude the old, the already sick, and those with exceptionally high levels of contact with patients with the virus, practically no risk remains—certainly not much more than from other kinds of behavior. Even in households where an ill person already resides, the risk of others getting the disease is estimated at between 10 percent and 15 percent. Most people seem to have been naturally resistant to contracting it.

In these circumstances, it is difficult to maintain the levels of fear necessary for people to keep up irritating and constricting precautions. If I had been the age of the people enjoying themselves on the terraces—how much more than they did before!—would I have joined them? Almost certainly, yes.

Of course, those who lament such behavior as irresponsible would say that it would help spread the virus to the old, thereby killing some of them. Only time will tell whether this is so; for the moment, all is joy. Even though, because of my age, I do not join in, I take pleasure in the pleasure of others.

That the old are being considerably more cautious is

interesting. Does this mean that both the young and the old have a grasp of epidemiology and the concept of relative risk? In the last few months, everyone has become his own epidemiologist, even those to whom the word *epidemiology*, let alone its methodology, was previously unknown. Epidemiology is now what theology was in the Middle Ages—namely, the Queen of the Sciences.

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