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Staying Indoors Due to COVID-19:

How People Who Are Not Disabled May Learn About Mobility and Reasonable Accommodations and Become Allies of Those With Disabilities

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Abstract

This essay argues that lockdowns imposed by governments in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic starkly foreground the perennial problems of mobility and accessibility faced by individuals with disabilities. Since non-disabled people have experienced what it means to be prevented from moving out of doors freely, they should, at long last, be able to comprehend the negative impact that inaccessible roads, buildings, offices, recreational facilities, and attitudinal barriers in employment have on the lives of persons with disabilities. Thus, living through the pandemic may assist those who are not disabled to become allies of such persons. I draw on a number of sources to make my case: three memoirs on life as a blind person by Stephen Kuusisto, an American poet and memoirist with a visual disability; news articles from India; scholarly articles on the pandemic and employment of disabled people; and the latest data provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO). In the course of the argument, the essay calls for greater respect and reasonable accommodation for individuals with disabilities in our societies.

Keywords: COVID-19 lockdown, attitudinal barriers, accessible infrastructure, reasonable accommodations

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With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early months of 2020, countries around the globe declared lockdowns one after another. This extraordinary move plunged most citizens into a remarkable situation, that is, of staying in quarantine for extended periods of time. This isolating experience made it possible for people who are not disabled to comprehend, in a way unlike any other, how physical and attitudinal barriers exclude those with disabilities from participating in essential human activities on a day-to-day basis (Sins Invalid, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022). Thus, the experience of being in the pandemic carries the potential of making non-disabled people allies of those with disabilities. It might motivate the former to support the policies and practices needed to provide the latter with reasonable accommodations (Schur et al., 2020).

This essay, then, sets out to reflect on the implications of the COVID-19 lockdowns for disability inclusion. I adopt an autoethnographic method to probe my experience of the lockdowns as a person with a visual disability and to connect the understanding I have gained to broader socio-economic concerns as represented in creative nonfiction, scholarly articles, and journalistic texts that deal with the mobility of disabled persons. In a politico-ethical spirit, I note, unsurprisingly, that while the pandemic has likely brought the reality of disability exclusion to the notice of non-disabled people, increased awareness does not necessarily lead to the promotion of disability justice (Wong et al., 2022).

Grappling with mobility issues

Beginning on Wednesday, March 25, 2020, my mother and I walked religiously every evening for around 35 minutes. From March to May, we measured the 19 meters from one end of our front yard to the other and back again. This exercise was sparked by the lockdown declared on the night of 24 March 2020 by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi. Marching to the sound of a modified sprinkler spraying water on plants in the garden, we heard an eerie silence from the main road nearby. No one was abroad. One day early in that strange period, I remarked to my mother that the stay-at-home decree was really not alien to me as a blind person. This understanding had suddenly surfaced as my mind forged a connection between something I had read in a memoir of blindness (Kuusisto, 1998) with lockdown experience during the pandemic, which had abruptly brought the lives of humans around the world to a grinding halt.

In this context of enforced isolation, the American poet and memoirist Stephen Kuusisto's words (1998) – in the opening page of *Planet of the Blind: A Memoir* – acquire greater meaning: "None of the turmoil or anxiety of being lost will reach us because moving is holy, the very motion is a breeze from Jerusalem" (p. 1). The author goes on to explain in the prologue how he, a blind man, and his guide dog, a yellow Labrador named Corky, were moving through New York's Grand Central Station "in a different tempo" "like two sea lions." Kuusisto's (2018) latest memoir, *Have Dog, Will Travel*, conveys the elegant poise of the author and Corky through the expressive phrase, "'man-dog'" (pp. 58, 81, 86). This compound noun paradoxically connotes an action figure by suggesting the vitality of a verb.

So, moving is holy (Kuusisto, 1998). This realisation dawned on humans in the time of the novel Coronavirus as most of us spent long periods of time cooped up inside our houses, in lockdown. On Monday, 6 April 2020 (the thirteenth day of the first lockdown in India), a media report on public mobility appeared in a national newspaper, namely The Hindu. Yuthika Bhargava (2020) states that the movement of people in places meant for retail and recreation was significantly less between 16 February and 29 March, 2020, as compared to the period from 3 January to 6 February in the same year. Based on Google's research into anonymized data about phone locations, this report implies that free mobility of people was, until February 2020, considered normal. Further, it presages, by means of statistical data, what most of us went on to experience day in and day out for nearly two years.

Millions of people suffered from a profound sense of suffocation during the prolonged confinement because of the stringent restrictions placed by governments on stepping out of doors. Many more persons than had previously been recognized faced psychological issues (Bates et al., 2021). Their distress stemmed not only from social isolation, but also from the fear of infection. As per the grim data presented by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 25 January 2023, in the course of three years, more than six hundred and sixty-four million people fell sick with the disease. The official death toll is over six and a half million persons globally.

The exclusion of the disabled from public spaces and employment

Having undergone the isolating experience of the pandemic, it may have become possible for non-disabled people to pause midstride, as it were, and reflect on how 'lockdown' is an everyday reality for millions of persons who are blind, have other disabilities, or are elderly. David Bolt makes the provocation that the coronavirus might have seemed to herald "the end of disability history," meaning "the triumph of equality over the dominance of normative positivisms (i.e., indifference to disability [. . .] displaced in favour of appreciation)" (Bolt, 2021; cf. Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022). During "the first peak of the pandemic" in the United Kingdom, disabled people witnessed an increased interest in their "personal narratives of isolation and social limitations" (Bolt, 2021). With the disruption of 'normal' life, non-disabled people seemed to realize that persons with disabilities may have important lessons to share about coping with isolation and uncertainty. However, with perceived improvement in the pandemic situation, this interest waned (Bolt, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022).

With the restoration of 'normalcy' in what is termed "the new normal" (Bolt, 2021), societies which subscribe to normative values about the body hold disabled persons' physical conditions alone as limiting factors. It is seldom recognized that these persons have to grapple daily with the challenge of moving out on roads and non-existent footpaths to schools, colleges, workplaces, or places of retail and recreation, if at all they have access to them. This itself is a rarity in many economically underdeveloped countries (Das et al., 2021). Because individuals with disabilities experience what Kuusisto aptly describes (2018) as "the intimidating quality of unseeable spaces" (p. 81), they often hesitate to venture outdoors. On some occasions, I have been derided by sundry busybodies for seeming to be unsure of myself. If persons with disabilities feel walled in, rolling out blithely on wheelchairs or walking out with white canes and engaging in recreational activities is not an option: our surroundings, roads, footpaths, and buildings are inaccessible and pose real danger to life. This is a comment of sadness and rage on the repeated failure of governments, policymakers, and contractors to incorporate accessibility in their development plans.

To extend this critique, consider a crucial point raised by Tony Kurian in an article published on 1 May 2020 on Scroll.in. It pertains to the livelihoods and economic independence of persons with disabilities. It needs to be said that this matter too constitutes an issue of reasonable accommodation. Right from the time the first lockdown was declared, people who have disabilities remarked how companies moved their operations online in a hurry. However, earlier the same employers refused to consider requests from workers with disabilities to be permitted to work from home and perform their duties online on the grounds that they were unreasonable demands. Kurian calls out Indian companies on such discriminatory practices in his trenchant article (Mampatta, 2022; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022).

Barriers to Disability Inclusion

On November 30, 2016, I was reminded, in a serious way, of what it means to face a physical barrier. That afternoon, I walked out of the building housing the department where I taught and started tapping down a dirt path leading to the main road in order to meet my father. He was going to pick me up in his car. I was looking forward to welcoming home my sister and her family from Germany. In my excitement, the end of my white cane slipped and I sat down by the side of the path with my feet in the ditch. Surgery had to be performed on my broken left ankle, and I had to spend four painful months convalescing.

Perhaps not coincidentally, just after my accident that day, I also encountered a stubborn attitudinal barrier in the form of a few thoughtless words uttered by a professor working in a different department. When my father drove up, the man in question asked him sharply, “Why do you let him come out alone?” Granted, he was pained to see my fractured leg, but is this not how disabled persons are generally viewed by most able-bodied people, i.e., as being incapable of looking after ourselves? Poorly constructed roads and buildings are evidently not the real problem; the disabled are to blame for their suffering. A contentious relative once said to me, “people like you have to be made normal.” She failed to realize that her mulish adherence to oppressive norms about the human body is what actually does great harm. Disabled persons no longer need to be “made normal”; structural and attitudinal barriers have to be dismantled and everybody included in the common life of the world.

Circling back to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are confronted by a forceful paradox. Although the expression is cliched, we cannot help but acknowledge that a virus, a creature so tiny that it cannot be seen by the naked eye, succeeded in thoroughly disrupting 'normal' life across the world. In this regard, I wish to call the reader's attention to coping strategies used by racialized people caught in various forms of incarceration in the U.S. Bates et al. (2021) present "stories of formerly incarcerated people who teach us what they learned in prison that can now help us all adjust to life during the pandemic" (p. 64). Artaysia Malisham shares her wisdom on "self-care." She says, "So during my experience being locked up, I learned how to do my own hair, how to do my own makeup, and to take care of myself to make me feel confident" (p. 65). Then, Romando Valeroso recalls how he used Islamic prayers during a lockdown imposed in prison "in the late 1970s due to a TB epidemic" to build "structure" into his life of incarceration. He says, " ... it gave me like a regimen, a structure in my life, something that I could do every day—something that I had to look forward to every day, to deal with the lockdown" (p. 67). Finally, Juan Juan Willis speaks performatively about how "venting," that is to say, "put[ting] whole songs together" (p. 70) on paper, or writing songs about his experiences helped him to "cope with [his] twelve years" (p. 69) of imprisonment. As noted by Patrick Bates, these lessons hold significance for both the present, post-pandemic situation and even our future (Bates et al., 2021). Further, they possess relevance not only during lockdowns, but also for the everyday lives of persons with disabilities. The strategies used by the former prisoners are similar to how Kuusisto deals with isolation as a blind child and adult.

In the collection of essays (2006) entitled *Eavesdropping: A Life by Ear*, several lyrical prose compositions center on the activities of Kuusisto in his boyhood, when he struggled with social isolation arising from the ableist rejection of his blind self. For example, in the piece “Ice” appearing in Part one of the book (“Sweet Longings”), the author narrates how as a small boy he made “instantaneous” (pp. 13-14) music by walking and rolling on the ice forming “between the trees behind [his] house” (p. 13); by plucking the wire of a rusted, frozen “fence in the woods”; shaking shards of ice from birch trees; and “tapping” on metal drums “with [his] fingers” (p. 14). These acts of creative play kept the lonely blind boy engaged at a time in which the world at large was unwilling to accept those with disabilities.

To further explore the matter, in an essay from Part one of *Eavesdropping* called “Birds” (pp. 10-12), and in the late composition “The Twa Corbies” (147-154) appearing in Part two (“Walking by Ear”), the essayist goes independently as a young boy and an adult, respectively, into the woods in search of avian fellow creatures. Similarly, in a late essay entitled “Skull Flowers” (155-156), he sits still in the open, listening to the denizens of the natural world, like a purple martin diving to catch “an errant hornet” (p. 155). These experiences of isolation, which prisoners and the disabled alike share, may give rise to art (Villoro, 2020), and provide models for coping with loneliness during lockdowns. They may also cause people who are not disabled to view reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities as just that, reasonable, and as something that could benefit society as a whole. However, as Shenaz Patel reminds us (2020), creative responses to the pandemic should not ignore the despair of people who lost their loved ones to the Coronavirus, or whose survival became precarious in the difficult economic circumstances during the pandemic. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha goes further in an article published October 1, 2022 on Truthout and severely criticizes the U.S. establishment for trying to suppress the memory of COVID; she calls on abled-bodied leftists to never forget the disabled and the millions who died from the disease and urges that both abled and disabled people join in solidarity to achieve the revolutionary possibilities in disability accommodation that the pandemic made evident.

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