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CRITICAL THINKING

Matt Morgan: A pandemic in 15 minutes

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Although I think I'm a "reflective" person, the mirror only really comes out when I need to make something out of the reversed image I see. Perhaps there's a column to write, a student to speak with, or an appraisal to pass. Reflecting for a purpose can feel sickly. It can be cathartic, but it isn't healing.

So, I never expected to have a deeply emotional experience, with a tear in my eye, while sitting on a plastic chair in the middle of a basketball court. But I did. Perhaps it was because I'd just finished a night shift. I'd just spoken with another family where grief had unexpectedly knocked on the door of an otherwise uneventful Tuesday. Perhaps my vagus nerve had reacted to the minor prick from my second covid vaccine a minute earlier. More likely, it was because I'd just spent an uninterrupted 15 minutes thinking about how the past year had consumed me, my family, and my whole world.

When was the last time you sat down and did nothing for 15 minutes? I mean *nothing*. For me, it was probably when I was 10 years old. The second best thing about having my vaccine was the 15 enforced minutes when I had to sit down and wait, without a phone, with only my thoughts. I did nothing, yet something happened. I was surrounded by army volunteers and redeployed health staff in the middle of a leisure centre's basketball court, whose purpose was now more directly linked to health than ever before.

Grasping at nothing is hard, so I started remembering. I remembered the first patient with covid we had cared for. I remembered the first patient who had died. I saw my fingers pressing the numbers of that first phone call that started and ended with "I'm sorry." I also remembered the smiles, the energy of dealing with a new disease, the speed of progress and research, and the tight squeeze of teamwork. I could taste the late night pizza on the way home from another long shift. Sleeping in another room from my wife and telling my daughters that "Daddy is safe," not really knowing if it was a lie. I remembered a friend telling me that no day lasts forever, but then realising that there are a lot of days in a year. But, most of all, I remembered hope. The hope that not only would tomorrow be better but so too would be the day after and the day after that. Even if it wasn't better, it would still be tomorrow.

Finally, I touched my sleeve on the corner of my eye. I hadn't been sure if it was a tear, but it was. Fifteen minutes had passed. I stood up, my plastic chair was wiped down, and the next person sat on it. And then I realised that reflection for reflection's sake can be cathartic and perhaps even healing.

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