**In defence of joy**

The magnolias and the cherry blossom are coming out in London, the sky suddenly seems bluer than before, and around the country we are about to experience the first fully sunshiny week of the year. This is the moment when the long winter seems finally to be giving up, and no matter what is happening in the news, people step outside, feel the sun on their face and feel glad to be alive.

So it is hardly surprising that, at the end of the first week of government-mandated ‘social distancing,’ with cinemas, restaurants and pubs now closed, families and individuals took to the parks and open spaces over the weekend. The government advice explicitly suggests ‘[going for a walk or exercise outdoors if you stay more than 2 metres from others’](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults) as a way to stay sane, so as long as they were taking those precautions, why shouldn’t they?

And yet social media has been filled with censorious comments alongside pictures of people in the park; the Andrew Marr programme showed images of people in parks as proof that people were not ‘taking the government advice seriously’; the National Trust, having had the wonderful idea just five days earlier of [keeping their gardens and open spaces open for free](https://twitter.com/nationaltrust/status/1239959453824409602) during the shutdown, relented due to concerns about inadequate social distancing and has now [shut them completely](https://twitter.com/nationaltrust/status/1241461966184513537). Italy has already shut [all its parks](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/playgrounds-and-parks-shuttered-in-italy-120031400494_1.html).

Just as Boris Johnson was speaking on Sunday about his welcome desire to keep these spaces open, Hammersmith and Fulham announced the closure of all parks until further notice. Clearly, appropriate social distancing must be observed, and enforced if necessary, but closing the parks would be a grave mistake.

There’s another danger here, alongside the primary danger of the coronavirus epidemic. If it feels like you are asking people for too much, without convincing them of the reasoning; if you are dismissive of quality of life as a second-order concern; or if you allow an atmosphere of finger-pointing and mutual censorship to prevail in the absence of clear guidance, society will not put up with it. We face a societal threat as well as a viral one.

Some of this is already happening. The endless search on social media for proof of irresponsible transgressions — [people visiting a street market](https://twitter.com/HeydonProwse/status/1241396729687220231), [buying flowers to brighten their homes](https://twitter.com/dinosofos/status/1241697657690734593/photo/1), [going for a final pint before the pubs closed](https://twitter.com/rakibehsan/status/1241312944366837760) — is acquiring a worryingly Puritanical air. At this rate, it won’t be long before we reach the nonsensical public shaming that is now commonplace in Italy — couples holding hands have been separated by the *carabinieri* in Milan for setting a bad example, even if they live together.

We need to push back against this tendency, with vigour: the search for joy during these times is not immoral, it’s fundamental and the best of human instincts. Preventing unnecessary deaths is quite rightly the top priority of government, but it’s not the only priority: a flourishing society should be right up there too. It is not selfish, or superficial, or denying the gravity of the threat to demand that serious attention and resources are put towards defending what joy we canhave during these difficult times.

That means easing up on the self-flagellation and finger-pointing, and giving due credit for the extraordinary sacrifices that people are already making. Inevitably, the crisis so far still has something of the eerie atmosphere of a dress rehearsal: despite the warnings that it can be dangerous for young people too, the disease is accurately thought of as mainly a risk for older people and people with pre-existing conditions, so there is no visceral fear among young people. What’s more, it hasn’t really happened yet — the current shutdown is in order to flatten an infection peak that is predicted in the weeks and months to come.

All this makes the demand for discipline harder. Even as the news gets worse and we start seeing overwhelmed hospitals and, God forbid, thousands of deaths, it will still feel remote for many people and as time goes by it will become harder not easier to ensure compliance.

The best way to prevent real discontent and the state having to police its own people is to visibly defend quality of life as a major consideration in government decisions and communications.

That means, first of all, clear information as to what we *can* do not just what we can’t do; and to err on the side of inventive ways to keep things open safely rather than taking the easy and damaging decision to close them.

This must include parks and open spaces, even if (as summer approaches) you need to book slots and times so that they don’t become over-full and that people can distance appropriately. It might even be possible to design one-way walking systems around park paths to make it easier for people to stay a safe distance away.

As time goes on, families could be encouraged to go camping, cycling, and hiking in nearby wilderness areas, armed with protective gloves and avoiding any external contact. Sports facilities like golf and tennis should be permitted to remain open, with new practices for ensuring social distancing and proper hygiene.

In time, it means care homes devising ingenious, formally sanctioned, ways for people to safely visit their elderly relatives — a special visitation room or outside area, perhaps, with handrail barriers at a 3m distance and a clean after each visit.

As for what you can do at home, people need to be told what will continue to be possible. This could be a golden period of DIY, with all those long-forgotten chores and improvements finally tackled, as well as work on the garden — so DIY and garden centres should be helped to stay open for home delivery.

And there could be government support for free remote university courses, to get those accreditations and skills you have always wanted to do.

This bias-to-life should also affect the core strategy as it evolves. Those “millions” of antibody tests that the government has promised might turn out to be key to seeing an end to the crisis, and provide much-needed optimism in the months ahead. A badge or card for people to prove that they have had the disease and are no longer infectious could act as a passport to returning to a fully normal life.

The number of deaths will not be the only measure of how well a country has weathered this crisis: whether or not it emerges with its society intact will matter too. This means licensing joy and defending quality of life wherever possible, and putting an early end to the confused and censorious atmosphere that we’re already slipping into.