

The Capture of Goodness

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by [Sinead Murphy](#), [OffGuardian](#)

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'Goodness' is not the word I wanted to use in this article. But 'ethics' sounded too abstract, 'morality' too rule-bound, 'virtue' too archaic, and 'kindness' too corporate (at least since 'random acts of kindness').

The ubiquity of that dreaded term 'safety,' brayed at us from every angle, has made all the old names for concern for each other's welfare seem ill-fitting and out of date. 'Goodness,' for all its faults, will have to do.

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On Tuesday 30th March, leaders of 23 countries, including the UK, France and Germany, issued a statement on the matter of 'pandemic preparedness.'

Its key phrase was reprinted across the media: *Nobody is safe until everyone is safe.*

As we embark on our second Covid year, the sentiment is chilling.

Nobody is safe until everyone is safe is the latest phase in the capture of human goodness that has been the most profound effect of Covid.

At first, we were asked to keep our distance. Other people, for whose sake we do most of the good things we do, were put beyond our reach.

We no longer held the door for the next person to pass through. We no longer offered to carry an old lady's shopping. We stopped shaking one another's hand and patting each other on the back. We no longer hugged.

Almost all of the ways in which we knew how to be good to each other were paused; the bonds of mutual support were severed.

Then, for the first time uncertain about how to do good – then, we were asked to mask up. Not for our own sake. For the sake of the other person – I mask for you, you mask for me. Being good to other people was returned to us. But it was not quite like it had been before.

Other people, still at a distance, were now also without faces, and faces are so important in arousing our pity, commanding our assistance, eliciting our smile. Goodness had been readmitted, but for the sake of newly anonymous beings.

Then, still at a distance, still masked up, we were encouraged to take the jab. Not for our own sake – at least, not directly. For the sake of the herd. For herd immunity.

This concept, so energetically rejected as cruel during the first months of Covid, was returned to us. But it was not quite like it had been before. It was cleansed of its natural components, redefined by the World Health Organisation as an achievement of vaccination, its taint of 'let it rip' buried under a great enthusiasm for pharmaceutical engineering. Herd immunity was back. And goodness was redirected towards an anonymous crowd.

And now we are told that nobody is safe until everyone is safe. Now we are to be good, not even to a masked and distanced other, not even to an anonymous herd, but to everyone.

Everyone? All seven billion inhabitants of the earth? It is worse than that. The statement issued by world leaders on 30th

March champions a concept of 'One Health,' which is described as encompassing 'humans, animals and our planet.'

How in the world is any of us to act for the good of this everyone? The idea is sublime. It may strike us with awe, even admiration, but there is nothing we can do for its sake. Our good deeds, already scrambled by distancing and masking and herding, are now, at last, out of play.

One year ago, we were tempted from the well-trodden paths of goodness onto a seemingly higher road, emblazoned with slogans of sacrifice, decorated with rainbows and resounding with the clapping of people pulling together. But the road leads nowhere. It is a dead end.

In January, in the northern snow, I was saying hello to my neighbour over the low garden wall. So that she could find her key, she placed her little girl, ten months old and all wrapped up in her snowsuit, onto the soft ground. While my neighbour was searching in her bag, her baby slowly keeled over. Without thinking, I stepped across and leaned down to lift her. But it was the wrong thing to do. Her mother snatched her up and I retreated in vague apology.

What is now the right thing to do when a small baby falls sideways onto the snow? The answer: nothing. Goodness is cancelled. Or, rather, it is redirected through an idea so sublime that nothing follows from it for mere humans with their merely human faculties. Everyone means nothing to us. For the sake of everyone, we can do nothing.

But there is a problem about doing nothing. Because it may just be that human beings are only good insofar as they do good things. Goodness requires practice and wastes away from lack of practice. It is more like playing the piano than riding a bike; you have to keep it up or you can no longer really do it. How long before our good natures grow rusty and flake away? How long before we no longer know how to be good?

Which is why, I presume, we now have these badges of goodness: masks, certificates.

Our enthusiasm for both may have little to do with their dubious efficacy in stopping the spread of a respiratory virus, and much to do with our need for reassurance that, even though we no longer do good things, we still really are good people.

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