

Making the most of covid isolation



This photo, kindly taken by a neighbour, shows new neighbour New Plymouth MP Jonathan Young and his wife, Maura, stopping for a two-metre chat with (from left) Jim Tucker, Raewyn Potts and Lin Tucker. Image: Lorraine Collier

So here's the scene: a small boy is walking down the middle of our street. He's nervous about such wonderfully flagrant behaviour, but that's not dimming his triumph.

I give him a wave, but I'm apparently too grey to be communicated with.

His insouciance may also be to do with the way I look, which is ridiculous. What normal man would plant himself in a deck chair beside the footpath with a coffee in a bright red cup and saucer?

For the boy, I'm obviously someone to be avoided, but that doesn't apply to everyone. At 10am and 4pm each day of the duration, I'm sitting at the end of our driveway and I'm there to talk.

Not just to passersby as they skirt warily past, uncertain whether to look up from their dog(s). They get a greeting, of course, but my main target is those in our immediate neighbourhood who live alone.

They make up about half the Holsworthy Worthies, the support group Lin and I have set up in Lower Vogeltown, to ensure everyone close by has plenty of options should they feel a need to interact.

The driveway gatherings are nothing formal and everyone keeps their distance, in case someone in authority gets excited.

In "normal" times, I spend many hours each day in my little writing shed. Every now and again, I need to move around to ward off clots or whatever the health columnists advise will afflict those who don't exercise.

That means our letterbox is the most checked in the province.

All I've done is let the group know when two of those visits will be. If they happen along while taking their own exercise there's no reason we can't exchange words.

There're 22 individuals in the 11 households involved, six of them solo, the others in families of two, three and four. So far, conversations haven't involved more than

four people, and not the same ones. Each occasion seems to attract different neighbours.

A minority of the group's members – including one living alone – has so far not availed themselves of the opportunity, reinforcing the obvious, that everyone's need for company is different.

As you know, I'm a trained gossip, so I love every session. Initially, the talk was dominated by Covid-19 and its many myths, but now we're drifting into ephemeral topics such as how much all this might change society.

Some people – including me - showed signs of stress a few days into the duration, but now that routines have hardened and we've begun to grow accustomed to such strange times, and nobody has caught anything or run out of food, there are signs of relaxation.

Regular discourse between people who previously saw one another comparatively rarely because of the busy-ness of ordinary life has meant virtual strangers have got to know each another better.

There's one small child involved in this accidental experiment and she already knows our first names and is beginning to realise she has gained many more doting adults in her life.

Chalk art has suddenly appeared on footpaths and block walls as parents seek diversions. Some kids are camping under a tarp draped across a backyard clothesline.

Next door, a council staff member is applying her brilliant musical skills to the composition of an item about recycling.

One neighbour, an accountant, is bracing himself for the aftermath of his employer's annual balance date. He's already enjoying working at home, although he's concerned the new family puppy might get the wrong idea.

Two of the three neighbourhood daytime barkers continue their contribution to our ambience, even though their owners are presumably there. The third is quiet now her mum is home.

Above all, it's unnaturally quiet. Traffic noise is rare, with boy-racers suddenly gone. Thanks police, if you're the reason.

I'd be lying if I said it's been all sweetness and light here in Lower Vogelstown. Lin and I have felt the stress on occasion, a couple of times rowing over the smallest thing.

A neighbour emailed a cartoon showing a grim woman knitting a noose. "A couple of weeks into isolation, Gertrude decided to make hubby a present," said the caption. I'm wondering if anyone in my bubble will be tempted to crochet a gun.

FOOTNOTE: A reader has accused me of being right wing. I can assure her I'm no different from the majority of journalists, who hew to the code of "keeping the buggers honest – whatever their hue".