**Small acts of kindness will be our salvation**

**For every shelf-stripper and profiteer there are countless volunteers looking out for the elderly and the vulnerable**

[**https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/comment/small-acts-of-kindness-will-be-our-salvation-ckgv8p9hz**](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/comment/small-acts-of-kindness-will-be-our-salvation-ckgv8p9hzhttps:/www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/comment/small-acts-of-kindness-will-be-our-salvation-ckgv8p9hz)

The postwoman rings the bell, leaves my parcel in the porch, then jumps back the statutory two metres from the door. “Sorry,” she says, “I’m not being rude. It’s what we have to do.” We joke and wave and tell each other to “keep well”.

Take care, look after yourself, stay safe… In the rare social interactions we have now, the goodbyes are more heartfelt. The only upside of this virus is it’s an icebreaker, even in glacial London. No more polite hellos. The Latvian swimming pool cleaner laments her son’s cancelled visit. The Portuguese deli guy fears casualties back home. My neighbour, masked and plastic-gloved, offers us milk since Sainsbury’s at 9am has run out. There’s a grim camaraderie, a new openness and warmth.

Sure, there are wild-eyed, two-trolleyed shelf-strippers who’d beat your granny to death for the last pint of UHT. Yes, scumbags have stolen hand-sanitiser from hospitals and donations from foodbanks. Every society in extremis has its hoarders, thieves and racketeers. But in our anxiety and uncertainty, amid the growing sense this pandemic has no obvious end, it is easy to forget that most people try to be good.

So let us speak of kind deeds. The many individual spontaneous acts by supposedly “selfish millennials” such as offering phone numbers to frail elderly people they meet in the street or handing over food from their own baskets in sold-out shops; a pub delivering a beer keg and box of crisps to a self-isolating regular; an Italian joint offering free pizza to emergency workers, a paper girl sticking a note through a door on her round.

Meanwhile neighbourhood mutual help societies and street WhatsApp groups are making up food parcels for A&E staff who don’t have time to shop, offering to collect medication or walk dogs. A nursery school gets its children to write to residents in a locked down care home. In Ripon, houses display green cards in windows if they’re fine, red if they need help.

Ironically, many lonely old folk, who endure days without conversation and are normally invisible or even despised for cluttering up shops, are now getting more official attention and family visits, cards or FaceTime. Some over-70s who are cheerfully self-isolated in superannuated sleepovers with same-age friends, Netflix and lots of wine, are even having fun.

Among newly designated “key workers” are those the government branded unskilled only a month ago. Shelf-stacker was seen as the epitome of a dead-end job but now they work tirelessly in protective masks among possibly infected and often frustrated crowds. “What you’re doing is vital,” I said to an exhausted guy unloading veg, who grinned goofily with pride.

Others may have “inessential” skills yet are sharing them goodheartedly online: yoga experts and personal trainers live-stream classes, primary school teachers offer help for parents aghast at having to home educate, artists suggest soothing projects people can do at home. There is a powerful desire to reach out, to be useful, to boost the nation’s morale.

What will we remember in six (or maybe many more) months’ time when we come blinking out into the economic ruins? That some super-rich were prepared to reach into deep pockets, like Gary Neville and Ryan Giggs, who made their closed Manchester hotels available to NHS staff. While the likes of multi-billionaire Richard Branson made 8,500 Virgin Atlantic employees take eight weeks’ unpaid leave. There will be a reckoning for the 1 per cent who leave the state to save their fired workers then flee to private redoubts. Actual profiteers, like suspected US insider traders, face the tumbrils we spared the bankers in 2008.

Who’d have thought a virus could be an antidote to Brexit, healing bitter divisions the more it spreads, making us remember who we love, while forgetting who voted Leave or Remain. In fact this epidemic appears to be crash-testing every political truism. “There is no such a thing as society” is exploded as our precious few non-privatised institutions, the NHS and BBC, prove their unifying power, when only through a true national effort will we step safely out of our homes again.

“We are all in it together”, so hollow under austerity, is truer now the rich are scared and, like Tom Hanks or Michel Barnier, getting sick too, and when a Tory government considers guaranteeing incomes and suddenly finds money to solve rough sleeping. In this crisis we really do “have more in common than divides us” as fractious and factional identity politics are mainly laid aside.

Whether this crisis leaves us better people is yet unclear. Certainly it might make us realise how obscenely we waste food and the process by which our modern bounty is brought to our tables, now it is not instantly available and we must eke out supplies. Solitude is a great leveller: while confinement in a mansion is different from a council flat, you are at least faced with the same foes of boredom, isolation and fear. That great youthful paranoia FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) is over: there is nothing to miss, there is no going out.

Perhaps it will make us, temporarily at least, less narcissistic and self-involved. We will certainly appreciate our friends when we can finally hug them with abandon, go dancing or shout at each other drunkenly in a throbbing bar. For now what is celebrated on social media is not great outfits, fabulous holidays or shopping hauls, but silly jokes and acts of simple kindness. It turns out we can be closer while standing farther apart.