

Last April during the first lockdown, I was hospitalized with a near fatal heart attack. Contrary to all expectations, I am still around and almost back to normal, and facing yet another lockdown. At 88 years of age and long retired with an adequate pension, I am luckier than most. This is not a recommendation for aging, but it does have its advantages. The combined restrictions from my heart attack and COVID have been challenging. Here are some things that have kept me sane during the isolation.

My first prize in the anti-insanity sweepstakes goes to the Public Library and their collection of electronic books, audiobooks, magazines, etc. Large quantities of online entertainment ready to be downloaded. Many newspapers also contain cryptic crosswords which can be downloaded. Why is this important? I suggest that “A cryptic-a-day keeps dementia away.” Unlike conventional crosswords which rely on memorized facts, cryptics require flexible thinking. Think of your brain as a muscle (no don’t, you don’t want to be muscle brained) but like a muscle, the more practice it gets the better it works. For starters I recommend: <https://puzzles.bestforpuzzles.com/> The puzzles are relatively easy, can be printed off, good for beginners and good for solving over breakfast if, like me, you are still half asleep.

If you are missing your visits to the art galleries, substitutes can be found close to home. Our townhouse driveway frequently turns into an art gallery courtesy of our neighbours’ four-year-old boys and a two-year-old sister. The art exhibits change frequently, especially after a rainstorm, where they become not water colours but very, often completely, watered colours. Sometimes the art is functional like a hopscotch game, sometimes symbolic like the shamrock labeled spring, but most often it is abstract.

Some days I open the front door and find the art gallery transformed into a velodrome and the artists into Olympian athletes. The boys ride their mini bicycles with a speed and skill that would be the envy of Tour de France entrants. For thrills and chills however, there is 2-year-old Maeve, speeding down the slope her brakeless micro-tricycle – a feat that recalls those of the motorcycle stunt rider Evil Knievel. Other sports options include ball hockey, soccer and even competitive leaf raking/snow shoveling.

For performance arts you can’t beat the excitement of a good squirrel chase. Flat out ascents, dangerous branch crossings, death-defying leaps, and a headfirst descents, all at top speed. Now that I have more time to study them, I am convinced they are a troupe of rehearsing Shakespearian actors. What play? “All’s Well That Ends Well”, “As You Like It” or possibly “Romeo and Juliette”.

For live music, we again turn to the back yard. The winter quiet has been replaced by the spring chorus. First up, in fine voice and splendid red suit is the principal tenor. The sopranos – finch and chickadee - have also started to rehearse. This music now accompanies our latest dance – the COVID shuffle. Meeting an oncoming pedestrian, you give a little wave then shuffle to the left (or right). There’s a nod, smile behind the mask, and circle each other keeping two metres apart. Another wave as you pass and final right (or left) shuffle. With experience, this happens without breaking stride.

Now that I am vaccinated, with my mask, the Covid shuffle, the low population density, I feel safe resuming my daily walks.

Dr Rolfe Morrison, PhD, Professor Emeritus, McMaster University.