

***Phone, keys, cards...mask, hand sanitiser***



When leaving home, I, like many others, have replaced the mantra 'Phone, keys, cards' with 'Phone, keys, cards, mask, hand sanitiser'. These things have now become essentials. The norm, if you will.

Some people have added gloves to this list. I saw a man on the metro this morning with a mask, homemade visor and gloves trying to repeatedly retrieve a bag he kept dropping on the floor. It suffices to say that a cat wearing gloves would have had greater success.

The first time I remember using disposable gloves was when I was about six years old and we were picking up rubbish around our town. (That's what passed for fun in 1980s Ireland, getting schoolchildren to remove sweet wrappers from hedgerows - and we went gleefully, poor fools that we were.) About half an hour in, my hands began to feel odd but hey it was the 80s, we weren't in school and we were collecting rubbish, so I carried on. When I took them off a roaring red rash was exposed. Turns out the gloves were not my friends - contact dermatitis. I have regarded them suspiciously ever since - disposable gloves that is, not my hands.

My first encounter with hand sanitiser was in 2000, and I was in New York for a wedding. At the bridegroom's house, we chatted to his mother. I excused myself to go to the bathroom. Upon navigating my way to the facilities, I could not for the life of me find the wash basin. I looked around, looked again, looked a third time, and then I found it. Sitting on the cistern in the shape of a small bottle of hand sanitiser. This was some form of sorcery. Where was the water? How did it work? 'It's soap in a bottle that allows you to wash your hands without water', my host explained as we all oohed and awed. We brought some home with us to show bemused family and friends on our return. ('What is it? Soap? You don't need water? Sure that can't be right!') The following year, we reciprocated our hand-sanitiser friends by introducing them to ice cube bags. 'Wow, so you just fill them with water, stick them in the freezer and you get ice cubes?' they enthused. I think we got the better of the cultural exchange.

A few years prior to this, I had my introduction to face masks. My Dad was in hospital. He had been inexplicably losing weight and was in isolation. The first day he was there was, as happens in Ireland, our 'one good day' that month. The sun shone into the room as my father lay in the bed. The radiators were on full blast - the hospital administration equally victim to the vagaries of Irish weather - and the dust flickered through the stifling air of his hospital room. The consultant explained the importance of keeping our masks on and of washing our hands. 'Thank you very much, doctor,' my mother said deferentially. And after he left, she warned us all to make sure we followed the rules. However, my mother was claustrophobic so roughly one minute later, she was tugging at her mask. 'Cripes, 'tis very difficult to breathe with this thing!' We all berated her, but wearing masks wasn't the norm, the situation wasn't the norm, we cut her some slack, and we all got used to the new normal. My father was subsequently diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and was chronically immunosuppressed; modern medicine, isolation, masks and the simple act of washing one's hands saved his life.

Now every time I don my mask, I think of that bright May day in Cork and how something so simple could save someone's life. Every time I use hand sanitiser, I think of ice cube bags and every time I wear gloves, I think of collecting sweet wrappers on a grey Irish autumn day...

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