I belong to that infuriating group of people who regard the pandemic as a blessing in disguise. No more commutes, no more trips to the office, no more dinner parties. What could be better? Some time ago I came to the conclusion that the ideal life would be conducted physically in the 21st century (not least for the dentistry) but intellectually in the 19th century – with an endless diet of Wagner, Tolstoy, George Eliot and, for light relief, Trollope and Dickens.

In recent months the pandemic has brought me close to realising my dream. Yet I’ve noticed something odd tugging at my comfortable smugness: I’ve started missing the pre-pandemic world. I long for the obvious things, of course – dinners in decent restaurants, the cut-and-thrust of discussion freed from the dead hand of Zoom, travel to exotic places. But I yearn for some of the more mundane warp and weft of normal life, too. I’m loth to admit it, but I miss many of the things that used to make me angry.

Normal life is full of triumphs and tribulations. A few of these are big, but most are small and offer the useful purpose of marking each day out from another. Viewed collectively, they help to demarcate some moments as good, and others less so. They give form and texture to our existence.
The petty triumphs of travelling are many: realising that there’s an empty seat next to you on the train or plane, being upgraded to a slightly better room or rental car, picking a queue that moves a little faster than the rest. These moments are thrilling because each one represents victory over an irritation. And travelling involves many of these annoyances and obstacles too: people who insist on conducting long phone calls at maximum volume (“look how important I am, I’m discussing scheduling conflicts!”); loudspeakers blaring deafening “background music”; lame excuses, often delivered by those same loudspeakers, for dismal, interrupted or non-existent service.

I now realise that these small irritations serve an important purpose. The ever-changing cycle of annoying people and machines soak up our malevolent energies. Remove these vexations and those energies are more likely to be directed at the people who actually matter to us, such
as our partners and children – particularly if we’re all cooped up at home. As the plague ravages the world, muttering angrily about who forgot to turn on the dishwasher can seem a little churlish. We are left to drown in our own existential angst.

So I find myself looking forward to experiencing, once again, some grit in the oyster of life. I also relish the return of something else lockdown has robbed us of: the thrill of serendipity. Zoom calls are so choreographed that, even if someone funny or brilliant is lurking amid the chessboard of on-screen faces, you can’t establish a rapport with them. With travel out of the question, you’re unlikely to find yourself stranded in some out-of-the-way place. Each day is neatly planned and boringly familiar.

My most illuminating experiences as a journalist have all happened at random. After interviewing a Republican senator once in Wisconsin, a well-upholstered man with a briefcase full of bromides about free trade and low taxes, I wandered back to my hotel and came across a gathering of survivalists dressed in military fatigues, bristling with guns, who were buying and selling the tools of their trade (which seemed to consist primarily of do-it-yourself dental equipment).

The fanatics I stumbled on revealed far more about the future of the Republican Party than the person I’d worked hard to schedule an appointment with. I suspect that one reason why big drinkers like H.L. Mencken and Henry Fairlie made great journalists is that, unlike their better organised colleagues, they were too hung over to cram their days full of interviews with the usual suspects. Instead they discovered the big story as they refuelled in the bar at night.
The vaccinating needles are now approaching my age-group and I watch their march with gratitude and excitement. I can’t wait to revive my old travelling tricks (putting a copy of “The Secrets of the Great Serial Killers” on the seat next to me to discourage occupancy). I’m looking forward to smugly fending off the irritating chit-chat of my fellow travellers by donning my unmissable huge Sony headphones. And I definitely need to restock my previously prize-winning collection of hotel unguents in their tiny little bottles.

Most of all, I’m longing to add to my trove of tales about the extraordinary unreasonableness of my fellow human beings. I need something unimportant to complain about. Roll on freedom day! The right to have a good grumble, it turns out, is both a glorious privilege and a gift. Long live the unexpected and irritating.
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