

When will our social bubbles burst open?



MARK PAVILONS

As human creatures, none of us can live without relationships. We can't survive in total isolation. There's a huge difference between the distance that divides us and barren solitude. Forced isolation, or a confinement to our own social bubbles, may very well be our undoing. Just as a country or society can't simply close its borders to the rest of the world, we cannot zip ourselves into one giant inflatable ball as we go about our daily routines. And yet, that's exactly what has happened. Here in Canada, the Maritimes decided to seal themselves off, and prohibit visits by non-residents. This may have curbed the incidence of COVID-19, but at what cost? The Maritimes rely on their exports as well as tourism. Any place in the world that depends on tourism as a source of income has suffered immeasurably this year. When I see commercials about travel to Mexico or the Caribbean, I think of the street vendors, the roaming musicians, who depended on tourists for their living. When the tourist well dried up, just how are they surviving?? Their countries don't have the means to provide wage subsidies and CERB to their residents. Sadly, I imagine the ranks of the impoverished have grown exponentially. Equally, we suffer from a lack of human interaction, the experience of sharing cultures and expanding our horizons. Meeting new people and visiting new places is almost a necessity to the human existence. While some may prefer days alone fishing in Ontario's wilderness, it's nice to see a familiar face, even if it's a bear! Time away is one thing, time apart from other humans is quite another. The early days of the pandemic were filled with fear and uncertainty. They included hoarding and we witnessed a shortage of necessities. Tempers flared and anxiety levels rose. As things progressed and levelled off, we saw a change in our habits. Even now, in stage 3, we're still quite limited in what we can do. Even if we venture out of the house and go out for dinner, we're restricted to our social bubble of family members or close friends. Our bubbles aren't getting any larger. In fact, they've likely shrunk a bit in recent weeks. Most people admitted to getting a little stir crazy during the lockdown. Be prepared as many places already around the globe are heading back into lockdown to slow the spread of this virus. Here in Ontario, Premier Ford tightened things up on social gatherings in back yards and offices. I can't say what will happen if our numbers continue to rise this fall and into the winter months. I dread what may be on the horizon. I've been rather lucky in that my job was deemed one of the essential ones. Other than a few days off here and there, I retained my daily routine and went into the office as if nothing happened. But it did. The barren streets and stores were constant reminders of a world gone astray. Even now, as masks are mandatory, we're still doing that funky avoiding dance in store aisles. There's little in the way of contact, gestures, motions or polite comments. Nada. As we move about in our communities, there's an air of uneasiness, a feeling of something missing. That my friends is good, old fashioned human contact. Gone are the handshakes, replaced by weird elbow bumps. Gone are hugs and kisses. Gone are noticeable facial expressions. We've seen mass protests in the U.S. and abroad. Citizens hit the streets, claiming forced isolation, masks and social distancing are an infringement on their fundamental rights and freedoms. Of course, gatherings like this only throw fuel on an already growing fire. We need to listen to science because it's the only real truth when it comes to infectious disease. But these people may be right, but for the wrong reasons. I think the point they want to make is they're tired of being alone. They can't function in social isolation. And there's the ultimate catch-22. We can't be at our best when we're secluded. And we can't gather because it will lead to more infections and ultimately, even more isolation. As we're seeing now, younger people are not only carrying the virus but spreading it like candy on Halloween. While I think most have received the message loud and clear, there will always be a certain percentage who buck the system, break the rules, thinking they're cool to be rebels. But a lot of the recent spikes

in COVID-19 are the result of this very naive and irresponsibility. What will it take for them, and others, to stick closely to the rules and limits set for us? I'm not sure. All projections point to another wave, but this one isn't even over yet. It's like one huge ocean wave that never crests. A plague is the ultimate test of humankind's agility. Forget about asteroids and earthquakes, eliminating human contact will ultimately lead to our species' demise. Our newest "test" is our new school system. While many health protocols are in place, I don't think this is conducive to a well rounded education. Kids want to get back to normal, back to their cliques, back to lunches in the cafeteria, back to locker gossip, sports teams, field trips and smoking in the washroom. What's the price for social contact? I guess we'll find out.