

On the 12th of March my family and I passed carefully through a quiet Dublin airport and boarded a flight to Gran Canaria. When we arrived in Las Palmas and switched on our phones, we were alerted to the fact that Ireland was now in lockdown. Not a bad place to be during lockdown we thought as the sun kissed our faces and we were efficiently transferred to our apartment complex in Puerto de Mogán. We had a great couple of days enjoying the beach, pool and local restaurants. On the eve of the second day there was an eerie feeling as half of the premises were open and actively seeking business, while the other half was closed. The following morning - Gran Canaria was closed. We were only allowed to leave the hotel for groceries and this was actively enforced by the local authorities on the street as well as a somewhat dystopian vehicle circling the resort using a tannoy to tell us to stay indoors in a range of different languages.

So, myself, my wife Catrin and three children aged 4, 8 and 10 made the best of our remaining time in the hotel (with the help of Apple inc.) with the soon to be unemployed staff gallantly trying to make our stay as comfortable as possible. We just managed to have a birthday dinner for our son Cai (10) before the shutters on socialising came shuddering down. It was a surreal trip, a surreal St. Patrick's day in a surreal year. Our flight was due back in Dublin at 8pm on Thursday the 19th of March. The Irish department of foreign affairs issued a deadline of midnight on the 19th for flights returning to Dublin - this was a bit too close for comfort in my opinion and was a cause of considerable concern for the remainder of the trip as flights were being panic-bought around Europe and leading airlines were charging exorbitant prices to worried customers. Our own travel company (Tui) got us home in the end - the captain himself personally addressing the passengers in the aisle with an emotional tribute to his cabin crew which were soon to be grounded or worse.

And so began lockdown no. 1, home schooling, remote working, online delivery and a very challenging few months. My wife and I both work full time and we usually have the luxury of our fantastic childminder, so the next few months necessitated some major changes. In general I started work early in the highly professional working space adjacent to my youngest son's bunk bed, pokémon collection and stuffed toys. While I was trying to devise remote teaching options for the smooth muscle practical that was scheduled for that week, my wife was doing home school downstairs, working on reading and writing and something called the growth mindset which deals with the power of yet. I can't read this book...yet! Around lunchtime my wife and I swapped over duties like ships passing in the night as I was in charge of maths and Irish. Every day was a new challenge. The kids are bright and hardworking but our kitchen is not school and I was not their teacher. Usually one of the three was not having a great day and this affected the whole dynamic. In saying that I think that all three really benefited from the personal attention they got at home and it was particularly noticeable in my daughter that she grew in confidence over the time. However, lockdown was protracted, school was not prioritised at the time by the government and little by little it became clear the effect the social isolation was having on the children. Despite our best efforts, creative home schooling, treats, tv, zoom calls with family and walks in the mountains, the kids were not alright.

And so summer came, exams were held, research students got back in the lab and the world returned to something resembling normal - the new normal. I am very proud of the tremendous additional work that myself and my UCD colleagues did to help our university students complete the academic year. Students got their degrees or progressed to the next stage, assignments were completed, professional qualifications were awarded. This is remarkable against a background of so many other industries being shut down or impeded. I am equally proud of our students who stuck with it through those difficult times and came out the other side.

Now in lockdown no. 2 it is unfortunately more normal for me not to go to UCD than to travel there for work. The kids are great - the structure of school and the value of their friends is incalculable. The schools must remain open. My wife is unlikely to return to her office in the city centre for a very long time. This has been a particularly hard year for her not being able to visit her aging mother who lives alone in rural Wales, in addition to surgery in July and all of the work trying to keep her husband and children happy. Indeed we are happy. We definitely had some dark days in the recent past but we have come to really value the comfort of our home and the closeness of our family. A silver lining to everything in the past 9 months is the extra time we have had with our children at a really pivotal stage in their development.

And so we push onwards, trying not to repeat some of the mistakes of lockdown no. 1. Less bad food, fewer drinks, more exercise, more fresh air, early to bed, fewer zoom quizzes! The promise of Christmas with the larger family is the carrot to balance the stick of a second lockdown. It has been a difficult year but we are healthy and we have each other. Others have suffered much more through physical illness, isolation, loss of earnings, disruption to weddings, funerals and other milestone events. To those that are still struggling at home through lockdown no. 2, I would encourage you to take a leaf out of our home school playbook and the growth mindset. The hard times are not finished ... yet.

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*Family picture having completed the Blessington Greenway (September 2020). Osian aged 5 (2nd from the right) only learned to ride a bike without stabilisers in April.*