

THE STAR HALIFAX

No easy ride: COVID-19 is a long road. How a psychology prof, a restaurant owner and a musician are coping

By [Steve McKinley](#)

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There's a long, long road stretching out ahead of Steve Joordens and his wife. A road across the country, in fact. A dream they've had for several years of riding their motorcycles coast to coast.

The dream — born of a 2016 road trip around the Atlantic provinces — was the freedom of leisurely making their way from St. John's, N.L., to Vancouver, pausing when they wanted, seeing the sights they wanted, soaking up Canadiana.

It's a dream that, like so many, has been put on hold for now.

Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, the day when the couple might take their twin Ducatis on the road — hers a Monster 696, and his a Multistrada — seems a long way down the line.

It's been eight months since the initial coronavirus lockdowns, and Canadians' lives are still on hold. There were weeks of moderate respite through the summer, but now, with the predicted second wave of infections upon us, the future beyond COVID-19 is up in the air. We have no real concept of when normalcy will return, only the vague notion that it will be later rather than sooner, and that "normal" will look a lot different to us than it did eight months ago.

For many, it seems futile to plan for an uncertain future. To make plans now only to have them fall through seems more cruel than not making them in the first place.

For others, the key to weathering this pandemic is in understanding that though it is a long road ahead, it, like all roads, will eventually come to an end.

Like many, Joordens, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, has had to deal with the emotional ups and downs of the pandemic's hazy timeline.

He says sometimes, in the absence of the events that we generally use to mark the passage of time — Thanksgiving celebrations, Halloween festivities, the odd live music event — life becomes a bit of a monotone.

"I live almost completely in my house," he says. "It's like my family life is outside of this blue room. And my work life is inside of this blue room. And that's my commute from one to the other. And it's the same thing every day."

Some people, he said, are just now wrapping their heads around the fact that there's a long way to go on this journey.

"When I first heard that with the Spanish Flu it took people three years or two years to get back to a relative state of normalcy, that sounded horrible to me," he says. "But now, when I think of that, I think, 'But they got to a state of normalcy.' So, there is an end. There is a light at the end of this tunnel, and I think that mindset is very important for us."

"It's like if we're in a marathon, and we realize, OK, we're on Mile 10. And it's been a lot of work, and we feel like crap and sore as heck, but we've got a long way to go, and we've just got to stay the course and keep going."

Marathon runners, he says, often feel the most exhausted when they're finally in sight of the finish line; they know the race will soon end and they can stop running as soon as they get to that line.

In this case, however the protagonist is less Pheidippides — the Greek marathon runner — and more Sisyphus — the king condemned to eternally roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down every time it neared the top.

“I think that the worry of the second wave is that some of us felt like we were reaching a finish line; that things were opening up, the kids are back to school. ... We were getting to this other side. And so, to then have it sort of stolen away from you is (difficult.)”

For some, their reaction is, in essence, to hibernate — to shut down and wait for it all to be over. For others, like Joordens, the reaction is to find something new to do, to keep the wheels turning.

In Joordens case, when his anxieties well up, he turns to work. He created a free online course on anxiety, for example. For others, he says, it may be finding new things to learn — especially about mental health — or different ways to do things that you used to do.

The key, he says, is to keep moving forward and to understand that one day, this too shall pass.

“You've got all these great positive experiences ahead of you; we all have that,” he said. “And we all know that almost as a certainty. In fact, we may enjoy them more than we ever have, once we can finally do some of those things we can't do.

“We have we have good times ahead. And that might be enough.”

Easy Restaurant in Toronto is a small place — it only seats about 45. Its walls are covered with posters from old road-trip movies, including the eponymous Easy Rider.

It's been a long, strange ride for Peter Morrison, its tall, lanky, hyperenergetic owner, who opened the breakfast joint in Parkdale 20 years ago. None more strange, perhaps, than the past eight months.

In March, when coronavirus cases started to climb in Toronto, Morrison noticed a drop in business right away, that first weekend that people became aware of the problem. The following Monday, business dropped some more and, realizing that they weren't going to be able to make money, he decided to close the place down.

That was weird. For its entire 20 years of existence, Easy hadn't been closed for more than a couple of days at a time. Morrison was sure of his decision to close, less sure of what he'd do with himself when it did.

He started to go into the closed restaurant, preparing it for the day that it would reopen.

But the days turned into weeks, the weeks into months. And there appeared to be no end in sight. His landlord gave him a break on rent and there were government loans and wage rebates that allowed him to pay the basic costs.

But that didn't change the fact that the restaurant he'd birthed and nurtured was essentially in a coma.

"It was very bizarre, very stressful, and I was just trying to sort things out," he said. "And it's hard. I have staff that I support. And my kids. There are a lot of things that hinge on being open and having a normal life and (it was) pretty stressful at times."

But as the weeks stretched on, and it appeared he would be able to keep Easy going, Morrison settled into his new normal. He found routines. He did yoga — until the yoga studios were closed. Spring came. The weather warmed. He met someone. The jazz funk band he played drums in cleared out the tables at the restaurant and rehearsed there when they could.

And suddenly, at the beginning of August, they got the OK to wake Easy up again.

"Usually running a restaurant after 20 years, I'm just some pretty chill," he said. "But this was almost like going back in time to when we first opened up, you know, and all the pressure of, like, trying to build sales and do normal things. I mean, you feel a bit guilty if you're doing something enjoyable, you know? It's like, 'You're not supposed to be enjoying yourself. This is a pandemic, right?'"

It was mostly patio service, but it kept the restaurant going, kept his staff employed and kept his bills paid. There was optimism, for a time.

Then came the second wave, and restaurants were shut down again.

For Morrison the second closure was even more devastating.

"I think I'm a pretty resilient guy," he said. "I don't really need much time to bounce back and figure out another way. But for a few weeks there, it was ... I felt like everything was ending for me, that I was going to have to sell everything I had and just, I don't know — retreat."

For now, though, he thinks with another government loan he might to be able to keep Easy alive through the spring if all goes well. In the meantime, he's finding other routines, and drawing support from his partner, Winnie, her family and his own kids when they visit.

It's little things, he says, like waking up and going to bed. Having lunch. Trying to have a normal life.

"These are the little things that you take for granted when you're just busy all the time," he said. "But when things are really sort of distilled down to, 'How are you spending your time?' Well, I want to spend quality time."

So how long will it be before Canadians can start making some concrete plans for the future?

"It's a good question," said Ashleigh Tuite, an epidemiologist at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.

"And I don't really know the answer."

Her sister is making travel plans for March Break, said Tuite, but she doesn't have a lot of confidence in that trip happening.

"A lot, I think, depends on what happens over the fall and winter, because we have the potential where, if we keep transmission suppressed, and we have relatively low rates of COVID in our population, and if we start having access to rapid tests, then that sort of changes the way that we navigate the world."

The technology that could be developed and distributed over the next six months or so — vaccines and treatments, rapid tests, contact tracing methods — will determine how long we have to wait before we approach some form of normalcy.

Tuite has been working on modelling projections for the epidemic since March. Given the technology at our disposal right now, those projections suggest another year and a half of on and off restrictions.

"In the absence of anything really materially changing our reality, this is our reality for a while."

Rick Fines knows the perks and pitfalls of a long, long road.

This upcoming February, the Peterborough-based roots and blues singer/guitarist will celebrate 40 years in the music business. Last February, he was looking at his most promising summer in a decade. He was almost fully booked — festivals, tour dates, workshops. He had a new album recorded and ready for mixing and mastering.

In March, that all fell apart. All the festivals were cancelled, all the gigs were gone. There would be no touring to push the new album.

Fines, who rarely spends a summer at home, was watching his garden grow and wondering what to do.

“I got quite worried. And I started thinking about what I was going to do, but I’m someone who gets up and goes to work, whether there’s work to go to or not, so I had an album in the can, and we were talking about doing the final mixes, and I decided I couldn’t wait, I have to release it anyway.”

Along with co-producer Alec Fraser, he got the mix done. He sold a guitar to pay for the mastering. He bartered a backyard concert for the album artwork. And at the beginning of October, released the album — Solar Powered Too. But that wasn’t the end of that.

“You know what, you either come out of this with more people knowing who you are, or you coast and don’t do much and come out of it, having diminished your profile,” said Fines.

He wasn’t about to let that happen. He realized it might be a year or possibly two before he’d be able to play to a live audience, so he set out to learn how to create small videos for those songs. He did online concerts and lessons. He looked into creating online guitar workshops.

And somewhere along the way he realized something — he was getting to watch his garden grow. And he was helping his daughter with her online school work. And enjoying time with his family. And that, to a large extent, was because he was forced to slow his usual pace.

That realization, he suspects, will heavily influence the next set of songs he and a lot of other songwriters write.

“When it comes to writing, it’s maybe a chance to just get a little bit deeper into ... the human condition. What makes us tick, who are we, what’s important in our lives, those are the things that you make songs about.

“So when we’re missing those things, then I think we’re gonna see songs by a lot of people about missing that sense of community and that togetherness and those shared experiences.

“If there’s to be a hope for humanity, I hope that people understand that we’re all the same and that people, through this shared experience, that they start placing value on the things that are important when they’ve been forced to slow down.”

“Humans are mental meteorologists,” said Dr. Simon Sherry, a clinical psychologist and professor in psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax. “We make predictions into the future, much as someone might try and forecast the weather.

“We make predictions about how happy we might be if we do certain activities. And if it’s difficult to predict anything other than doom and gloom, and rainy weather and storms, that can be demoralizing to humans. And we need hope and we need optimism.”

For Sherry, that means people need to “cope actively.” That means moving forward, planning activities and trying to make social connections even in the face of dark and pessimistic thoughts. He said he sees many people who are worn down, fatigued and exhausted by the pandemic, but he believes the only way for those people to get more energy is by expending more energy.

“The way out of this malaise is not passivity, it’s activity.”

“As much as this pandemic has exposed so many cracks, and so many problems, it’s also highlighted to me, and I think to many, what is important in terms of our freedoms, our health and our families. And from that perspective, a pandemic is both a brutal force and a great teacher, because it does help underline what’s important in this world and in our lives.”

“But despite the ugliness of COVID-19, it won’t change the essential resourcefulness and resilience of human beings. So I continue to realistically believe in the bravery and the bounce-back of humans.”

Steve Joordens thinks he and his wife, Sue, might be able to do their cross-country motorcycle trip by 2023. That’s a long way off, but planning for the future is what people who believe in their future do.

As children, both of Joordens parents lived in Holland during the Nazi occupation. Those were harsh and dangerous times, they’ve told him. They endured.

“I think, when it all is said and done, we’re going to get through the other side,” said Joordens. “And maybe we’ll be better for this at some level. Maybe it will make us rethink some of the ways we were living, some of the things we were valuing.

“And, who knows, it could be that 10 years from now, we’re kind of thankful.”

Of course, not everyone shares that viewpoint, he adds.

“My eight-year-old granddaughter swears regularly that COVID is ruining her life.”

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