

FROM THE INSIDE



Travelling to hell and back

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If you're going through hell, keep going
Winston Churchill.

Media began reporting more and more intensely about the spread of a virus that was causing death and destruction, and that had been isolated in China. East Asia seemed far away from Italy, and the various experts who took turns as guests of TV programs and newspapers had conflicting opinions. At that time, media coverage appeared to focus on three different schools of thought. The first was represented by the deniers, convinced that COVID-19 was no worse than seasonal flu. Next, the alarmists, for whom the SARS-CoV-2 would have possibly the potential to decimate millions of people and finally the prudent, those who before committing to any projections, wanted to see more data. If we consider the figures today, all three were right and wrong at different points of the timeline because the world was not ready to face such a situation.

China seemed far away and although we were alerted, it appeared unlikely that even in Italy we would have to experience the dramatic situation that was exhausting the province of Hubei. But it did not go like this. After the first cases, the virus spread rapidly in Italy and produced its devastating effect by striking mercilessly. As a physiotherapist in a University Hospital in Italy, I found myself immediately on the front line. I worked then on the pulmonology ward and the respiratory intensive care unit: both were converted for the acceptance of SARS-CoV-2 positive patients. Growing figures in Italy, together with the awareness of facing an unknown enemy, did not help to dampen the dramatic tones of what was becoming a pandemic.

At 6.30 the next morning I walked through the medieval streets of the centre of Bologna to reach the

hospital. Nobody was around. Deafening silence was the soundtrack of that morning. A grey-violet light enveloped the towers and the walls of the city, and the buildings with closed windows seemed to hold the people inside them like a vice. I was alone in the dawn, and in a little while, I would have entered the lair of the virus. The memory of the beginning of the journey is this: the grey-violet light and the absence of noises. Would we have all the personal protective equipment available? Would we have it for as long as necessary? What would it be like to face patients in these conditions? What form would our patient cases take? Should I worry about the safety of my family, at home? On entering the ward however, the worry disappeared because then I was surrounded by colleagues who, like me, had journeyed through this morning and were ready. Immediately after making contact with the first patients, everything became clearer and the enthusiasm of being there overwhelmed everything else. All the staff demonstrated a character that I will never forget. Everyone gave their best and more.

In the days that followed, the faces of patients loomed large. Memories of wide eyes lost in a parallel universe from which they hoped to return. Those patients regaining consciousness found themselves in the presence of ghosts in white suits whose voices were muffled by the protective masks. We learned to live with a new reality.

At the time of writing, the situation in Italy has improved. But, let us not forget this lesson and try to remember how dramatic it was to face the pandemic. As a physiotherapist, I spent day after day in contact with positive patients. It was tough and demanding.

We travelled to hell, we went through the flames and we found the way back. It was a journey that reminds us of the smallness of man but also its strength. What we have experienced and we are still experiencing will change us and, perhaps, we will finally appreciate the true value of things. Is this really going to happen?

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