

DAVID BROOKS

# The Great Unmasking

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For millions of Americans, the next six months are going to be great. The power Covid had over our lives is shrinking, and the power we have over our own lives is growing. The image that comes to mind is recess. We've been stuck emotionally indoors for over a year. Now we get to sprint down the hallway and burst into the playground of life.

People in large parts of the world will still be enduring the ravages of the pandemic, but those of us fortunate enough to be in countries where vaccines are plentiful will be moving from absence to presence, from restraint to release, from distance to communion. Even things that didn't seem fun are going to be fun. Not being able to get the bartender's attention because the bar is packed — that will be fun! I'm a Mets fan, but going to Yankees games will be fun! (As long as they lose.) Going to age-inappropriate concerts will be fun! I don't care if Generation Zers don't want to sit next to some damn boomer at their Cardi B concert. I'm going anyway.

Even better than the fun is the birth of a cultural moment. Many are gripped by the conviction that if they are working and their children's schooling returns to normal, they do not want to go back to their old lifestyles. No more frenetic overscheduling and pointless travel. No more shallow social whirl.

This is the moment to step back, be intentional and ask: What's really important, and how should I focus on what matters? It's a matter of ranking your loves and then making sure your schedule matches your rankings. "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives," Annie Dillard once wrote.

This week I had a chance to be in a football stadium with real people and to give a commencement address to the Boston College class of 2021, from which this column is adapted. I stood at the lectern in front of humans and took off my mask — and that was a moment of liberation.

People wear masks when they feel unsafe, and for more than a year, we *were* unsafe, and we had to wear masks. But the physical masks we wore were layered on top of all the psychological masks we had put on, out of fear, in the years before Covid.

Productivity is a mask. I'm too busy to see you. Essentialism is a mask. I can make all sorts of assumptions about you based on what racial or ethnic group you are in. Self-doubt is a mask. I don't show you myself because I'm afraid you won't like me. Distrust is a mask. I wall myself in because I'm suspicious you'll hurt me.

As we take off the physical masks, it seems important that we take off the psychological masks as well. If there is one thing I've learned in life, it is that we have more to fear from our inhibitions than from our vulnerabilities. More lives are wrecked by the slow and frigid death of emotional closedness than by the short and hot risks of emotional openness.

All around I see people determined to undo what Covid tried to do to us. Covid isolated us, but I see people thinking about how they can replace social distance with social closeness and social courage. I'm hoping to practice what a friend calls "aggressive friendship," being the one who issues the invitations, reaches out first.

People are thinking about how they can reconstitute and deepen their communal and moral lives. I have friends who moved from big cities to Montana and rural Tennessee. That crowded bar could be an enjoyable novelty, but according to a report released by the Harris Poll in March, three-quarters of survey respondents said they would prefer small gatherings at home or at a friend's place over going out to taverns and restaurants. The Wall Street Journal reports that some employers are finding that many workers are simply unwilling to go back to the office five days a week; time at home is better.

My wife and I are printing out our calendars in three-month chunks, so we can get an accurate overview of how we are committing our time. I'm hoping to spend less time at one-off events and more time with recurring commitments — groups that meet weekly, monthly or several times a year.

I gave the B.C. graduates one actually useful piece of advice: Form a giving circle. Take 10 of your best friends. All of you commit to putting some money into a pot every year. Then gather every year for a few days to decide how to give it away. The charity piece of this exercise is nice, but it's really just a pretext so you can live side by side with a group of lifelong friends.

This year's grads entered college in one cultural moment and leave it at the start of another. A year ago, when everything was shut down, I thought they were the unluckiest generation, but they could be the luckiest. They've survived something hard and have the strength that comes from that experience. They enter a world that's been interrupted and have the opportunity to create a different and more humane way of life — a life without masks.

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