When lockdown began, I found it difficult whenever someone claimed that no-one had ever experienced isolation like this before. For a start, it isn’t historically true: perhaps not on this scale, but the world has had many lockdowns in the past, for many reasons.

More personally, however, it wasn’t even true for me.

My parents belonged to a small, closed religious group. I was homeschooled for most of my teens. This wasn’t the 2020s version of homeschooling, with virtual classrooms and a proliferation of innovation and advice. It was just me and my mum, a few second-hand revision books, and one old word processor. We lived far off the beaten track, miles from neighbours or a bus stop. It was the 1990s and we didn’t even have the internet for the first few years.

As soon as I saw the callout for *A Changed World,* I wanted to write about how covid-19 has altered my perspective on my upbringing, my attitude towards my PhD (which I am finishing) and my view of myself. To get to that point, however, requires quite a lot of backstory. I hope you’ll bear with me. I’ll try to keep it short.

My childhood was extremely unstable. It was full of bankruptcies, bailiffs, house moves every six months, parental separations and reconciliations, and occasional bouts of living with strangers. I went to 11 schools by the age of 13, including two boarding schools.

My parents didn’t believe in authority. I think they believed that they were guided by a higher power that meant they didn’t have to answer to anyone else.

I left my last school shortly after I turned 13. I’d had a very upsetting summer abroad with my parents’ group, and I came back in need of some stability. Within weeks, my formal education was over as my mum dragged me out of school forever. Nobody ever told me why.

Homeschooling was rare where I lived and I was subjected to a grueling array of tests, personality profiles, IQ tests and interviews. Some days I was seen as a shy, gifted child. Other days I was presented as the exact opposite, and sometimes anything in between. Adults could be extremely vocal about their opinions. Eventually, I was allowed to stay at home, as long as I met some basic requirements.

I was an academically minded child, and I wanted to be an astrophysicist. I had a dream of going to Oxford or Cambridge, maybe even Harvard. I knew those basic requirements were nowhere near enough. For two years I tried to teach myself a high school curriculum. I created a strict timetable for myself, starting with yoga at 7am and ending with a relaxing bedtime at 10pm. I made lesson plans, went to the city library whenever I could. I didn’t just get out revision books for myself but would read all the teachers’ notes too. At first, the librarian complained about me not being in school, but relaxed after watching me copy exam board requirements into a scruffy notebook. I’d grade myself on every assignment and quiz, endlessly worrying about every low score.

Moreover, whilst it’s perfectly possible to be self-taught in all manner of things, I discovered that physics is an incredibly difficult subject to teach yourself. I found several books on home experiments in charity shops. But apart from the most basic ones, there were few I could try. My parents wouldn’t buy me any equipment. I’m not sure why.

Nobody explained that revision books were designed for revision, not for complete learning. They never explained that the teachers’ notes were for teachers who often had a degree in that subject. Nobody explained that sometimes books have typos in them. When I got stuck on something, I blamed myself for not being able to figure it out. I thought there was something wrong with me.

Life at home was very complex. My mother’s drinking became out of control and she started claiming that the house was full of ghosts and demons. Sometimes she’d become angry or start crying for no reason. Other times she’d become completely unresponsive, seeming to not even know I was there.

At the time, I had no idea what mental illness was. All I knew was that she was in pain and I wanted to help her. I tried to be her therapist, her life coach. She wouldn’t talk to anyone but me, especially not doctors, and wouldn’t let me talk to anyone. Helping her became more of a priority than helping myself, and I’d blow off my revision schedule because I thought she needed a friend. I made excuse after excuse for behaviour, which became increasingly destructive towards me.

When I failed to help her, I blamed myself. I struggled to concentrate. I couldn’t keep to a healthy schedule, and instead of fighting with physics problems, I began spending my days writing rambling stories. They had no plot, because my life had no plot. They had few characters, because I spent my days almost completely alone. No-one knew what was happening to me. Whenever I saw anyone, I pretended everything was great.

My father had always wanted me to go to a very prestigious sixth form college. It had been his plan all my life. I applied when I was 15, around the same time I started taking adult education classes and volunteering one afternoon a week at a museum. He told me everything I’d need to do to get a place, and I did them all.

I didn’t get in.

This utterly threw me. It sent me into some kind of panic. It had never occurred to me that I might fail, that I might not end up where I wanted to be, that I had nothing to show for the last two years. I started applying to colleges and summer schools almost at random.

So, when someone joked about me applying directly to University, I was desperate enough to try. I went for an interview, chatted to the admissions tutor about telescopes, and got a place on an astrophysics degree, here at Herts.

I was 16 years old.

I lasted six weeks.

I might’ve lasted longer, but it was 2000, and mere weeks after I joined, there was the Hatfield rail crash. My mother, deep in the complexity of mental illness, seemed to believe I had caused this somehow. Bad karma, I think. It was hard to make sense of. But I was also struggling with the work, and although I liked everyone on my course, I felt stupid at falling behind. Everyone expected me to be some kind of child genius, reciting pi to ten thousand digits. They seemed disappointed that I was just… ordinary.

So, I quit, and went straight back to that dark bedroom in the middle of nowhere, alone for 23 hours a day or more. Except this time, it was far worse, because I’d lost all belief in myself. Whenever I tried to talk to anyone or ask advice, I was met with discomfort and stony silence.

My dad lost his company about five weeks after I left University. It took 18 months for the bank to repossess our home. Another 18 months of living in the middle of nowhere, facing nothing but a blank wall of uncertainty.

The next 15+ years can be summarised easily: we got evicted, my parents divorced permanently, I moved to a random town, started a random job, joined my parents’ religious group, married young, divorced young, left the group, studied several different degrees and Masters, ran my own business, lived in the Arctic, and never stopped trying to find a way back into astronomy. After working in outreach, I eventually moved back to Herts to do a PhD in astrophysics. The project was the one topic I’d been interested in all my life, and although I was scared, I decided it was worth it.

I’d never stopped blaming myself for everything that had happened. I thought I hadn’t tried hard enough. I thought that if I’d just found a way to stick to my schedule, if I’d worked harder, if I hadn’t left school, if I’d been a better person, if I’d found a way to help my mum, if… if… if *I’d* been better, then none of it would have happened. Even at the start of 2020 I was still blaming myself.

Lockdown, therefore, was genuinely confusing.I saw people on social media struggling with feeling isolated less than two hours into the first morning. Family members who had long told me to stop making such a big deal about my experiences were the first to make a big deal about covid-19.

More generally, there was a proliferation of discussion about how difficult isolation is to cope with, how hard it is to be productive, how it’s ok not to be ok, how everyone copes in their own ways. Suddenly, a lot of people were talking about mental health, and their own struggles with a loss of identity, or changing financial circumstances, or the stress of feeling cooped up. Although the cause was very different, many of the outcomes weren’t.

I saw people sharing their own grueling work schedules, planning out every minute from 7am yoga to a relaxing 10pm bedtime. I saw others respond with reassuring comments about how none of that was necessary. I read homeschooling schedules that involved maybe an hour or two of study in the morning (with lots of breaks and exercise) followed by an afternoon of creative work. People struggle with self-regulation in a world without distraction, and I saw a thousand ideas to counteract that. Over and over, I saw people figuring out, collectively, how to adapt to this changed world of oddly connected isolation. The story was clear: don’t panic, go easy on yourself, this isn’t normal. I saw the ways different people reacted depending on their circumstances. I finally understood some of the things I’d been reacting to all my life.

Rather than easing off work during lockdown, I found it much easier to throw myself into it. For the first time, my PhD became something I enjoyed, rather than some adversarial task I had to conquer. I wrote my second paper in early lockdown and my thesis introduction, alongside my third paper, in the latter parts. I won a grant for academic excellence in the face of adversity.

My county went into Tier 2 on the 20th anniversary of the train crash. I still don’t know how I feel about that. I decided I don’t need to feel anything, it is what it is. Lockdown 2 feels like normal life at this point.

It’s hard to know how to conclude this. Isolation is different for everyone. Covid-19 has shown us all a great many different truths about the world: how interconnected everything is, yet how fragile and unequal. It also reveals how creative, strong and innovative we can be, and how both things can coexist. Grief and trauma can sit alongside energy and hope, sometimes in the same community, building, or family. Sometimes even in the same person.

Perhaps we should have known that all along.