

This is a transcription of the Yellow Jack Podcast, Episode 2.

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[00:00:05]

Hi, I'm Robert Ouimet, and this is episode two of the Yellow Jack podcast where you'll meet people who have voluntarily gone in to self-isolation because of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic.

In Canada, anyone who's come in from another country or thinks they may have been exposed to COVID-19, are being asked to self-isolate for 14 days. That means no contact with others. Primarily, you're confined to the house. There's some leeway for going outside on a solitary stroll or to walk the dog. But basically you're supposed to stay inside, isolated from other people.

[00:00:39] The idea is that if you're inside isolated for 14 days and there's no symptoms of the virus, then you're good to go back out into the world of social distancing.

[00:00:48] On this episode, Dr. Richard Smith. Richard is a professor in the communications department at Simon Fraser University.

He's also the director of the Masters of Digital Media Program at the Centre for Digital Media in Vancouver. The Centre for Digital Media, the CDM, is a collaboration between SFU, the University of British Columbia, Emily Carr University of Art and Design and the BC Institute of Technology.

So Richard is usually at the CDM campus on Great Northern Way of Vancouver. But for the last week, he's been in self-isolation at his home on Bowen Island. Hi, Richard

[00:01:23 Richard] Hi, Robert. How are you?

[Robert] More importantly, how are you?

[00:01:28] Pretty good, actually. I mean, it's upsetting or challenging times, let's say. But my personal situation is quite pleasant, really. I like being at home and I've been at home a week now and so far so good.

[00:01:42 Robert] So can you just tell us how you ended up having to self-isolate? Were you traveling or were you at an event or what happened?

[00:01:49 Richard] Yeah, I was actually in France. I was a visiting professor at a University in France. And, And, you know, I went there I was going there for a long time and I didn't really check into the situation in France. I mean, the virus existed, but it wasn't that big a deal at the time. We went and my wife left me. And just while we were there, things, you know, almost as soon as we got there, we realized that France is in a lot worse situation than we had ever known. And it got worse by the day. It didn't have a real material effect on us while we were in France, but we could see it coming. And so we decided to come back and we did that before Canadians were ordered back. But actually, I think we were in the air when that order came in. And so we were home on the 13th of March. And the advice even then was to self-isolate. Right.. We got a pamphlet as we got off the plane. But we followed the instructions went straight home. Been here ever since. People who live on Bowen Island tend to have a fair bit of supplies. Anyway, it's just the nature of island life. So we were pretty well situated. And my brother, who'd been looking after the house, kind of left it even more stocked up than you would otherwise. And then, you know,

we have neighbors, too. And my neighbor across the street actually got some milk and stuff like that. So we're in pretty good shape here.

[00:03:26 Robert] Is that a bird in the background?

[Richard] Yes, I have a parrot. What's unfortunately I know.

[Robert] What's the parrot's name?

[Richard] Cecil. named after my grandfather. An African gray. So he learns new things and repeats them. And if we're lucky, he won't be too intrusive while I'm doing this call that part of the joy of working at home is all the pet interaction. So if I was younger, maybe children interaction.

[00:03:54 Robert] I think it's great having him there. And I hope that, you know, in the next week or so, while you're still in self-isolation, he learns how to say COVID.

[00:04:01] Yeah, he is. We always have to be careful, what we say around the parrot.

[00:04:08] So now you because of your work, you're pretty used to working remotely and, you know, dealing with people all over the world in different time zones and using video conferencing and all that kind of stuff. But now that you're actually forced to sort of stay at home and not be able to, you know, go out and interact. What are you finding the most challenging?

[00:04:25] I do a fair bit of remote collaboration and have people all over the world that I interact with, but I do so from typically from an office. I actually commute. I work in the city. And so I have people that I walk past. And my commute is really long from Bowen Island into downtown every day. So and most of that trip is with people that I know or you know, casually. So I actually have a pretty busy casual social life or commuting social life in my say because I use public transit. So. What I miss is all those kind of not the non work interaction.

[00:05:09 Robert] And it is actually kind of surprising. You don't actually realize it when you're not restricted, but you don't realize how much of that interaction actually goes on every day.

[00:05:19] Yeah. Yeah. From, you know, just paying for bus fare and, you know, acknowledging people and or, you know, all those little things. And then in the office environment, we you know, we we all work on one hallway and we we actually have a little coffee station and a big table beside it. And people just hang out there, you know, they were getting their coffee. And so they. The time that. That kind of those punctuation of points, I guess, are are missing. Actually, this week we we we created a, you know, basically an artificial "no agenda" meeting, which was just grab a coffee and join us on this channel. And so we just hung out together for about half an hour. And it was it was kind of it was it was necessary.

[00:06:11 Robert] That's a really good idea, though. I think a lot of people now are, whether they're isolated or not. There are a lot of people are almost everyone I know is having to work from home. And the idea of having just a meeting just to catch up and not have an agenda, I think that's brilliant.

[00:06:27] Yeah, and it was nice, too, because just like in an office. You know, if you have set meetings with set agendas and everybody's remote, you know, did you turn your mike on and all that stuff, then you tend to get a very linear flow of things. And when you have a coffee klatch, we call the Academics in Pajamas having talking about Corona's or something like that. We gave it a funny name and we just hung out. But we also got a whole array of different people from the person at the front desk to, you know, faculty members to staff members. And so we we didn't have any - we tried not to make it all about the coronavirus - but we didn't avoid the elephant in the room either. We just kind of, you know, as they say, shot the shit .

[00:07:19] What a great idea. I really like it. I mean it. And I guess to you're kind of in a weird situation because you're also having to manage - figuring out how you're going to deal with your students and your faculty and the whole organization around the Centre for Digital Media. So you kind of got two layers of stuff to sort out. if in quite the transition.

[00:07:37 Richard] It's been quite the transition. And you can imagine like I've actually been in the digital media space for a long, long time. And part of that has been looking at online and remote teaching options and, you know, how can we use the Internet for teaching? And so we've been working on that since the 90s. And yet, you know, not that much has changed fundamentally. University education, it's face to face seminars, lectures and so on. Well, my university just basically last week mandated no, we're all going online all the time now. And we had four days to make the change. And so something that's been evolving for over 25 years and really not making a huge you know, it's kind of like a dent in the status quo. Suddenly, this marginal part of our lives is transitioned and everybody has to do it. And actually, to be honest it's gone really well. I think part of it is students are well used to doing all kinds of other things online. So and then I think just making it absolutely mandatory for everyone, no exceptions, then there's no moment - like nobody can whine and complain and dodge the issue or whatever.

[00:08:58 Robert] You can't sit back and hope it'll pass you by. It's just the reality now. But, you know, it is interesting. You and I met in that in the mid-90's and I was doing work at CBC. And you're doing work. Get us a few in the communications department. And we sort of bonded just because we were both really interested on the digital side. And you were right. You know, I just spent all this week in meetings with, you know, various people, some of their clients, some of them are coworkers. And the amount of time spent just trying to get everybody to connect is crazy, you know? You know, there is your mike on, is your mike off? Why aren't you connecting all that kind of stuff? Like, we haven't really moved very far. Like, we have great tools. There's lots of options. There are there's you know, I'm not saying they don't exist. They're around, but they're still sort of not really easy to use for regular people.

[00:09:44 Richard] Yeah. You know, I think a lot of it is is skill and being just being used to things. An example I might give it; I don't know if you remember when you were learning to drive. But it is absolutely overwhelming. Right. You have to remember, you know, the different pedals in my day three pedal, you know, the blinkers, the lights - looking all. And and you just you go into overload and you try and you try and think about everything in kind of, you know, the way you were taught. And then you don't have any automatic muscle memory of all the various things like, oh, I'm going to turn, I'm going put on my blinkers. I'm going to check these directions like the things we do automatically. So that muscle memory or that autonomic function has not yet built up, for online teaching on online meetings. But it will.

[00:10:36 Robert] I agree. Like, actually, I should rephrase what I said because I think the tools are actually pretty good, like when you think about the off the shelf, free for use tools that we have. They're all really, really good. I guess the thing is they're not super intuitive and because they're combining kind of consumer equipment into a different environment. There's kind of a few little hiccups that come along the way. And if you're not used to, you know, changing settings on your computer, that is where things fall apart. Right. I mean, and that's where the beauty of things like Facebook live and all these instant messaging services that people use. They are pretty goof proof. You know, you press a button and it starts

[00:11:10 Richard] Yah, and the little edge pieces. I think there's two things we can do. One is - I circulated to all of my staff and my students - a best practices. One was from Blue Jeans, I think, and another was from the big teleconferencing and video conferring companies, publish best practices with tips and tricks. Yeah. And I circulated two of those those documents to everybody. The second thing I did is this. I got actually way back in the early 90s when we did at cross-Canada Collaborative Research Project. And some of the people were, you know, that as you can imagine, the technology was very rudimentary. And so one of the things we did is we started every single meeting with a best practices guide. Right. And and, you know, if you were part of the project for more than a few months, you've got kind of, oh, and do we have to go through this again? The thing is, people come and go and you always need reminding you don't sit with the sun right behind your head. Don't forget to plug in your mike and don't forget to have headphones and all this stuff. Yeah. And I think given my students the advice that they're masters students in digital media, this is our chance to excel. This is our chance to become not just adequate, but the best possible users of the technology, because we're going to be those leaders. We have to show leadership on it and challenge yourself and each other to not just get it done, but do really well.

[00:12:40] I'm curious, though, with your background and your expertise, just in terms of the whole communication around COVID in the way that we're having to adjust as a society to how we speak to each other. You know, my wife, for instance, is an actor, so of course, she has no work. But also, her community is now trying to figure out, well, how do we how do we do our craft in this world that may last two weeks or it may last two years or it may last...it may be a complete change in the way we work, you know, as a as a as a, you know, an academic who's thought about this stuff for a long, long time. Have any sort of ideas started to percolate for you around how this might change, how we work as a community?

[00:13:21] Yeah, I think for one thing, there's no way that this is going to go back to some sort of former state of normalcy. Right. And so absolutely. We need to make those adaptations. And that's where we're experimenting with that. The other thing is human beings are incredibly adaptable. That's you know, that's why we occupy virtually every square inch of the whole planet despite how different it is. So we you know, we will be able to adapt. And if it's if it's hard to imagine what that adaptation will look like. Yeah, I can I can commiserate. But just I say to people, just get out there and start figuring it out. And that may not be right the first time. But, you know, we will figure it out. And and who knows? Some of those things might be even better.

[00:14:14 Robert] Well, I think it's exciting in some ways when you get past the fear of the unknown and the fear just over the physical risk, like the idea that we're kind of being

propelled now into a new way of working and thinking and communicating, for me that's super exciting.

[00:14:28] Yeah. Yeah. And and it sounds, you know, it's a creative moment. And I sent a message out to my students, you know, the that we're we're in a sense, we're kind of like pioneers where we're figuring stuff out like if you came to a new place and you had to figure everything out. You know, that's that's an exciting time. And, you know, we'll get to tell the stories. You know, when once people have figured this out and long ago forgotten about the transition will be all the ones that can tell the stories. Oh, you wouldn't believe, you know, we can be that cranky old grandfather. Oh, yeah. So and also, we should probably take comfort, you know, many of us Canadians have had - if you're above a certain age, you either know someone or have been exposed to stories about, you know, the olden days. And, you know, they those people I endured hardships as well and they survived and thrived. So I think we can do it.

[00:15:28 Robert] Yeah. And I think that, you know, there's - I mean, I think right now there's just so many fronts that are being assaulted on. So there's the, you know, just the physical fear of getting sick. There's the physical fear if you're older. You know, maybe getting fatally sick. But there's also sort of the economic fear, there's the you know, am I going to be able to work fear. There's the how do I just get everyday normal stuff done, fears. So right now, we're kind of being we're inundated. As you say, that analogy of learning how to drive, I think is really is really good because we're just doing a lot of us are just overwhelmed with so much stuff. We can't see our way past it.

[00:16:05 Richard] Sort of paralyzing it is.

[00:16:07 Robert] I wonder, too, I think part of it is that, you know, we've always had in our you know, in our communities the artists or the seekers or the people that are pushing the boundaries and trying new things. And and they've always experimented in this stuff. And in a way kind of been on the edges of it, not really necessarily, you know, at the forefront in the community. But now, you know, every everybody and every walk of life in every type of job is being forced to figure out how to do this stuff. You know, how to have a meeting with, you know, six people when you're in the and this isn't your field. You don't work with software. So it's really interesting to watch how we're having to confront these things. And I think this idea of boldly stepping forward and not being afraid of it, I think is important and really the only way we're going to get through it.

[00:16:57 Richard] And I think we really do have to embrace the idea that this is not going to go away no matter. This is how big a problem as humanity ever faces from time to time. And we have to step into it and and start solving the problems and, you know, give yourself a bit of...it won't be perfect, of course. But I think it's really important is, you know, it's very normal and natural to feel anxious about things. And, you know, people do. If we didn't feel anxious about things, we wouldn't say, you know, we wouldn't be safe and we wouldn't we wouldn't survive. So people do get anxious. But people also put that anxiety aside and get down and do their work, whatever it is. And that's also very natural. So it isn't you know, if you aren't sitting around worrying or refreshing your Internet connection, but actually you're doing some work that's actually totally normal. And I encourage my students, OK. Get yourself informed in whatever way that is. I'm advising people to, you know, if you want to learn new things. Check with the Canada.ca page and then let it go after that. But do the rest of your life from being reasonably well-informed, you know, abide by the provincial health officer and all that stuff. But if it's if it's not your job to seek out information and circulate it to others, then don't make that your job. Get on with what your

job is, whatever it looks like. And, you know, I have students who, you know, they have a job, which is to learn new things and to deliver on their projects and all their stuff. And education is going to be enormously important in the coming years. So we have to get good at it and do it. And everybody else is going to have to adapt, find a new job. And I think you're right on the money to pinpoint the artists and the other sort of creative people because they're the ones we're going to figure out new ways. And if nothing else help people feel better along the way.

[00:19:01 Robert] Yeah, I think that's that's I think that's very true. Hey, are you are you actually getting to do anything that's kind of relaxing and like self-isolation, distraction stuff?

[00:19:14 Richard] Well, we live almost in the country and we have a big yard so, and my wife loves to garden and landscape. So, yeah, any minute that I'm not actually on a call, I'm on call to move a rock or did a hole or whatever. So there's some of that. And then I've actually taken up a thing called crazy golf. Well I like golf or with a frisbee.

[00:19:35] Yeah. And all the Valdy was the big proponent of Frisbee golf. Oh yeah.

[00:19:41] Well there's a new Frisbee golf place on Bowen . And so and it's surprising you can actually do it. Social distancing. Maybe not when you're in isolation, but you know, you don't have to get close to anybody that you don't pick up each other's Frisbees or whatever. So I'm going to do a bit of that. And, you know, walk the dog. One of my friends pointed out that the dog leash is about six feet long. So they can pet your dog, but they don't get any closer than that. And that's kind of a nice thing to do. And, you know, the dogs appreciate it. This is, you know, obviously the best of times for dogs. They think that – what the hell – this is great.

[00:20:16 Robert] Well, I I walk through my neighborhood, you know, I've walked through my neighborhood all the time, but I'm doing it even more. So now it's I'm not going venturing much further than my neighborhood. And I was thinking yesterday that the dogs will be very fit, but people will be very fit in. The gardens this year are going to be awesome.

[00:20:32 Richard] Right. We have some great gardens.

[00:20:34 Robert] Hey, what's the first thing you're going to do when you're - you've got another seven days. What are you going to do after your seven days? You're going go out and like run around the streets or, you got a plan?

[00:20:43 Richard] You know, one of the. I'm going to do if I'm going to go to school. I. I think my students you know, it's one thing for me, you know. I mean, I guess, you know, I'm an older person now. And I I've been through a few ups and downs in my life and I guess three major economic upheaval. So it's one thing for me to be a bit sanguine about, you know, it's going to work out even if you know, who knows. But it's different when you're younger and especially so. I think my students are more worried than they let on. And if I can just be at school and talk to them from a distance, that that might be helpful. And I just want to see some people doing their normal stuff. And that'll be interesting. But I just want to get out and do kind of regular stuff.

[00:21:35 Robert] Have a fabulous rest of your isolation.

[00:21:38] Thanks, Robert. It's great to talk to you. And I hope this reaches out to a good number of people. I think what you've been doing here all these years is really important.

[00:21:50 Robert] Thanks .

[00:21:52] Richard Smith from Simon Fraser University and the Centre for Digital Media in Vancouver.

If you head over to the Web site, there are some links there you'll find handy. Also, a photo of Richard before and during isolation, along with Cecil the Parrot.

That's at www.podcasthouse.ca , and your comments are welcome and encouraged.

If you or someone you know is stuck in social isolation and you'd like to share your story, please get in touch. Love to have you on the podcast to find a form at podcasthouse.ca/yellowjack , just fill it out and I'll get back to you as quick as I can.

That's it for this episode. Thank you for listening. And we'll talk again soon.