



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



Lost for words as I watch my beloved New York slowly come back to life

I walked by the Empire State Building last week and saw a queue of people waiting to see New York City from the building's two observatory decks. A queue to get into the Empire State Building! I had not seen that in more than a year – since the pandemic-related restrictions began – and I walk past that building almost daily. That line of chatting, smiling people is one of the clearest signs that New York is emerging from a long hibernation.

To be honest, I struggle to find the right word or phrase to capture what I'm seeing, what I'm experiencing. When a friend says: "I can't wait for everything to go back to normal, to the way it used to be," I have stopped being silent about their nostalgia. As sensitively as I can, and in varying

ways, I say that we can't go back because of what we have experienced collectively. We can only go forward, embracing and being open to enjoying the facets of a new normal. Why waste time and breath wishing for a past that we can never regain?

The days when skies over New York City are cerulean, clear, and sunny make the city feel like it's being naturally brought back to life. The energy on the streets, from the light reflecting off the buildings, to people walking at a jauntier pace, enhances that feeling. Almost everywhere I walk, especially through the parks and along the waterfront, people are jogging, biking, walking, exercising, sitting in clusters chatting animatedly, lounging alone in the sun with their eyes closed and their earbuds connected. It thrills my heart to see so many people enjoying the city again, because I remember those months when there were precious few people anywhere.

Trying to get a seat at a favourite restaurant that survived the sudden, complete loss of business is now a challenge – for both lunch and dinner. I have found this to be even more so at newly opened restaurants. You can feel that customers want them to be successful because of the optimism and recovery that it represents for the city. This past weekend, friends and I tried five restaurants before

we found one where we could make a reservation online. Each one was fully booked. We walked by a couple just to see the diners and to see if we could charm our way to a table. No such luck! Still, it is a joy to see the places jumping, full of happy, mostly young faces, some with babies and toddlers.

I have reinstated one of my decades-long Saturday morning rituals – going to the farmers' market at Union Square. I had stopped because of the Covid-related protective restrictions, like limited access and not being able to handpick the fresh produce I wanted. On a recent Saturday, I ran into six people I had not seen in more than a year. We did not shake hands, we did air hugs or elbow bumps. Each of us shared our experiences getting both vaccination shots. As we chatted, we stood in a circle maintaining enough social distance so that everyone was comfortable.

Museums and galleries are more full of people than the farmers' market, which is surprising because you have to book an appointment. The Calder exhibition at MoMA, the Julie Mehretu retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Alice Neel show at the Metropolitan Museum, the installation of the Frick Collection at the Breuer Building on Madison Avenue – I've seen them all, along with many other people. I find it really moving to overhear conversations about the deep pleasure and satisfaction people get from being able to look at art again. However, I will also admit that I became a teeny, tiny bit uncomfortable with how crowded it felt. I try to now only visit galleries as close to the opening time as possible, when there are few other visitors, when it feels like my own private viewing.

Occasionally, it does feel like 'old times', until I remind myself to pay attention. As I walk through these places, especially museums and galleries, everyone wears masks. As I walk along the street to the areas, I see that many stores are closed, some of the storefronts boarded up with painted plywood. And a few of my friends are still anxious about leaving the Covid-free safety of their apartments. They don't feel comfortable doing so – and won't.

I have walked around New York, with one friend especially, through all phases of the pandemic. It was beautifully fascinating, even during the eerie quiet of the most restrictive lockdown. Seeing the city come to life as the pandemic eases is also beautifully fascinating, but in a different way. So, what word or phrase describes what I see and feel happening in The Big Apple? Re-emergence? Rejuvenation? Revitalisation? Reinvention? Maybe it's not a word or phrase.

Maybe the feeling is best captured in the Stephen Sondheim lyric: *Good times and bum times | I've seen them all and, my dear | I'm still here*