

Interdisciplinary & Transdisciplinary Perspectives

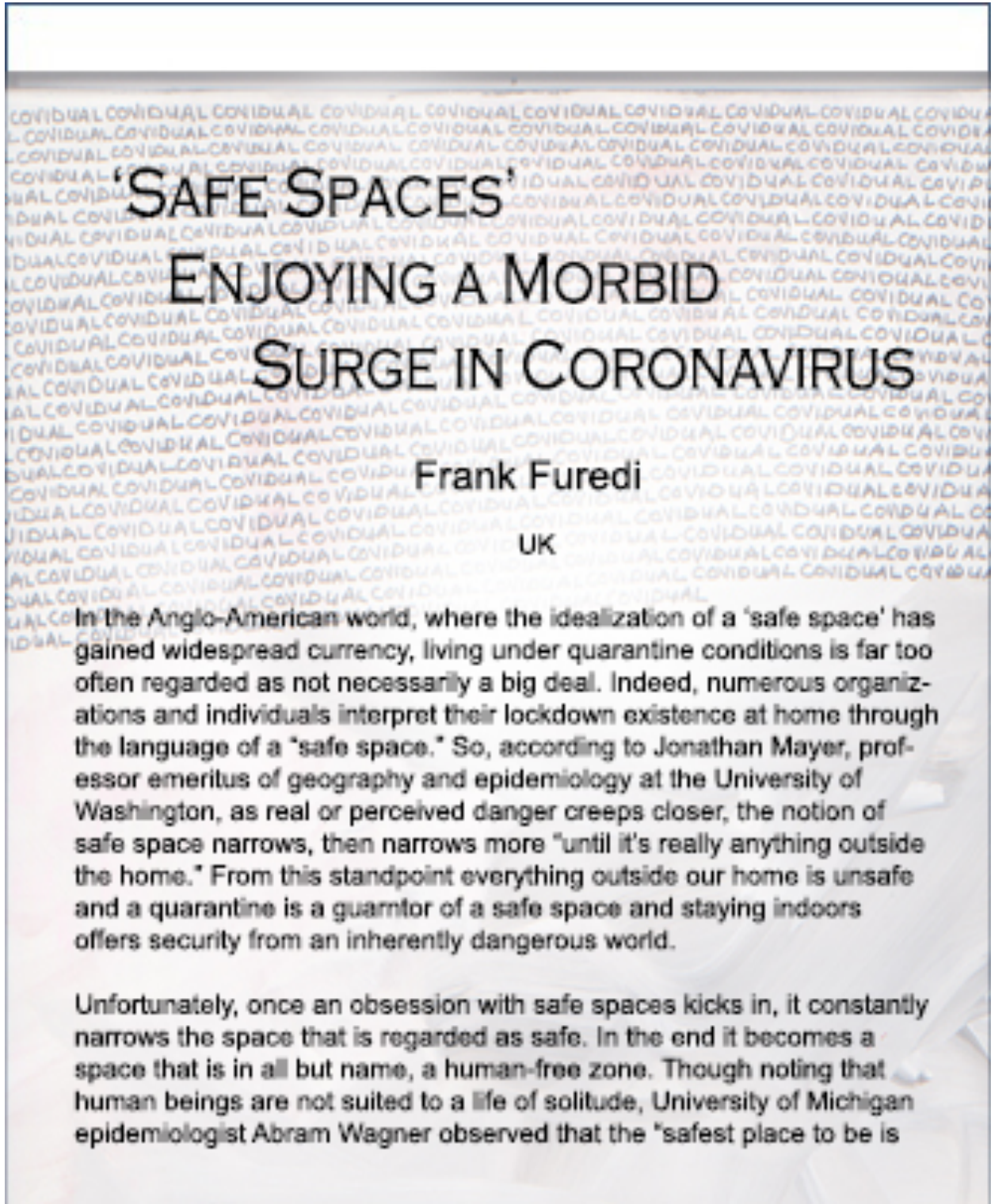
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somewhere where no other humans are.” In the absence of an entirely human-free zone there is

the promise of a digital safe space. [For example](#), the Jefferson College of Nursing offers a “safe space for nurses to share their coronavirus fears.”

Safe space is a quarantine from judgment

It is entirely understandable that people fear the threat posed by the coronavirus and do what they can to keep themselves and their families safe from becoming contaminated by this virus. However, it is important to make a distinction between the sensible precautions that are necessary to protect ourselves from a specific threat to our health, and how we respond to the normal insecurities of human existence.

In recent times the idea of ‘safe space’ emerged to manage the sense of malaise and insecurities of everyday life. It is important to note that space represents not merely physical but also symbolic, psychological and cultural qualities. In some instances, a safe space connotes the idea of protecting people from physical harm. However, when the term safe space became a media talking point a decade ago, it referred not to a response to a pandemic but a movement of university students who were demanding to be insulated from offensive and triggering ideas. Today, even in the midst of the corona-virus epidemic (and maybe more expressly so), the quest for a safe space conveys a similar sentiment.

“A few days ago, I had the pleasure to participate and be part of a [virtual safe space](#),” wrote [Daniela Zelaya Raudales in a YWCA blog](#) titled “How virtual safe spaces can help women during the COVID-19 epidemic.” So how are women helped by a virtual safe space? According to the author, “a virtual safe space is, at its essence, an online place where all people present are encouraged to share their experiences, opinions, ideas and feelings without fear of judgment.” In other words, a space is safe because it protects people from judgment.

Keeping judgment at bay is also the motive that underpins one peer network of physicians operating during COVID-19. [According to Dr. Mamta Gautam](#), a psychiatrist who organized the initiative, “what we do is provide a safe space,” where people can “share thoughts and feelings....without any judgment.”

A plea for queer safe spaces during the lockdown echoes the need for protection from judgment. “Having a space where LGBTQ people can simply exist in their own skin and experience, without judgment,” can apparently “be enormously beneficial,” [contends a columnist for Vox](#).

When I carried out [a content analysis of documents](#) calling for safe spaces in 2016-17, I was struck by the regularity with which the avoidance of judgment was featured as the key objective. Not much has changed. As was the case on campuses in the pre-pandemic era, so today *a safe space promises to provide a quarantine from the threat of judgment*. Contemporary elite culture has become estranged from moral judgment. It frequently communicates the idea that judgment is inherently harmful and it therefore incites people to quarantine themselves from criticism and judgment.

***Non-judgmentalism has become a commanding value,
it can do little to actually make people feel safe.***

A safe space can be conceptualized as an *inverted quarantine*. Unlike a traditional quarantine, which seeks to isolate a disease to keep it spreading to the public, an inverted quarantine represents the opposite impulse of people [isolating themselves from the harms that they perceive as threatening them](#). Inverted quarantine constitutes a response to the understandable concern that the human condition is inherently uncertain. It appears that during this pandemic—at least for some—the justification for a traditional quarantine has become indistinguishable from the aspiration for a judgment-free safe space. That many people are emotionally drawn towards practices that promise to protect them from judgment is not surprising. From an early age, school children are socialized into the commanding pedagogic values of empathy, self-esteem, and unconditionally respecting the view of others. With so much time and resources devoted to affirming the identity of young people it is not surprising that they believe that they have a right to be validated. So, when they arrive at college, they regard an ideal classroom environment as one where themselves and their views are accepted and affirmed. When they leave university for the world of work, their previous experience and socialization disposes them to expect their employers to continue to validate their identity and not to be judged.

Though non-judgmentalism has become a commanding value, it can do little to actually make people feel safe. Those who are insecure will always feel that they are being judged. Perversely the retreat into “safe spaces” is likely to enhance the sense of insecurity. That is one reason why so many people fear stepping outside their door, once the lockdown ends.

Experience shows that the quest for personal safety is not simply a response to external threats but increasingly a reaction to the internal turmoil associated with existential insecurity. Since existential insecurity is an integral element of the human condition in a world of uncertainty, it is likely that the quest for safety will be a never-ending feature of life.

The most important downside here is that this quest distracts people from attempting to gain a measure of control over their affairs. Control requires a willingness to attempt to manage and live with uncertainty. And the most effective way of gaining that control is through the use of judgment. The use of judgment is historically expressed through the Aristotelian virtue of Prudence, which refers to the ability to govern and discipline oneself through the use of reason. As a virtue, Prudence derives, in part, from the ancient Greek concept of *phronesis*, which translates into the term practical wisdom. Prudence conveys an ability to recognize and follow the most suitable or sensible course of action. The acquisition of practical wisdom relies on the use of judgment.

In the current pandemic, when we are all forced to engage with a life of uncertainty, it is through acts of judgment followed by deliberation and debate that communities will learn to deal with adversity and acquire a measure of control over their lives. But to achieve that objective we need leave our safe spaces, re-learn the art of judgment, and as somebody once said “put away our childish things.”

Frank Furedi, is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Kent in the UK. He is the author of the forthcoming, *Why Borders Matter: Why Humanity Must Relearn The Art of Drawing Borders* (June 2020). He is also the author of *How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the 21st Century* (2018). frank.furedi@gmail.com <https://www.frankfuredi.com/>

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