

Impossibly Living in Possibility

Science and nature as mentors in challenging times

“Do you live alone?” asked my neighbor, an emergency room doctor.

“Just me and my dog,” I said.

“Perfect,” she said. “That’s the best thing. You can stay safer that way.”

Although I live alone, I never feel lonely, because as soon as I step outside my door I enter the rush, and crush, of New York City life. To put a twist on Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* lyrics, I *always* liked the quiet before. But the quiet caused by COVID-19 is filled with grief for what we’ve lost.

New York’s governor, Andrew Cuomo, has observed that the virus can spread among the vulnerable “like fire through dry grass.” And the novel coronavirus has definitely torched the grass of the city’s street life. Fortunately, I live close to both Central Park and Riverside Park, two of the largest and most diverse natural areas that coexist within the urban landscape. I’m in these parks every day with my dog. I go when I’m depleted, and emerge restored. I go when I’m happy, and emerge with even more joy. Parks literally breathe with us and for us. And with this particular virus circulating, it’s my breath that I’m most grateful for.

With so many of the places we normally visit shuttered, the parks have taken on even more importance.

They’ve become our everything: our classrooms, theaters and concert halls, laboratories, and living, thriving museums. They’re where science, art, and society intertwine so fully that it’s impossible to separate them. Parks can set the stage to unite us, with nature and with one another.

Ten years ago, my apartment building caught fire, and I learned viscerally that fire is an irreversible chemical process. A pile of ash cannot be transformed back into its original form, no matter how much we work, pray, or pay. But ash isn’t all that remains from what was lost. There is also food for the future. When nature endures a fire, the scorched earth teems with life and possibility that in time will break through in ways that couldn’t happen before the fire. That’s the task that we face now, as we lift our gaze, peer outside our doors, and begin to reopen and rebuild from what remains.

In addition to looking to the parks to help me cope, I have found comfort in the concept of deep time. When an asteroid struck the Earth 66 million years ago, it was tragic and hopeful. It wiped out 80 percent of plant and animal species on Earth, and without it we wouldn’t be here. Like the fungi that rise up and over a fallen tree in the park, our ancestors were the life that teemed below the surface in the wake

of that asteroid. We’re here not in spite of the asteroid, but because of it.

As we come to grips with the idea that we may have to live alongside this virus for years, we’ve turned our attention to adaptation, just as nature does when a massive change occurs. Many of us have lost loved ones, livelihoods, and dreams to this virus. Now we are forced to reimagine and redesign our lives with these casualties. In our own individual ways, we’re tending the micro garden that lies below the surface, just out of harm’s reach, to bring forth new life while honoring our losses. It’s a delicate balancing act, but we needn’t face it alone.

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Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir, Central Park

