

Corona Chronicle

Week 38

Wednesday, Dec. 2nd

Going for a long walk in late November-early December in New England can be a challenge for one who delights in the beauties of nature. Why? All those wonderful colors we are blessed with throughout the rest of the year – from the dark red nubs of the new tree-buds in early spring through the last of fall's colors (a few reds and oranges, but mostly yellows) – have deserted us. What are we left with? On my six-mile roundtrip walk today in the Watuppa Reservation – from the intersection of Riggerbach and Wilson Roads, where I usually leave my car, to the entrance to Firetower Road, just off Yellow Hill Road (a very poorly-maintained road best done on foot!) – I mostly saw browns and greys. The browns, were of course both the leaves on the ground and the brown of the American beech leaves which cling stubbornly to these trees all winter, and the brown of dried pine needles which have fallen to the ground. Also the trunks of so many bare trees, although these run from brown to grey (alas, almost no white birch trees in this area!). The greys are, in addition to the just-mentioned grey tree trunks, our ubiquitous New England field stones, and in the woods (especially this time of year when you can see so much further in) the remnants of old stone walls. Since we have plenty of pine trees in the Southeastern Massachusetts Bioreserve, this study in brown and grey is also relieved by the dark green of their needles. And if you are lucky, you might have a blue sky overhead, with a fluffy white cloud or two. When I started out, there was a blue sky, and I greatly enjoyed the warmth of the sun and the sparkle of its light on the water as I crossed the causeway at the top of North Watuppa Pond. But soon it clouded over and my sky was only grey.

And yet I was excited by this walk because I had never walked so far on Yellow Hill Road before – all the way to the entrance to Firetower Road. The fire tower, on Copicut Hill, is the highest point in the area for miles around (I once climbed up the tower and saw the view all around, but that time I was taken there by car) – although the hill itself is less than 400 feet above sea level. Nevertheless, to walk somewhere in Fall River that just keeps going up and up and up – but gradually (not like those terribly steep streets that connect North Main Street to Highland Ave.) – this was a pleasure. The higher I walked, the worse the road got (not a problem for a pedestrian), and the quieter everything got. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the air even seemed to thin out, as it does in real mountains.

This experience of discovering a new area right in my own town is somehow more exciting than if I had traveled to a faraway place where of course I expected everything to be new to me – it connects me to myths and fairytales where people are always walking right by the entrances to whole other worlds, only they don't know what lies right beneath their feet or just out of their line of vision. At one point along the road I saw a semi-clearing with a stand of American beech trees gathered together as if for a meeting with one another, and at another point I saw two beech trees that had grown so closely together, one seemed to lean back into the other, the second one embracing the first. For some reason when I am walking like this in this “brown and grey” time of year I think of C.S. Lewis and his friend J.R.R. Tolkien, and their other writing friends who called themselves the Inklings. Perhaps it is the grey sky (which is so common in England) or the ruins of stone walls (which makes me think of the “Lord of the Rings” world)...and also my fantasy that there would be a cozy pub with an open hearth just around the corner where I could reward myself for all this walking, as this group would do after a long tramp! And I wondered as I walked, what this group *talked* about while they walked – sometimes *talking* really ruins a good walk. Although in some ways I long for a walking companion (and often I do have the pleasure of Mark and/or Lev at my side), I know that I always *notice* things in nature much more acutely when I am alone.

What sorts of subjects would go with this landscape? A little research has now informed me that the sorts of things that the “Inklings” were likely to discuss were theology, philosophy, ancient Norse myth, and Old Icelandic (both the myths and the language, I presume, Tolkien having been a linguist). Mostly they discussed these things in indoor places, but Lewis (known by his friends as “Jack”) and his brother Warnie were famous for their long, fast walks (sounds like Mark and Lev!). Apparently Tolkien was a slower walker, who liked to pause to notice and admire things (more like me!). But I found this passage from Lewis' 1955 memoir, *Surprised by Joy: the Shape of My Early Life*, where Lewis writes about walking, and surprisingly, his feelings about walking and talking are rather like mine:

Walking and talking are two very great pleasures, but it is a mistake to combine them. Our own noise blots out the sounds and silences of the outdoor world; and talking leads almost inevitably to smoking, and then farewell to nature as far as one of our senses is concerned. The only friend to walk with is one ... who so exactly shares your taste for each mood of the countryside that a glance, a halt, or at most a nudge, is enough to assure us that the pleasure is shared.

Apparently Tolkien *talked* too much on these walks, but Jack and Warnie, who had been taking great long walks since their shared childhood in Ireland (their family never had a car, and Lewis remained without one for his entire life), these two could communicate with silent gestures.

So I was thinking about these lovers of walking and writers of myth-like fantasies dealing with wonder, magic, good and evil, who often walked *together* over in England, on the one hand, and about one of my first writing-inspirations, Henry David Thoreau, who usually walked *alone* (although occasionally, yes, with Emerson, who I imagine also probably *talked* too much!) here in New England. I have a collection of his journal-writings from 1837 – 1861 (which I purchased at the special 2017 Concord Museum’s exhibition in honor of the bicentennial of his birth). It is not the type of book that you sit down to read straight through (I tried!), but it is great to be able to look up a particular date and see what Henry was thinking that day. Here is his entry from December 4th, 1856, surprisingly like mine today, a short disquisition on *color*:

Dec. 4. Saw and heard cheep faintly one little tree sparrow, the neat chestnut crowned and winged and white-barred bird, perched on a large and solitary white birch. So clean and tough, made to withstand the winter. This color reminds me of the upper side of the shrub oak leaf. I love the homely colors of Nature at this season, - her strong wholesome browns, her sober and primeval grays, her celestial blue, her vivacious green, her pure, cold, snowy white.

I will be glad when that “snowy white” comes. Although Thoreau sounds quite cheerful here about early December’s more subdued palette, in another entry around this time of year (with no snow yet), he remarks that the real beauty to be seen now is at night – in the starry sky.

That is something that we who live in cities in the modern age miss – a sky jammed full of stars. Of course, it’s still up there. But we can’t see it. When I was a teenager in high school, my family (which had taken up skiing a few years before) began to go to a new ski resort in West Virginia. The surrounding area was as far from being built-up as you can imagine. We used to stay at a farmhouse where Mrs. Schaffer, a farm widow, took in families and fed them big family-style suppers and breakfasts. I remember one night after supper I put on my long winter coat and went out and lay down in the snow to gaze at the most beautiful night sky, so full of stars, that I had ever seen. I stayed there, wrapped in my coat and not at all feeling the cold, for a long time, just mesmerized.

And what does all this have to do with this pandemic period? A lot, really. For almost a year now we have not been able to do so many of the normal things we humans do to enjoy ourselves: no parties, no gatherings in large groups, no going to plays, movies (in a theater), concerts, for most of us no restaurants (except for takeout), and barely seeing our friends, unless it is outdoors and socially-distanced, or in online get-togethers. But one thing we *can* do is get out in nature – whether to bike, run or walk (and I am hoping, soon, to cross-country ski!). We can do it alone, or with a companion (whether two- or four-legged).

But it can be challenging (as I said at the opening of this entry) to see the beauty in each and every walk. Sometimes you just walk for exercise. But I prefer to find something special in each walk, if possible. Today it was the excitement of walking somewhere new, and up to the highest point in the area for miles around. The colors were dull, but the trees lent themselves to my imagination. Perhaps that stand of beeches was a kind of “sacred grove” where the fairies dance at night beneath the starry sky.

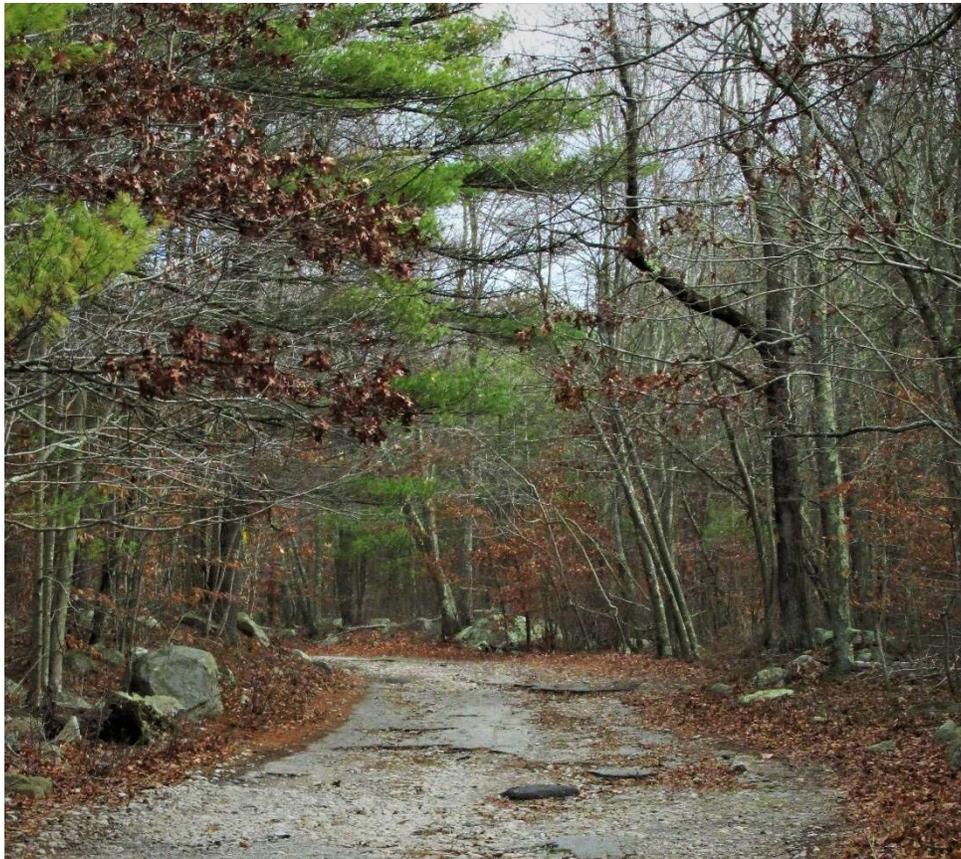
And another thing we can do during this pandemic is to *read* – a nice indoor activity that is especially delicious on days when the weather is too horrible for walking. I looked up, for inspiration, a website that offered me 160 quotations from famous (or somewhat famous) writers about reading. They reminded me that most of what we miss now – gathering with others, travel, companionship, the excitement, perhaps, of making a new friend, and many, many other experiences – all can be found in *good books*.

Fall River’s public library bears the inscription across its façade: “The People’s University.” Yes, our public libraries can be sources for our learning and education; but they can also be portals (more realistically so than any “sacred groves” of trees or other doorways-in-disguise I might encounter on my walks) to whole other worlds, our vehicles for meeting and getting to know intimately people who live across the globe, or across *time*, centuries or even millennia ago. One 17th-century essayist, Joseph Addison said “reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body,” which seems to nicely connect walking and reading. However, there were many more quotations on reading that moved me much more. I have selected two of my favorites which I offer you below:

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.” – **James Baldwin**

“A book is a garden, an orchard, a storehouse, a party, a company by the way, a counselor, a multitude of counselors.”– Charles Baudelaire

This week we have reached the number of 271,000 in fatalities due to the coronavirus. I hope my musings on walking and reading have not seemed too blithe in the face of such statistics. But we who are alive must learn how to live in such a way that we do not spread the virus (if we unknowingly carry it) – and, in addition, we must keep up our *joy* in living – even when the landscape is mostly brown and grey. We have to learn how to *train our attention* to the beauty that is still all around us. To possess this quality is to be imbued with a super-power. And how do we acquire it? Well, this is just me, but I recommend walking (especially in a natural setting), and reading, and of course as a cantor I must not forget to mention *music* – but that is a topic for another day.



Near the summit of Copicut Hill on Yellow Hill Road, Watuppa Reservation