



MY WEEK

Alvin Hall



Bucolic feelings as nature reclaims the city

“Those birds are awfully noisy,” a friend said as we sat, socially distanced, in the Tudor City Greens garden outside his apartment building in New York. Before I could react, he added: “And we’re in Midtown!” There was almost no traffic in Manhattan – an unbelievable occurrence. Without the noise, we could actually hear the cacophonous spring awakening. We looked up at the tree above us and there, perched amid the green sprouting leaves, was a bright red cardinal, chirping happily.

Being so close to full-bodied nature in the middle of the city felt, I will admit, a bit eerie, like the moment in a science-fiction film just before strange things happen. However, the closeness also made me wonder: what other amazing natural sights and sounds could I discover in the many parks scattered throughout the city and along the rivers?

I had been in the habit of taking five-mile walks every other day for exercise, alone or with a friend, looking for architectural wonders, public art and commemorative statues. Inspired by the chirping

cardinal, I extended those walks to 10 miles or more, focusing on the natural world and new terrain.

I covered a lot of ground, always on foot: Battery Park in Lower Manhattan, Riverside and Morningside Parks on the West Side, Carl Shurz and Marcus Garvey Parks on the East Side, morning saunters along the planted walkways by the Harlem and Hudson Rivers, and many mid-afternoon strolls to Central Park.

The flowering trees were the most dazzling. The abundance of blossoms – all white, pale pink, light yellow-green, or striated crimson and white – were like bursts of floral fireworks, especially when standing solo against a cloudless, azure sky. Sometimes the trees were in properly spaced pairs, naturally framing a majestic apartment tower not far away. When planted in a sequence along a curving path, as the Japanese cherry trees are in the Shakespeare Garden in Central Park, the trees called to mind dancers sequentially popping out of boxes at Radio City Music Hall wearing floral-inspired costumes. The beauty and the associations took my mind, if only for a minute, off the dark realities of the pandemic.

Another friend with whom I took the longest walks – more than 13 miles one day – took photographs of all the colourful flowers we saw. Our trips took

longer than expected because it seemed negligent not to appreciate all the types and hues of tulips and alliums planted among the varieties of azaleas, hydrangeas, rhododendrons and other perennials in gardens from Battery Park to Harlem and further north.

I am partial to settings that are cultivated to look wild, such as parts of Central Park. In these areas, it didn’t feel like we were in a pandemic. The dappled light, the smell of the moss, the gurgling of a nearby stream – and almost no people – transported us.

One day a cluster of birds were chirping and fluttering so raucously overhead that my friend thought there might be a predator nearby that we, not the birds, should be worried about. Another time, we came upon a pond in which every rock had four, five, sometimes six turtles crowded together, sunning themselves. An egret stood nearby while a pair of geese with four fuzzy goslings paddled past. We looked at each other and simultaneously said: “So bucolic”, before bursting out in wild laughter.

As the city begins to reopen, I realise that nature became both the primary focus of all my walks and an emotional necessity. Each walk reminded me of the importance of taking time to experience nature’s eternal renewal and varied splendour, and ask what I can do to maintain, even expand, this naturally occurring asset, especially across the man-made wonder that is the Big Apple.

MOVING WITH THE TIMES

I have walked and thought a lot this week. Being in motion, striding rather than sitting in one place, made it easier for me to breathe deeply, to calm and focus myself, and to start to unravel my feelings. As a black man in America, it is impossible for me not to imagine waking up and seeing one of my brothers or sisters, or any of my nephews, nieces, cousins, or best friends in the morning’s news. The injustice and its long lineage feel personal. They feel even closer. They feel unshakable.

How do I relax the knot in my gut? I wake up with it and I go to bed with it. I talked to a few long-time friends and texted others. Some could show by their pitch-perfect words that they empathised and cared. Some couldn’t. I was left wondering, why couldn’t they, what didn’t they see? This just added to the level of hurt that was swirling ever higher in my heart.

When I got back to my apartment after these walks, I sat in my living room and listened to music, like *Tryin’ Times* by Roberta Flack and *What’s Going On* by Marvin Gaye, over and over. They were soothing, but didn’t quite touch or provide relief from the cycle of sadness, frustration and anger that was looping through me.

And so I went for another walk, this time with hundreds of others. The breadth and diversity of people involved were far more than I had expected.

It made me feel hopeful, maybe for the first time in days. The commitment and passion of the marchers when they chanted in unison “Black Lives Matter” was what I needed to hear, to see, to feel, to believe this week, next week and in the many weeks to come, until all of America – and the world – agrees.

