



Thin Places 2020/21

a term from Celtic spirituality --indicating places in nature, and spirit, where the veil between this world and the Other, is “thin” and offers a new perspective

www.dirt-mag.com/special-spots/thin-places

2020: Shadows, Spirit Rocks, Wounded Places, Covid Kaleidoscopic, Covid Cemetery

2021: Covid Walking, Covid MoonVision, Davis Woodlands, Sphinx as Spirit Animal

Visiting wounded places

Risk getting lost, feeling lost. Then trust you can find your way back. Spring 2020

Places, like people, get wounded. Vandalism, neglect, insensitivity, overuse and the forces of nature all have their way with places held special. When I visit a wounded place, several feelings present, often at once. Anger is the loudest with its judging, blaming, vengeful tones. Quietly, on the sidelines, is the sadness and the maybe identifying with the Place (*Am I wounded?*). There's nostalgia for what the place used to be and maybe a flicker of caretaking, how to help the place.

That ice and snow storm of this winter was the most dramatic natural wounding event in a long time. The evidence is still so clear and graphic: all those snapped leaders and branches, those hanging, dangling limbs.

After the shock of it all, I began deliberately going out to see more, to learn about human nature from nature. Somehow, surprise encounters with damaged or

misshapen nature was soothing. There was information about pain and repair.



Sunsets, glistening lakes, eagles in trees, budding bushes are OK, but only a small, distracting, part of the story. The relentless search for beauty often keeps us safe from the distress and pain needed for renewal, repair and another beginning. Walks in

damaged nature can help us learn to just be with the hurt, to see the larger forces and rhythms at work: that things change over The Seasons and each day and night. The creeks and rivers keep flowing, the earth sprouts, the rain falls. There is a vitality in destruction, offering the possibility of awe and even joy, seeing evidence of that big, quiet, slow, sacred rhythm of death, dormancy, budding, fruiting and decay. If the time is right, we may even feel a welcomed and comforted part of it all. At work here on the margins of nature are the lesser, fleeting, small gods. They can be encountered. But first, no planned “hikes,” no guidebooks. Trust your animal mind, your intuition, your hunches. Risk getting lost, and feeling “lost.” Then trust you can find your way back.

Start at railroad tracks, abandoned lots, swales, even curbs. See what’s washed up from the Hudson at Plum Point, those tires on the shore of Wickham Lake or what the beavers did to this tree at Cascade Lake. Let me know what you find.

rustic@warwick.net

Daniel Mack

The kaleidoscope summer

| MAY 2020 |

As our old ways continue to get altered, new ways do seem to get revealed. It reminds me of nothing so much as looking through a kaleidoscope: The same stuff, twisted up, jumbled and, yes, re-ordered. It's not just Chaos, but a New Order I'm learning to see.

The natural world, in its indifferent way, brought Covid and provoked the big slowdown, but not a shutdown. More of us at home noticed and enjoyed buds, sprouts, bees, watching birds nest and the rhythms of pets. Without the rat-a-tat cascading of appointments, programs, events, there was more organic-based activity: walking, meandering, wandering, weeding, planting. Time shifted from the urgent "now" to "this week," then "soon." Some things emerge clearer at slower, lower energies: smells, moods, moving shadows. Daily life is more a meditation than it used to be. That righteous impatience of last year's fully scheduled life now seems so unfashionable.

"Home" for better and worse, is no longer just a waystation. It's the epicenter, moving from background to foreground. Incidental

activities have taken on importance. So care, repair, getting, preparing food have taken on more personal meaning, recalling worldwide traditions of household spirits and deities that have always lived with us.

Outside, too, that kaleidoscope image has helped me find new places close to home, thin places that hold and reflect this new hybrid world. That huge, 10-acre Sanfordville School solar field in Warwick is a window into this reconfigured world of nature, science, culture, history all jumbled up together. There's easy access with a 10-foot-wide mowed grassy path around a massive gleaming solar array, with warning signs of Caution High Voltage and Area Under Surveillance. There's a 9/11 Peace Memorial, a lively pond, treacherous groundhog holes and an old farm cemetery. There are angry piles of brush, dead trees and fallen limbs. I half-expected to see ghosts of students lost and smell sulphur hissing out of some crack from hell. Go walk around. It's right off Route 94, that old Lenape trail, in use for hundreds of years.

Cemeteries feel just right

DANIEL MACK JUL 2020 |



Extraordinary times call for imaginative responses. Forget the AT, the Preserves, the Parks. Go to the cemeteries, for better and worse, the mirrors of our time. With this surge of planetary Covid mortality, the Death Energy in the air is quite high. Just

being in a cemetery helps us recognize – and not ignore or distract ourselves from – this fact. Cemeteries are theme parks to the dead. Once or twice a month, my grandfather would take me to the cemetery in Rochester to “visit” family gravestones. There would be a few stories and moments of quiet. It normalized something, as an 8-year-old, I found so naturally alien.

But cemeteries are about much more than death. Many were designed by landscape architects and have a quiet beauty that has evolved into something between wabi-sabi and kitsch. There’s a jumble, a visual carnival, of heights, materials, inscriptions, personal plantings, balloons, pinwheels and lichen. Then there are the “others” of graveyards: the animals and birds who live comfortably closer to life and death than we humans. Being in a cemetery is allowing time for several storylines to unfold and intertwine. You are invited into the process of organic discovery.

I favor the well-tended Warwick Cemetery on Route 94 at Route 17A. In 1868, these 65-acres were formally designated a cemetery. There are many, many large maples which I guess were part of the

original planting. And there are still lots of grand, dead standing pines as foils to the vibrant maples.

This land was part of the last great Lenape village, Mistucky, which saw its heyday in the late 1600s, till the diseases and alcohol that came with the European settlers wiped out the sustainability of the Lenape culture. So this particular cemetery is also a reminder of a cultural death or evolution.

Visiting right now, you might see the red-tail hawks who nest nearby and feed on the plentiful chipmunks living beneath the gravestones. Recently, my friend David spent 15 enchanted minutes within a few feet of this beautiful hawk.

And you? What cemeteries do you like?
Please let me know: rustic@warwick.net.

Second Wave walking

DANIEL MACK

| 24 DEC 2020 | 12:16

What place could I possibly recommend you visit that could be any more interesting than your own head, and heart, in this Covid Time? We now know a lot more about it, both medically and spiritually. In general, everything is more fractured, iffy, blurry, ambiguous. The Old Rules do not work as well. What to do? Let's consult Nature to learn more about the unnatural patience and tolerance of ambiguity that we seem to need right now, and for the foreseeable future. The Organic has ways often alien to humans: things evolve, reveal, season, cook, wait, wither, ripen. Things are no longer either this or that. They blur, more like a snow globe. Looking to the natural world seems to help rebalance. I offer a few nearby nature adventures.

For a short, dreamy outing, go to Lower Wisner Road, off Wisner Road behind Merchant's Square. It runs through the Rabbit Run Farm, which is preserved in perpetuity. There's a small off-road parking area and it's a nice walk down the sleepy road with wide open vistas of farmland.

You know you're in the right place when you see the bluebird nesting boxes on top of fence posts. You may see some bluebirds overwintering here. For the Lenape, they were the sign of the spirit that drives off the gods of winter. The Orange County Audubon Society uses this area for its Climate Watch Bird Count, coming up in February. Maybe you want to [help out](#)? Further up, walking on Iron Forge Road is another adventure all by itself. It's darker, more historical, with more water views of Long House Creek and some falls.



The other adventure is longer and more mysterious. It's the 10-mile Clinton Road in West Milford, connecting Warwick Turnpike to Route 23. It starts at the

modest Lake Lookover community and winds through the wild 15,000 acres of the Pequannock Watershed. There are good public parking and hiking areas. It's the only local road I know with its own Wikipedia entry, its own citation in *Weird New Jersey* and a recent movie made about it. It might be the perfect Thin Place for this Second Wave of Covid.

Moonbeam vision

DANIEL MACK FEB 2021 | 01:31

We may be emerging from this collective trauma, or not. We're still adjusting to the bald, painful fact that some old forms and ways are just not coming back.

Speaking of waiting on the past, a quick digression: My house was built in 1906 and still holds evidence of another time when old forms lingered and disappeared. The barn was built as a carriage house, for the carriage, two stalls for horses, a loft for hay and a built-in outhouse for the help. There's still hay, now well over 100 years old, in the feeders. I've left it there. Just in case the horses come back.

So, in these times of change, are there places to go, to visit, that may offer any comfort or perspective? I do have a few ideas.

* Consider it's not so much where to go, but how to go. There's a term, *derive* (da-reev) that describes a way to walk around and explore in a slight dreamlike state. Staying casual, without overwhelming purpose, alert to dappled light. Time is slower, seasonal. Smells emerge. It's not a hike, a

workout, exercise or even “a walk.” It’s more of a wandering, an exploration of the time of now. Please don’t bother counting steps.

* No journey necessary: In your neighborhood, now is the time of forsythia. Where’s your favorite patch? Tell someone about it. And the lilacs are coming and the phlox.

* Contact the elements, things that move slowly: light, water, clouds, air, that are here and gone. Go to the waters of Fitzgerald Falls, Wawayanda Lake, the Wallkill River. See the skies and fields on The Drive up to Ochs Orchards, The Drive past the Brady Farm and Moe Mountain and the black dirt fields in Pine Island.



* Moonlight may be the most important element of all right now. What can we learn

in and from lunar light? Just be quiet, wait for the evening's moonlight and sit there. It's called moon bathing. The April moon comes out around 8 p.m. It's the "egg moon," ripe and fertile with change and life. Oh, and the robins are nesting now.

Sphinx as Covid Spirit Guide

The persisting pandemic has quietly altered, for many people, the sense of place. There is still available the simple, ample beauty of our region: the seasonal changes, the terrain, the vistas, the animals, birds and flowers. But there are emerging needs for “other” layers of place less obvious and predictable to speak to the heightened climate of mortality and melancholy COVID has brought us. We need places to help us rebalance those different worlds we live in: the perceived, the remembered and the imagined.

Ringwood Manor in Ringwood, New Jersey seems to be just such a place for this time. It is a prism of beauty, complex history and renewal. It's an accessible portal to that intersection of Native, New World and European cultures, industry, nature and art. The Ringwood area is rich in magnetite iron, likely contributing to the original inhabitants, the Lenape, considering this especially “charged” and sacred land. Some people are sensitive to such earth forces. Industrious European settlers, though, actively mined and smelted the iron ore for over a century,

deforesting the entire area of trees which were needed for fuel and charcoal.

In 1854, the Hewitt family, from New York, bought the land and started a program of fully reforesting the area and creating a European-inspired estate. It's now part of a 400+ acre park open daily all year round. The Ringwood Manor website has great information on all this.

What really got my interest were the pairs of 18th century statues at the four entrances to the Sunken Italian Gardens. They are Sphinxes, human-headed lions! In New Jersey! What better animal spirit for the Pandemic: a creature of air, earth, fire and water. The sphinx was the enemy of mankind, preying on humans who could not answer her riddle about humans themselves: "What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and upon three in the evening?"

Go see all this for yourself: the buildings, the land and restored forest. Maybe feel the magnetism and the somber presence of these weather-worn Lady-Lion creatures. It's easy to get there and there's no entrance or parking fee this time of year. Check their website first.

