

IKON

Six Lockdown Walks



Artist John Newling and writer Alys Fowler exchange letters on their daily walks, through residential areas and open spaces in Nottingham and Birmingham. Reflecting on the pattern language of these environs and their own behaviours, some happy accidents and moments of connection occur.

Letter: 1/6

From: John Newling

Date: Monday 6 April

Time: 10am

Weather: Sunny intervals and a moderate breeze

Subject: A walk at distance

The first and possibly only route decision on my walk is whether to go left or right outside our gate. I go left.

I pass neighbours' and friends' houses and find myself waving at them. Weirdly I think this helps as if some sweep of air percolates through their walls and makes a greeting. I bring my hand down feeling a bit silly. Before long I have to cross a main road. It reminds me of film footage of the M1 opening in 1959 with a single Morris Minor trudging along the vast

open space of tarmac. I cross the road and think about how the earth is doing a huge spring clean right now; this gives me some solace.

There is, and always has been, a distance between what we hope for and the reality of our world. Distance has been a generator of human endeavours for millennia. Social distancing gives us a chance to think about what we wish for. The earth is getting cleaner and in some ways all of this can be seen as a rehearsal for some of the conditions we need to maintain if we want to survive as a species.

I turn right and start the uphill climb of a private road; always good for a bit of cardiovascular exercise. A private road is what it says. It is a wealthy part of the city. I enjoy walking up this particular road. Even now I get a delicious sense of not being allowed here; a cuckoo, so to speak. It has some beautiful domestic architecture and large front gardens. I have, for many years, followed the growth of some of the road's plants and trees. I also enjoy looking at what is visible in the front windows. Many of the houses are set way back from the road and not much can be seen. I guess this is another kind of social distancing. Occasional glimpses of the people who live in these houses are always a treat, like spotting a rare species. I always want to know what they do for a living.

It is spring, my favourite season, and everything appears to be in a rush to amaze us. I stop to look at the early leaf unfurling on a beautiful beech hedge. Beech trees are very slow growing and lock in lots of carbon. They come into full leaf late in the spring. I once grew nine beech trees for a work and really enjoyed studying how their leaves grew. Nature does not stop for us, but we can stop for it.

When our son was young we used to go collecting conkers. Once, in an area around a private road, we saw a great horse chestnut tree laden with conkers. We started to collect them when someone emerged from the house and shouted "You do not belong here, go away!" In truth the tree was in their front garden so I guess they had a point, but the phrase 'you do not belong here' still hangs around me like some poisonous fog.

Sometimes I walk with a political voice in my head,

"Is there is such a thing as a Daily Mail reader's garden or, for that matter, a Guardian reader's garden?" I wonder.

On walks, I often just stop to look at some plant or building for some time. These are slow time activities that help me know where I am.

Out of breath, I reach the top of the private road and start to meander through other places.

I see someone about fifty metres away walking towards me. I start to cross the road at the same time as they do; a shadow dance of sorts. I then move back and we both laugh. As we pass each other we wave. Perhaps it is "not waving but drowning". However, I feel a small sense of wellbeing from the wave.

I am overwhelmed with a desire to shake a hand or give someone a hug; such greetings do mean so much. The handshakes, hugs and smiles are surely what will narrow the distance between us. We will mind the gap and be better for it.

Just maybe all this awfulness will help us move away from our predilection for thinking exclusively in a binary of blame/ virtue. We are a fragile species that has the capacity to dazzle like the blossoms I am seeing.

Distancing is strange thing. I pass a queue of people waiting to go food shopping. I have to say the older people in the queue have a poor idea of what six feet is. I work out that if their idea of six feet is true then they would all be four feet tall. Perhaps they are scared someone will fill the gap; very odd. I have also noticed that when an area is given speed restrictions drivers seem to want to go to that limit, so it could be the same with social distancing. Perhaps when we are told a specific distance we want to be at or on that limit. We are all frightened and keen to comply to the letter so to speak.

I am making my way to a local park. I love parks. For me they are the freely given lungs of our cities. I walk briskly through the park; there are more people here than I expected. It is the park that Ann and I go to at least once a week. It is a park favoured by dog walkers. I laugh to myself as I remember that, in the Italian lockdown many dogs have been reported as exhausted as they've been passed between friends for walking. Italian rules allowed a walk with a dog. Not sure if this true or not.

I cut down a short road lined on either side with town houses. Each house has a small back garden and a front door onto the pavement. I have walked this road for several decades now. For a while the houses looked shabby and a bit neglected although structurally very solid. Then a few years back someone, maybe a family, moved in and painted their front door and window sills. They also placed potted plants on the pavement. Slowly the whole street took to doing similar things and it became a fine place. Now many of the houses have plants outside. It is delight to walk along. Significantly I have never seen any damage done to these plants. It is amazing how much change can be generated by painting a front door. I notice the virus is spreading to the adjoining streets. Such things bring a sense of care to place.

I pass the "pink shop" on my way back. The pink shop is painted grey. It has been like this for many years but is still, on occasion, referred to as the pink shop. When Ann and I moved into the area some kind people gave us directions to a grocery shop via the pink shop, but we couldn't find it. This was because it was no longer pink. Such landmarks abide in conversational form in many areas; local histories acting as guides.

I notice many houses have teddy bears in their windows. I found out this is for mums and dads who take their children on a bear hunt. This thought lifts that poisonous fog and makes me less inclined to fall out with my own species.

I am home. I wash my hands and put the kettle on.



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