

The Last Pandemic Walk



Hudson River at sunrise, as seen from the South Overlook

June 5, 2020. Has the Pandemic changed me? My daughter's opinion is that it has not. She says that my inner life has always been my driving force, and it is what drives me now. I am just not that affected by events external, even cataclysmic ones. She makes a good point.

The Pandemic is not over. Even though vaccines have become widely available, people still come down with Covid and they still die of it, though fewer than a year ago. And people are still out of work, though fewer than last spring. No day will be hailed as the Pandemic's last day, for at best it will fade away. Nevertheless, I am marking this day as my last Pandemic Walk.

Once again, I am at a rock ledge at what I call the South Overlook in Tallman Mountain State Park (Sparkill, New York). It's 5:20AM, just before sunrise.

I drove to the park at 5AM, with wisps of fog hovering over the highway. Initially, I feared that the Hudson River would be shrouded. Fortunately, I found that the land between highway and river was clear of fog. I walked along the bicycle path, smelling the intensely sweet Honeysuckle vines that are blossoming along its borders, but only dimly seeing the forms of trees and shrubs. The dawn silence was punctuated by the loud call of a Screech Owl high in a nearby tree. The walk to the South Overlook took me about ten minutes.

The South Overlook commands a wonderful view of the river. This morning, the hills of Westchester County, on eastern horizon, are clear, but a big fog bank hovers over the Mario Cuomo Bridge, to the north. I watch it warily, hoping that it is not heading my way, until I satisfy myself that it is stationary. I stand calmly at the cliff edge and reflect on my four hundred and forty-five daily walks, the great majority of them in this park.

Winter in the park was extraordinary. The late fall was cold, but without snow. The river remained ice-free, but the creeks in Piermont Marsh glazed over and then broke up into a mosaic of icy tiles. Snow first fell in mid-December, but only late in winter did it persist on the ground for multiple days. My wife Dallas and I had many snow adventures during this interval. We hiked during snowfalls, when powder clung to trunks and branches and twigs and when all views were soft. We tamped down long trenches with our snowshoes, following the formal trails when we could make them out, or else ad-libbing.



Icy creek in Piermont Marsh



The cliff edge on the day after snow

The days after snow were often crystal clear with a deep blue sky, or more rarely, a pastel blue sky that I suppose is due to ice crystals in the air. Then, views of the river were at their best. The snow lasted weeks, but crusted over after the first few days. We switched to micro-spikes, which are lighter than snowshoes but equally slip-resistant. Even the steep and ice-covered

stairs up Tallman Mountain did not deter us, but rather gave us the sense of accomplishment and freedom.

Spring started out slowly, with just a few budded bushes, followed by early flowers like Dutchman Breeches and Springstar. For a few days a chorus of frogs could be heard at every seasonal pond. When leaves finally appeared, they were lime green and only thinly decorated branches. Their color rapidly deepened and their density increased, so that the canopy now is dense and the forest floor is deeply shadowed.

Here at the South Overlook, the face of the sun finally pokes over the hills of Westchester at 5:36AM, eleven minutes after sunrise. I leave the South overlook and walk the cliff-edge trail, enjoying the interplay of green leaves and orange sunlight. The morning is already warming up. I think that today will be exceptionally warm – like summer, though it be only June.

Have I learned anything about myself during the Pandemic? Back in late April, after Dallas and I were vaccinated, I went on a group hike, arranged by my cousin, with twenty people or more. Afterwards, we sat around in a circle in my cousin's backyard, eating a cake that one of the hikers had brought. It was the first group activity that I'd done in more than a year. I've gone on many enjoyable group hikes over the years, but this one was for me different, special. Perhaps I learned something.

What will I do now? Well, though this is my last Pandemic Walk, I never said that I'll stop walking.

by Bill Menke

Bill Menke is a professor of Earth & Environmental Science at Columbia University, an advocate for open spaces and the preservation of Nature, and an avid hiker and kayaker.

Photos taken by Bill Menke during his 445 Pandemic Walks can be found by Googling "Bill Menke's Slides".



Frogs mating in a seasonal pond