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Opinion: On Earth Day 2020, practice gratitude and mourn the losses, just like in the pandemic

By JUDY BENSON

With the Vietnam War raging on one side of the globe and protests on the other, organizers of the first Earth Day in 1970 could easily have decided that wasn’t the time to rally for the environment. Instead, grassroots groups across the country staged inaugural Earth Day events that drew an estimated 20 million people.

Now, as the 50th anniversary of Earth Day on April 22 falls in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the ArborEarth Festival at the Bartlett Arboretum & Gardens in Stamford has been canceled. Connecticut Sea Grant would have been part of Earth Day events at Mystic Seaport and UConn. Even without official gatherings, though, this year’s Earth Day shouldn’t pass unnoticed. In fact, maybe there’s never been a better time to reflect on our relationship with the planet – pandemic and all.

By now we’ve had more than a month of staying out of our schools and offices and away from everyone but our housemates. For many of us, outdoor walks are the most precious time of day, even though there’s no escaping reminders of the virus – face-mask wearers on the sidewalks, fewer cars traveling the roads, restaurants with parking lots empty save for signs advertising “curb-side take-out.” Blooming dogwoods, peeping frogs and returning ospreys may have never seemed as dear as when they’re experienced while the human race is feeling particularly vulnerable.

Simply enjoying the gifts of nature is a great way to celebrate Earth Day this year. Spend time outdoors, feeling the sun’s warmth, noticing the endlessly imaginative shapes of clouds and the violets that grow in the cracks of pavement. Be grateful for all of it. Holding onto and expressing gratitude is one of the most powerful tools at our disposal for helping us through this crisis. That means valuing what we have – our families, our homes, what we have in our pantries today (even if the toilet paper supply is running low) and most of all our health if we’re fortunate enough to have avoided the infection. Not that we can’t complain sometimes – just don’t let it be the dominant activity.

The importance of appreciating what we have and appreciating nature – these are the complementary messages that the pandemic and Earth Day are sending. Along with that, though, comes a contrary message – there is also much to mourn in this current health crisis and the slower-moving environmental one called climate change. For anyone starting to feel survivor’s guilt about being healthy and secure so far in the pandemic, take comfort. The same is true for our feelings towards nature – we can simultaneously savor its beauty and be sad about its degraded condition. Holding conflicting emotions of gratitude and sorrow is necessary and honest. Together these can motivate us to care and do what we can to preserve the good.

The spring of 2020 will long be remembered for all the challenges and tragedy brought by the pandemic. Could it also be a time when Earth Day’s arrival came when we had the time and inclination to think about how to make a better future? Economist Kate Raworth offers a refreshing perspective on what a world not obsessed with ever-increasing growth but with human thriving that doesn’t wreck the environment might look like.

“So this double-sided challenge to meet the needs of all within the means of the planet, it invites a new shape of progress,” she says, “no longer this ever-rising line of growth, but a sweet spot for humanity, thriving in dynamic balance between the foundation and the ceiling.”

You’ll find this quote in her TED talk:

<https://www.ted.com/talks/kate_raworth_a_healthy_economy_should_be_designed_to_thrive_not_grow?rid=Uw6y9mrTNFYV&utm_source=recommendation&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=explore&utm_term=watchNow>

The 15-minute presentation might be some of the most meaningful time you can spend on or before Earth Day, if you’re hungry for inspiration about the future beyond the pandemic.

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