

Coping These Days can be a Walk in the Park

I'm pretty much not liking the new normal.

I'm working from home these days, and LuAnn isn't happy about having me underfoot. Last Saturday she ordered me out of the house for the entire day, and on Sunday she said, "I don't know where you went yesterday, but go there again." I went again to my old workplace for the day, which was a totally deserted 20,000 square foot building.

Other than that we don't go anywhere or do anything, other than make occasional fearful visits to the grocery store. Every day I retrieve the mail gingerly with two fingers, wondering if our mailperson could be Typhoid Mary or Gary.

Most people's primary concern these days is their health, so it seems a bit counterintuitive to have closed all the health clubs. I used to visit one daily, so recently I was casting about for other exercise options.

I started taking walks last week, for about an hour every day. On my third day heading off in a different direction, I stumbled across the 7th Avenue entrance of Hickory Hill Park, which turned out to be only about two blocks from where I live near City High School. Who knew? I've been in my current house for over 30 years, and I don't remember anyone installing a park there.

Just kidding. It turns out the park has been around since about 1927, and I did attempt a hike there over 25 years ago to try it out. It was in July after a heavy rain, so I was dying of the heat, humidity and sun, up to my ankles in mud and being eaten alive by mosquitos. It was my first (and until recently) last visit.

Anyway, as of this writing I've hiked different trails there four consecutive days and gotten lost the first three consecutive times. At 190 acres, Hickory Hill is huge for an urban park; easily Iowa City's largest. Amelia Earhart may be in there somewhere.

On my last visit, I used a GPS app called maps.me that actually indicates the individual trails and shows your position live. It even has a breadcrumbs mode to track your path. It's free, has no annoying ads, and you can download maps for

offline use. It worked great on my trip to Antarctica, not known for its Internet access or multitudinous cell towers.

If you stick to the now-graveled trails in the park, you're much less likely to lose your way or get bogged down. After thirty seconds of walking, you'd never know you were anywhere near civilization, so vast is the park and so dense are the trees and underbrush.

Every hike is a bit different due to the elevation changes, bridges, creeks, wildlife and diverse native ecosystems. They include Oak-Hickory Savannas, Oak Woodlands, Prairie, Bottomland Forest, and Hillside Seep (springs). I'm guessing the trails may be a bit busier these days, but I never see very many people.

The condition of the park is much improved since Friends of Hickory Hill Park came into being in 1999. It's an all-volunteer 501 (c) 3 nonprofit that has done much to enhance and expand the park. It's always looking for more volunteers and donations, which I'm now happy to be morally obligated to make.

I've hiked a lot of trails in a lot of states and countries, and Hickory Hill (why am I surprised) compares favorably. If you're looking to stretch your legs and breathe fresh air in a scenic area very close by, you can't do much better. And LuAnn wants you out of the house.

Writer's group member Dave Parsons' legs hurt a bit more these days, in a good way.