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Editor's Notebook

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Photo: Sarah Wiggins.

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Sarah Wiggins

Adaptation. It's a difficult fact of life. The realities of recent years have forced the concept upon us as we try to improve our physical and mental health, adjust to our new working conditions, and care for our loved ones. Discomforts require adjustments, some of which have to be substantial. Though sometimes it is the small shifts that become interesting and render something unexpected, leaving a sense of hope in its wake.

Like many faculty, I did not originate from southeastern Massachusetts. I grew up in a small town in rural Arkansas, and my parents' house is situated on a farm with many acres of pastureland. My childhood was spent walking around cows and horses, jumping on hay bales, fishing at the pond, and avoiding snakes. We are aware of the history of the farm and where the original homesteaders built their

cabins and dug their wells, as remnants of rockwork remain and jonquils that were planted all those years ago still bloom along the fence line every spring. I would think about those people whenever I would pick the flowers and bring them to my mom.

I miss it. I miss my family, mostly. But I miss the land - the expansive, quiet pasture where you can view the cattle at

a distance and watch deer pass through the brush and ducks land on the pond. Hardly any people, just chirping insects and birds. I can close my eyes and imagine it, especially through smell - the grass, the dirt, the hay, the inside of my dad's truck, and even the manure - all pleasant. It's funny because I thought that as time marched on, my homesickness would lessen, but it has intensified. I miss it so much that in recent years I have taken to wearing cowboy boots. My happy memories of girlhood include trips to the rodeo with my dad where the gear was necessary attire. So far, I have forgone the hat and belt, but you never know. The boots provide that reminder of home every time I look down and they keep me grounded with my roots.

I now live in an urban space in a quaint neighborhood where we have a small back yard. It's a lovely place, and I'm fortunate and grateful for it, but I miss rural living. From my current home, you have to drive a good distance to find land where you can feel that sense of expansiveness.

Since I couldn't easily retreat to vast swaths of the outdoors, adaptation was necessary, and my home became the focus. How could I connect with dirt and plants just outside the front door? The back yard was off limits because my condo neighbor had worked on it for years and I wanted to respect his vision. Gardeners can be particular. Instead, I turned to a side of the house that had been neglected and features a parking lot with trash and recycling bins. There was a space for a flowerbed that was covered with grass and a patch of ivy that was used as a dump for yard waste. Since it was the only space available, I decided to give it some love.

I steadily brought the area to life by clearing away the grass and ivy, planting perennials, and constructing a stone path in the middle of the bed. Once a dead zone, the bed now sees an array of coreopsis, black-eyed Susan,

I now sit in my little oasis and contemplate how every action and adjustment, large and small, carries meaning and creates an impact, positive and/or negative.

columbine, and foxgloves. A raised bed replaced the ivy for growing vegetables, with wildflowers planted around it.

With this little garden, I feel more connected to nature than ever. Each year I get my hands in the dirt and wonderful smells emerge. Originally, the plan was to beautify with the color, texture, and composition of the plants, but something more magical occurred: wildlife followed. Each spring, a significant variety of bees appear to take advantage of the flowers. It's amazing to stand in

(a racoon, or that opossum, maybe?) but has been forgiven.

As someone who misses the great expanse of a rural upbringing, I have been in wonder with how a parking lot micro garden can yield significant results. So much life can be packed into a tiny area. I started the planting as a desperate maneuver to connect with soil and now realize how random decisions can contribute to the lives of many beings. I now sit in my little oasis and contemplate how every action



Photo: Molly Speece.

the middle of the flowers and watch the bees swarm and listen to their steady hum. Butterflies are constant. Critters are everywhere. I woke up early one morning to spot a opossum walking down the stone path while an adorable family of rabbits have taken up residence in the bed. The rabbits appreciate the leftover sprigs after a winter snowfall. Something with a taste for heirloom tomatoes was enjoying the raised bed this summer

and adjustment, large and small, carries meaning and creates an impact, positive and/or negative. Plans for future planting now involve native species and how to support pollinators. More bees, please! Certain weeds are left to grow while leaves are not raked as often to protect insect life. My condo neighbors probably find me strange spending so much time in such a space, but my new wildlife neighbors find it perfectly natural.



Photo: Molly Speece.

A number of essays in this issue speak to adaptation, especially in taking small steps. Faculty are eager to share some of the adjustments that they have made in the classroom and with their syllabi and assignments in the continual effort to reach and support students. They show how sustainability can be woven into a variety of courses on our campus to meet the needs of the future. We learn how art can be used to confront grief and loss, and to interpret the surroundings of a new home. Others find inspiration and truth through a historical approach and discuss the history of race relations in America. The concept of civil discourse is also addressed, reminding us again that the small things in our daily lives yield meaningful results.



Sarah Wiggins is Professor in the Department of History.