

The elusive giant

By Lauren Harkawik

What's it like to parent during a pandemic? It's difficult, tiring, and humbling. There's a lot to discover in the living room and in the woods. A few years ago, I served on a jury. One of my favorite fellow jurors grew up in Wilmington and, during our downtime, would tell me stories about what it was like to be a kid here in the days when a Socialist camp inhabited Higley Hill each summer.

One of the memories my friend shared was a concrete dinosaur statue hidden in the woods somewhere near the Higley Hill camp. I imagined what this dinosaur might look like, and then I stowed that image away in the attic of my mind. I'll go find it, someday, I thought. Years passed.

Imogene is 4. She had a birthday party right before the pandemic set in. It was the kind of affair that probably sounds like a scene from a horror film to most of us now. We packed everyone into our house: about a dozen of her cohorts and their parents plus our relatives. We crowded around Imogene as she opened presents, then we crowded around her and sang at her, unmasked, until she opened her mouth and blew on her cake, which we then served to everyone in the room. Can you even imagine that?

But what I really want to talk about is the toys. On Imogene's birthday, she received more toys. I say "more" because she already had a ton of them. I've been lamenting, ever since she outgrew her baby toys, that toys don't evaporate once a child outgrows them. They just keep piling up. "This whole house is toys!" I often say, frazzled. And the worst part — the worst part — I thought, as I stood shoulder to shoulder with people watching her open new toys on her birthday, is that she never plays with them. Never.

The thing about the pandemic is that time is moving at an odd pace. Most days, I feel like I don't have enough time. Squeezing parenting, working, and also being a human into each 24-hour period has proven difficult. Parenting and working are nearly impossible to juggle. My brain, it seems, is hardwired to care more about my child than anything else. No matter how deep I may be into writing, if I hear Imogene in the next room — and if, God forbid, she sounds upset — I'm distracted on a mammalian level. So, this period has been days and days of attempted focus broken by my apparent undying and biological love for my child. Send help.

Meanwhile, regardless of my perception of it, all we have is time. Especially on the weekends. Deep, boundless hours to fill. Somewhere in the middle all this time, Garret said, "We should go find that dinosaur in the woods." I nodded the way I used to nod at plans that would likely never come to fruition. There are many hikes, many local sightseeing missions, many day trips we've intended to take since we moved to Wilmington almost 10 years ago. "We should ..." usually prefaces statements about these things, but we rarely follow through. But in this iteration of "We should ..." I forgot about all the time we have now.

For years, I told myself Imogene must just not be the type of kid who likes toys. Or perhaps no kid really likes toys, and toys are just a big sham — a thing companies convince unwitting relatives to purchase at birthdays and holidays to fill the homes of suffering parents. But after her school closed and we shuttered ourselves inside, as if by magic, Imogene started playing with her toys. My jaw dropped as I witnessed her dolls being given names. New meals were served out of her fake kitchen. On Easter, she got an ice cream set, and she served us dozens of plastic ice cream cones. Her imagination blossomed, too. At night, she sat in her room dreaming up stories. When the snow melted, she made mud pies in our yard.

Time. How could I have taken it for granted? I'd never given Imogene the time to play with her toys. Not really. In the Before Times, our weeks comprised Imogene at child

care five days a week while Garret and I worked. Evenings, we'd have dinner and often enough, I'd skip off to cover a meeting while Garret read her stories. Then it was off to bed. Weekends, we'd venture around New England, seeing new little towns, visiting with family or running errands. We didn't relax. We never relaxed. There wasn't any time.

Whatever Garret and I are juggling, for Imogene, the day is wide open during this pandemic, and very suddenly and without prompting from us, she's expanded her own world within our house. She's made it her home. She's slowed down enough to cultivate her imagination. Last night, she told me she's going to become an artist, and minutes later, she'd drawn a series of faces on a chalk board. She's not a prodigy, dear reader, she just has a little time on her hands.

* * *

Speaking of time. We had the time to go look for the dinosaur, so we did. We trudged into the woods where we thought it might be. I spotted bear tracks on the way, and pointed them out the way a kid explorer might. Later, I stepped into a huge vat of mud, so sticky that my shoe stayed behind without me knowing and I took another step directly into the mud. I felt mud on my feet! When is the last time I felt mud on my feet? And I thought to myself, in an 8-year-old's voice, "Quicksand!" Quicksand! When is the last time I thought about quicksand?

I don't hike as much as I should. Perhaps none of us do, but any time I'm in the woods, I feel alive in a way that fills me with possibility, like maybe I'll do this every day, and maybe my version of the Great American Novel is about to beam down into my brain from the leaves above me, the ones with the sparkling sunshine breaking through.

Every once in a while something draws me back to a hike, and I feel it again. That sparkle from the leaves. It's apropos, I think, that what got me to go back to the woods this time was a dinosaur — a creature I've been imagining forever but will never truly see. Well, what got me there was a dinosaur and time, which has, like water on the forest's floor, sprawled itself around us in every direction. We juggle it, we strive for it, it overwhelms us. We discover it.

We didn't find the dinosaur. We may well have been in the completely wrong place; my memory on the directions I'd received was vague. If you have any tips about its whereabouts, I'll welcome them. Even if time starts moving again, it's my hope that we'll keep our feet grounded in the mud and go dinosaur hunting again.



The dinosaur that somehow fails to be found.

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