We have lived in the same house for nearly twenty-five years, six blocks away from the house in which I grew up since moving to Tulsa in 1976 when I was just twelve years old. My Mother still lives in that house. Yet, in spite of living in essentially the same neighborhood for all these years, I never really paid attention to the neighborhood itself. That is, until COVID19. For the past five weeks I've been working at home from my kitchen table, feeling rather cooped up like everyone else around the globe. To restore my energy, get some exercise and feed my soul, I've taken to walking the streets of my neighborhood around five o'clock each day.

After closing my work laptop and donning my running shoes (repurposed into walking shoes since my orthopedist advised that running is no longer good for my fifty-five-year old knees), I set out with earbuds in place to listen to an audiobook or music, or talk to a family member or friend, forging a different path each day. I never really have a plan in mind; I merely start walking. And what I've discovered is that I live in a beautiful neighborhood filled with lovely homes, well-tended yards and friendly people! Some days I walk briskly with a sense of purpose, while others I just stroll and observe. The weather plays into that variation, as does my choice of media. If I decide to listen to my one and only playlist on Apple Music, my pace quickens because that particular collection of songs was curated for my former running days.

The book I began listening to on the very first day of my walking regimen is entitled: “How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy” by Jenny Odell. I had flagged the book earlier this year after noticing it on Former President Barack Obama’s 2019 booklist. It somehow seemed like the perfect choice for my new reality of working from home, using
the Zoom app to participate in meetings all day, and practicing social distancing. The author argues that our attention is our most precious and overdrawn resource, and that we must reclaim it and redirect it toward our natural surroundings. Initially, I was skeptical that Odell’s book was just another rant against our overreliance and overuse of technology in general and social media, in particular. However, as I walked around my neighborhood listening to her words on my iPhone (ironic, perhaps), I started to notice my environs more and feel their presence more deeply. In so doing, I began to relax and set aside the uncertainty I felt due to the abrupt changes that were happening to the world as we know it. It is entirely possible that the mere act of walking around my neighborhood for the first time would have aroused my awareness anyway. But I’d like to think that the intention I set to listen to this particular book at this exact time somehow played a role in my awakening.

As I walk by various homes, I wonder about the people who dwell there. Sometimes I see signs of children—faded chalk art in celebration of Easter, hopscotch on a sidewalk or an elaborate game of numbers and letters on a driveway that I still can’t quite figure out. I notice bicycles, scooters or Frisbees strewn on the front lawn or driveway. Occasionally I see a child outside in front of their home and give them a wave, which is always returned. A few times on the footpath through Adams Park, I’ve encountered a young man around thirteen years old with a basketball tucked under his arm. He always returns my smile and gives me a nod—a connection that I’m not confident would have been made pre-COVID19.

The adults who are out on their front porches or sitting in lawn chairs on their driveways are equally as friendly. After encountering the same people a few different
chilly that day so nobody was around to share in my joy. I still intend to congratulate the homeowners when I next see them, since I know from firsthand experience how it feels to get such a useful property enhancement project completed!

I’ve noticed a few other changes over the past five weeks, such as the caution tape carelessly put up around the lone piece of playground equipment at Adam’s Park in conformance with the City of Tulsa ordinance. I don’t think that particular piece of playground equipment is used much; our boys didn’t use it when they were young and of the age to be drawn to such climbing structures. That day I found it ironic that there were four young men playing basketball on the half court adjacent to the taped up playground equipment, and certainly not keeping at least six feet apart from one another. I guess it would require full-time monitoring by what would now likely be a furloughed employee of the Tulsa Park and Recreation Department to enforce social distancing on basketball courts, or a far more aggressive form of shuttering the court than the two-inch caution tape surrounding the playground, such as removing the hoop altogether. I’m not endorsing such a bold action, by the way, merely pondering the irony!

One particularly sad day I was walking while listening to the memorial service and virtual gathering via the indispensable Zoom app for my stepfather, Mike, who had passed away the week before at the age of 85 (unrelated to the coronavirus). Approximately fifty people from across the country were participating in the event, including his four sons who are scattered from coast to coast, my siblings in L.A. and D.C., my Mom, and a multitude of adoring family and friends, all of whom were ‘sheltering in place.’ It was lovely to hear the stories about Mike and listen to the fond memories of his many admirers. One of his sons,
Mark, who is located in Los Angeles, was moderating the event, and as things started to wind down he thanked the person on the call who allowed the birdsong to be heard by everyone else. I suddenly realized that the birdsong was from my neighborhood, since unbeknownst to me, the host of the event had unmuted all of the participants! I considered it my special contribution to the event, nature’s music from the streets of the neighborhood that we shared with Mike and my Mom, whose very house was nearby.

On that same walk I noticed a sign in the front yard of a white, one-story brick house that was made of a large board painted white with the words “STAY STRONG” stenciled neatly in black letters, and flanked by two large American flags planted in the ground. Given the aforementioned somber occasion, I found the words to have special meaning for me that day, since Mike had been an officer in the Navy and was given full military honors at his graveside funeral service in Bartlesville earlier that afternoon. I have since noticed several other homes on a different block with their flags flying proudly out front, and similar “STAY STRONG” signs in their yards or windows. Normally reserved for a federal holiday, the flags along with the words of encouragement are heartwarming, and I applaud the homeowners for their sense of community spirit and national unity.

There is a large office complex which consists of a series of six-story buildings near our street that has been there since the early 1980’s. I’ve never had occasion to go into any of the buildings all these years, and I’m not entirely certain which companies are located there, other than a prominently displayed travel agency, a bank, a well-known eye care center and a couple of other firms whose names adorn the top edge of the main building but are unfamiliar to me. One day I decided to explore the complex by walking on the
sidewalk in front of the main building and along the interior roads. There are a handful of cars in the parking lots, some obligatory, uninspired landscaping at the various entrances, a series of dumpsters hidden from view, and nothing else remarkable about the complex. Then, to my great surprise, I stumbled upon a gleaming metal sculpture of what looked to me like a giant compass (the technical drawing variety) nearly twenty-five feet tall on a triangular patch of grass nestled between two of the buildings. I stopped to examine it and pondered how it was possible that we have lived a block or so away from this piece of modern art and never knew it! I looked at both buildings surrounding the piece, assuming to see the name of an engineering or architectural firm, but could find evidence of neither. I considered it for a while longer, and thought perhaps it wasn’t a compass after all, but a cluster of knives. So I walked around to the other side of the building where I found a sign listing the tenants within. Only one, Modern Woodmen of America, provided any clue that the abstract sculpture might indeed represent knives, though none looked like they would serve the artistic purpose of woodworking. Nevertheless, I felt rewarded for my choice of route that day.

On a less grand scale, but no less impressive, is the house a few blocks away in the opposite direction from the office complex which also features metal sculpture in its front yard. Adorning the garden are several whimsical works by acclaimed local artist, Lisa Regan, better known as Garden Deva. My favorite is her iconic three-foot tall piece of a boy and girl holding hands. There are a few other smaller figures tastefully placed among the shrubs and flowers. This homeowner shares another favorite garden enhancement of mine, which is ceramic planters on either side of the front door in cobalt blue, a color which I’ve always found to be a beautiful contrast to the surrounding flowers and greenery. I
paused just long enough to admire their choices and make a mental note to consider similar curb appeal enrichments for my own home.

On a recent walk I noticed some pine cones that had dropped from the three towering Loblolly Pines that border a property on which a mini storage facility is being built at a glacial pace for the past two years or so. I wondered what would happen if I collected some to place in the planter in front of my house? After all, they were just lying on the ground and probably never noticed, much less valued by the current owners. I deliberated for another moment, and then the eight-year-old in me gathered as many pine cones as I possibly could, using the bottom of my shirt to form a basket, and continued my walk towards our house. Without suffering any repercussions from what felt like a rebellious act, the next day I decided to finish the job and picked up five more pine cones. The specimens in the second batch were even larger and more impressive than the ones I had gathered the day before. I look at them nestled in my planter with great satisfaction!

During my many walks these past five weeks I’ve happened upon houses of people whom I’ve known over the past four decades that no longer live there. Most moved to other states, but a few have passed away. I wonder who lives in these homes now, and what they may know about the former owners. I try to recall what the houses looked like inside the last time I was there, and imagine the multitude of changes made since, likely rendering them unrecognizable. I study the exterior and recall the former color of the brick or siding, deliberating about whether the current scheme is an improvement. In some cases the houses look exactly the same, and I admire the owners for their careful upkeep and preservation of these dwellings. One house, in particular, I recall with great fondness.
I have known the family since I was a teenager, and my own family spent many happy occasions in that house sharing meals, celebrations, and the like. The father, Irv, fancied himself as quite the chef, especially when it came to grilling and baking. He had a bushy mustache, sparkling eyes and a hearty laugh. His wife, Nada, had lovely deep blue eyes, high cheekbones, and fashionably short, blond hair. Before I returned to Tulsa and we bought a house in the neighborhood, they had moved to Tennessee to be near one of their married daughters. Yet the house is unchanged, and I find that sameness very reassuring and anchoring.

Another house I recognized in an area of the neighborhood where there are sidewalks on both sides of every street—unusual enough to be called out—belonged to a couple who have both passed away. The woman, Bonita, was a colleague from my previous job, and her husband, John, was a small business owner—an electrician, I believe. They were a friendly couple and very active in their church community, including going on mission trips to Central and South America well into advanced age. And Bonita loved to talk about the flowers she had planted in front of her house every spring. One day I noticed a woman coming out of the house, now boasting an OU flag, with a long dark ponytail and a baby on her hip heading to the mailbox. I think it would make Bonita and John happy to know that their home now belongs to a young family who tends the yard and keeps the house looking very presentable.

Yesterday I discovered what is without a doubt the steepest street in the neighborhood, due to the fact that it abuts the greenbelt known as “Shadow Mountain” for which the neighborhood is named. I happened upon a street which started as level as most
others, then, as I rounded the corner, the grade abruptly changed and I started my ascent. The houses on this particular stretch of road are unique, in that they were built on multiple levels to accommodate the steep grade of the land, giving them a majestic appearance. Several appear to have basements, which is uncommon in our neighborhood as in most of Tulsa. While admiring the unusual architecture and lovely tiered landscaping, I noticed that I had become short of breath due to the rapid elevation. And once I crested the hill and started my descent, looking back I couldn’t see where I had just come from. It was an unusual and wonderful experience!

Often I see the young couple who live down the street from us walking their friendly white Labrador mix and pushing a stroller. I know their dog is friendly because he has sat at the bottom of our driveway in the past when they have walked by our house while I was weeding or planting flowers. With a big smile on his face and his tail wagging at a feverish pace, he always seems genuinely pleased when I greet his owners. And since ‘sheltering in place’ I’ve seen the couple around the neighborhood numerous times, several blocks away from our street. They always greet me warmly, so much so that I think the time has come to introduce myself and find out their names. It’s not as though they just moved onto my block, so under normal circumstances it might seem like the appropriate time for exchanging names has long passed. However, since circumstances are anything but normal, I am committed to make the connection at last.

In early April my colleague shared three questions to help ground us while we navigate this pandemic: (1) What are you struggling with the most; (2) What is a positive thing you’ve noticed through this period; and (3) What has surprised you and/or what are
you going to continue to do going forward? As I imagine it would be for many, the first question is easy for me to answer: the uncertainty surrounding every aspect of our lives and fear of becoming ill from the novel coronavirus. My answer to the second and third questions should come as no surprise to the reader. Walking around my neighborhood and truly seeing its splendor for the first time has been an overwhelmingly positive and powerful experience, and one which I will continue long after it is 'safe' to return to the office, the gym, a restaurant, the theater or a friend's home. And like the author Jenny Odell taught me, redirecting my attention to my natural surroundings, being alone with my thoughts and delighting in small discoveries are not only worthy endeavors; rather, they are imperatives in order to be able to disconnect from the constant thrum of the news and social media, and allow the time that I need each day to develop my own ideas and perspectives on life. And contrary to cultural norms about productivity, I don't always have to show something for my time. So I keep walking and discovering and wondering what lies ahead.