

More distance

Another walk today, Socius and I, our permitted exercise. Under clear blue skies and warm spring sunshine with a gentle, much less sharp than last time, breeze - though still from the east - we followed the familiar route. Out of our gate. Turn right at the corner and out of the village towards the zed bends. As we come to the bends we are looking out over the Thames estuary at Southend, glittering and sparkling in the sunlight. It's the same sunlight and the same sky. Why does it seem so much brighter over there? The dog opines that it always looks brighter over the water. Oh? Like the grass is always greener the other side of the fence? The dog frowns. Greener? I indulge in a moment of patronising pity and savour my presumed ocular superiority. The dog gives me a look. One of those under the eyebrows looks. Which of us is wearing spectacles? I turn abruptly and head into the single track road. Socius follows, tail up, with the air of one who has just won on points. Its a bit quiet for the next fifty metres but they have laid blankets on the field beside the lane. Up and over the brow before the sharp slope to the blind bend. Very taut and straight and pinned down at the edges with soil, the blankets interest us both. They are a surprise to Socius but not to me. I had seen them being laid, from the study window, upstairs at the back of the house. It is a magic window, always framing a panoramic vista as a backdrop to small movements and incremental change. But, that day, added drama with an awesome display of the swift and accurate skills of the blanket layers. I should have been concentrating on something on the desk but, with a view like that, why would you? Is online banking that important, really? Anyway, here we are, right beside them now, and it is easy to visualise the germination and growth that is gaining momentum under their warm embrace . Looking around, there are other fields with blankets too. A team has been down from Scotland to lay them and, all in all, they cover many acres. Whatever the alarmists say, we are not about to starve. We may have to eat a lot of swedes, but we won't starve! Around the lane we meet many walkers, couples, small family groups and individuals, some with real dogs. A new protocol seems to be developing with people stepping onto the field margins and set aside to give each other exaggerated distance. From some angles this might look like a caricature, a form of mockery, but in the context of the smiles and hurled hellos across the chasmic distance with which we respect and love each other, it feels like community. For quite a few of those we meet, in former times the village has been only a dormitory

and private place. We have only previously encountered them as postage stamps framed briefly in the windows of their passing cars, but they smile and greet like everyone else. I like this comfortable sense of community. We must hope, and work, to sustain this and not to return, when these days are gone, to the anonymous supermarket rushing brushing by of the previous times. The dog gives me a quizzical look. We've always been like that, but they don't let us into the supermarket. In this, I sense, might lie an important bone of truth that we have forgotten where we buried. We are at the bottom of the sharp slope and round the blind bend. The stream on our left, running to the far side of the village, is quieter now after sunny days and drying winds, but still gurgling. On the right, the horses, wearing their blankets, are all on the far side, well away from the gate, and busy just being. We get no acknowledgement from them. So, on up the grade towards the top of the ridge. More people and greetings, and we work our way up beyond the field of flowering rape and, at the top of the next field, we get to the lizard plank. As is my habit, I do a careful visual check. Despite the brilliant sunshine, there is no lizard there today, again, but there was once and could be in the future. I live in hope. The dog doesn't get the lizard thing and mumbles about not being able to eat speculation. I think that hope can be quite sustaining. We move on. On our right, behind a deep ditch and enclosed by a wire fence and a mature hedge, lies a field that caps a former landfill site. It is peppered with gas venting pipes and kept manicured by sheep. None of the sheep are in sight through the hedge today. Part way up this hedge we stop to ponder on a style, set in the fence and leading into the field. This first appeared some many weeks ago. Access to it from the road was cleared through the undergrowth in and around the ditch. When it first appeared it seemed obvious to assume that a plank would soon be provided to bridge the ditch, which is about a metre deep, approximately the same width and has very steep sides. As things stand, getting to the style requires either the agility of a mountain goat or scrambling and clambering through a deep muddy ditch. Socius is up for it but, these days, I reserve clambering and scrambling for emergencies and, to be honest, it's been a while since I exercised the agility of a mountain goat. So, we don't know where one gets to by going that way. Still, we feel that there is space for mystery without threat and are distracted by the rattling of the shingled soil being prepared in a field to our left, down the southerly slope toward the Medway. The action is too far away to be certain what is going on but it gives hope that, in due time, there will be something to go with our swedes. Higher still, at the top of the

field with the mystery style, we look down the southerly slope again to the solar farm, making its silent contribution to saving the planet. We may yet have the power to boil our swedes. In the gateway that leads down to the solar farm, two men who are taking their car for a walk are having a rest. As we pass them, going up on the set aside on the opposite side of the road, an indistinct but seemingly cheery greeting is hurled our way. I smile and wave in acknowledgement. Now, at the brow, facing more flowering rape, we pause to take stock. Down in the valley to our south west the orchards are coming into bloom and leaf. In fields all across our vista we see evidence that spring is sprung. We turn and walk back down the set aside. The car walkers roar up the hill and turn round where we have just been. They come down again, giving a masterclass in how not to drive on single track roads. When they get a wheel stuck in the ditch, I remind myself that I should not take any pleasure from their misadventure. I look at the dog and raise an eyebrow. I get an emphatic shake of the head. No you shouldn't. But I so actually do! We give them a wide berth and continue downhill with the unfortunate sound of revs and wheel spin behind us. Between the mystery style and the lizard plank we have to jump smartly onto the verge as the car walkers, having freed themselves, come thundering down. They are followed, almost immediately, by a small van, driven more modestly by a man who gestures his thanks for our courtesy in choosing to be on the verge rather than be roadkill. Checking before stepping back onto the carriageway, up at the brow of the hill we see the distant figure of a runner headed towards us. We continue down. Near the lizard plank my attention is caught by the Queenborough wind turbines, maybe five miles away, glittering and waving in the sun. Instinctively and without thought, I wave back. The dog pretends it's not with me. We are almost at the flowering rape when we hear the runners footsteps closing on us. We step aside to allow ample space to pass. The runner, a woman carrying a water bottle, says "Thank you" as she passes. She's running and she can still speak! Even Socius is impressed. I note that, though we have seen a quite a lot of different people while walking, we have only seen women running. I wonder if this is significant. The dog gives a pitying shake of the head. We don't have a meaningful sample size. Half way down the rape field and suddenly we leap to the verge as the car walkers come roaring back up the hill. They pass in a cloud of fume and grit. I glance at the dog. The eyes roll but we don't discuss it. That would just sour and spoil our day without changing anything. We go on. Now, at the paddock gate again, the horses ignore us, again. We don't feel it is personal. Everyone has off

days. We cross to the verge on the other side, nearer the blind bend, to take a closer look at the burbling stream. A small red car comes down the hill behind us and approaches the blind bend with incautious haste. This has all the potential drama of a TV advertisement for Go Compare motor insurance. We brace ourselves emotionally. The car negotiates the bend without incident. I am about to open the question of the relationship between relief and anti-climax. A cat, the one that often hangs around the stable and paddock, suddenly appears, dashes across the road, and vanishes into an astonishingly small aperture in the bottom of the hedge. There will be no sensible debate with Socius for a bit! We go round the bend and start the sharp rise. At the crest, we are right by the blanketed field. The blankets are shivering. We are really close to the nearest one. There is a temptation to lift the edge, just a little bit, and take peek underneath, just a quick peek, to see how they are getting on under there, the germinators (germinatees?: discuss) but we resist. So, on round the squiggle in the lane where the farm entrance takes off. Strange that resisting allows us to feel self righteous rather than guilty for having even considered it. Socius decides to play 'jump the official distance'. Two metres proves more challenging than expected. I try to help by pacing it out. We discover that, where the hedges are full and there is no verge, the carriageway is really only just wide enough to allow people to pass at the specified distance. At the end of the lane and into the bends. In single file to allow for possible traffic. We take the last turn and face towards the start of the village. The dog is slightly ahead. I take a surreptitious glance back towards Southend. The evidence supports the argument that its always brighter over the water. I decide not to mention it. The dog glances back at me. It's to do with the reflection and refraction of the light over the water, it announces. I ignore it. We finish our walk in silence, each wrapped in our own thoughts, but I see the tail is up again, and I pray. For all those who do not have the opportunity for escape and all those who are not able, as we have been able, to get within breathing distance of future hope. Not, automatically, or, as of right, my future, but that of all those, near and far, for whom we care.

Stay safe and well. Amen.

John