Covid-19 has been a challenge. We may look back on 2020 as on a life not lived — no travel, or meetings with friends or theater. We would not for a while simply walk the streets of a favorite city.

There is always something magical about a city transformed. It happens on stage often — the curtain opens, and a set appears, sometimes with tall buildings, and if the plot calls for it, soft snow falling, or lights in a building turning off. New York City’s change, however, is generally a gradual one.

I have walked along the Hudson from the Jewish Museum at the battery up as far, on a good day, as to the George Washington Bridge and watched it transform itself. Slowly, year after year. What to make of those old rusted railway tracks, now become an elegant Highline footpath, planted with native grasses and flowers, winding through the Chelsea neighborhood. And off to the right an apartment building that looks a million feet high, into the clouds. A gradual transformation, as the city does its usual dance into a future that is always in its dreams.
Mary Luongo, walking on the streets of New York.

I enjoy being a flâneur, French for a stroller, a walker in the city, but since March, streets are without the familiar hum, honk, music.

A physician friend, former Joel Barlow High School student Andrew Thomas, now a Minneapolis surgeon, came to the Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital ICU in April, when the city was the epicenter of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Andrew left his wife and three daughters at home to help for weeks during New York’s terrible challenge. He told me that his New York City pleasure had inspired him years ago to attend Columbia, and later medical school at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. Andrew reminded me that his love of the city had a beginning in the high school treasure hunt his class went on with me.
Here is what we did:

Barlow students got off a school bus at the New York Public Library main branch at 42nd Street on Fifth Avenue, took pictures of the lions, Patience and Fortitude, named by Mayor LaGuardia, who were decked out for the holiday with wreath garlands. They went up the grand Astor staircase to the third floor where scholars sat at computers. And here is an interesting story. A student later told me that she opened a door in that room and quietly went up a narrow stairway onto a balcony lined with important-looking books. She opened one book and slipped a note inside, with her name and address, asking, “Does anyone read these?” Two years later, when she was in college, she got a postcard reply, from someone from Oregon.

After exploring the library, students “tripped the light fantastic,” up Fifth Avenue to the Metropolitan Museum on 82nd Street, with a list of sites along the way to identify. Merry high school people on a treasure hunt of discovery, flâneurs themselves in a wonderful city. Andrew and I chuckled together at how that adventure ended for me.

Relieved that all students were accounted for and inside the Museum, I bought a hot dog from a street vendor and sat on the sunny Met steps to enjoy it. A well-dressed man sat next to me with an open, leather briefcase at his side. I took one bite, the hot dog slid out of the roll and plopped into his briefcase. And he did not know it! I have laughed about the story so many times that I’m not certain how it ended. I’d like to think I said: “Uh, excuse me, but...” and then lifted the mustard-covered dog out of his briefcase. But what if I said nothing and walked quietly away... Hmm.

New York is different these days, but we know it will open to become its lively old, new self again, there for the walkers to enjoy. And rediscover. As T.S. Eliot writes in Little Gidding: “And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”