



Facing West with Big East

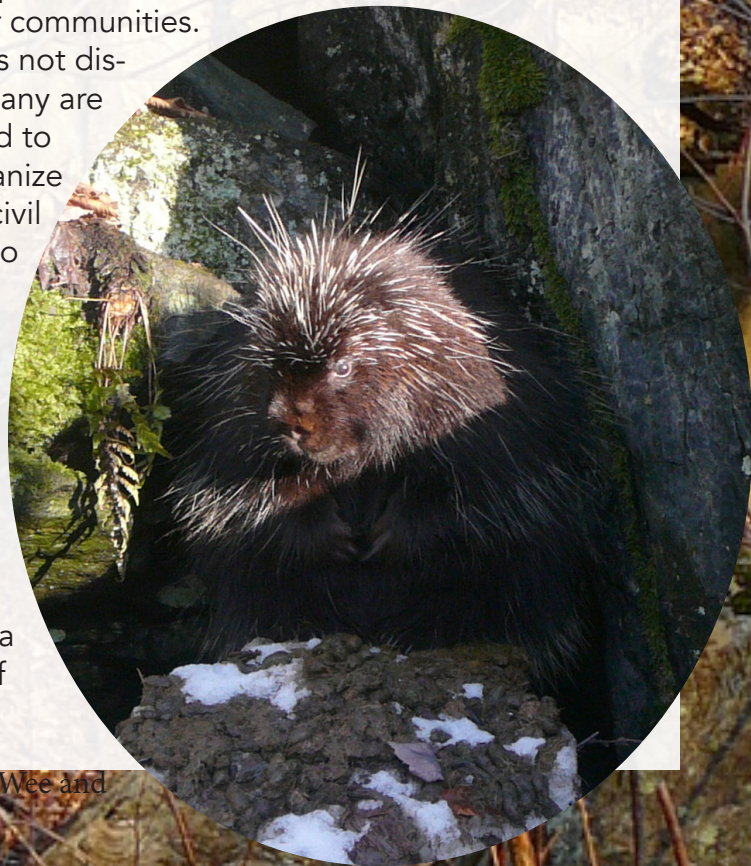
If you haven't experienced sunset on a steep, west-facing rocky hillside in early spring, come with me. Between 6 and 7 pm, the low-angled light illuminates the leafless forest in hues of gold and orange, accentuating colors and details washed out by mid-day sun. My favorite ledge sites are carpeted in mosses and lichens whose several shades of green appear almost luminous in the evening light. Porcupines are also connoisseurs of such sunset spots. On the last evening of March, after two days of rain, I settled myself down in just such a place to enjoy the light and perhaps the company of a porcupine or two. Within a few minutes, Big East ambled from his stone chamber, yawned, sat down facing the sun, and went back to sleep.

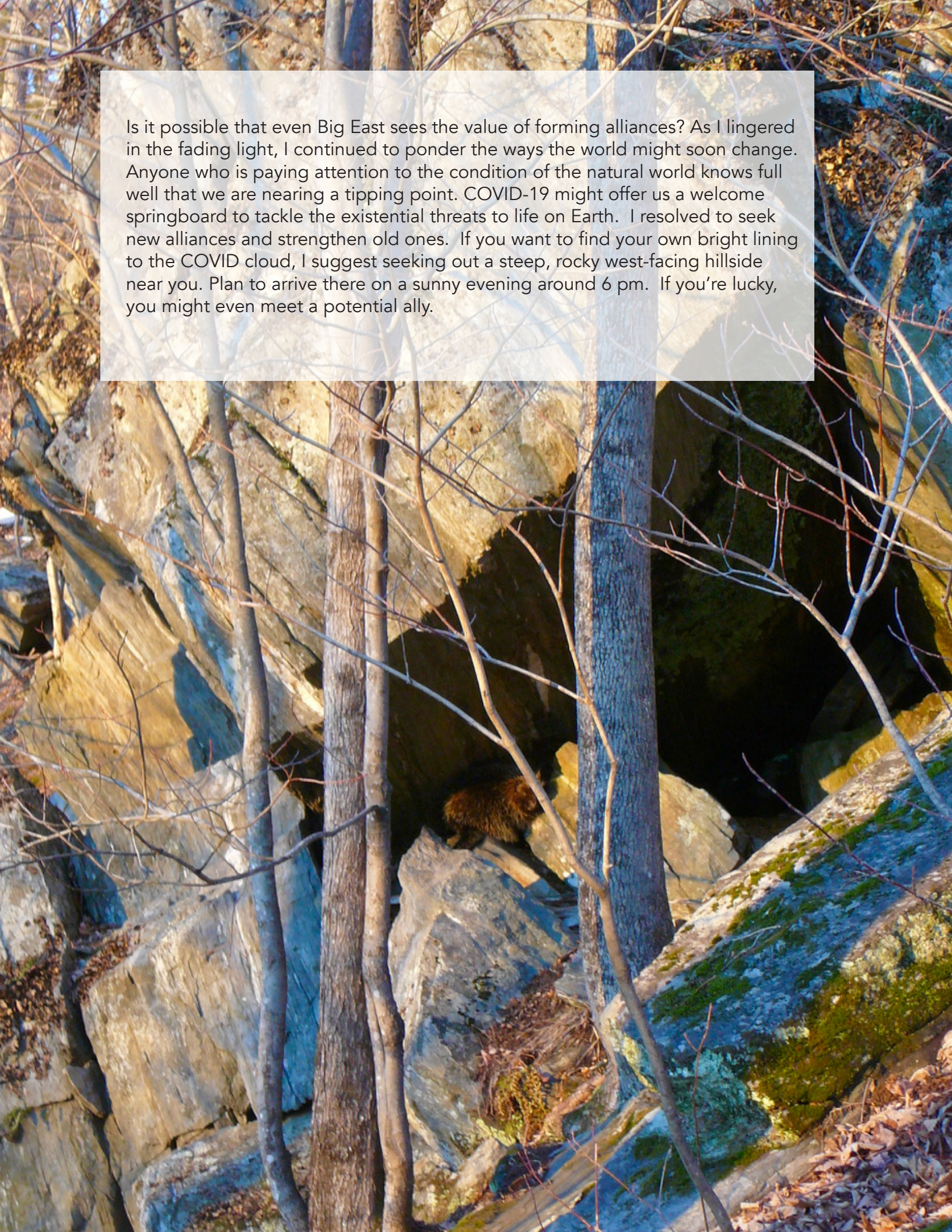
Big East and I go back to the spring of 2014 when he battled my friend Fretful and drove him from his territory. I saw Big occasionally after that, sniffing around for Fretful, making sure the aged porcupine knew his place. Two years ago, I had another memorable encounter with him while searching for Burdock, an orphaned porcupine I had raised. I hoped to find the Burd again as he approached his third birthday. The tracks I followed that day were made by Big East, but they did indeed lead me to Burdock. The two porcupines were facing off when I arrived. Big East hustled away, but I had little doubt who the victor would have been had I not intervened. This year Big East seems to have vanquished another favorite of mine among the local porcupines – Quirinus, the Wielder of Spears.

At the sunset ledges Big East dozed, unaware that the world around him was in flux. I doubt he has even noticed the reduced traffic on the little dirt road below us. Why should a porcupine care about a human pandemic? How we respond to the pandemic will affect all living things. I think mountainsides in glorylight generate optimism. While the porcupine slept, I thought about the good things the coronavirus might bring. This pandemic has shown us that we can and will take drastic measures to protect ourselves and our communities.

Because the crisis is caused by an enemy that does not discriminate, we find ourselves united as humanity. Many are using this opportunity to reconnect with nature and to enjoy self-sufficiency. Best of all, the efforts to organize neighborhoods to provide mutual aid strengthen civil society—the best tool to thwart those who seek to profit from the fear and insecurity arising from any disaster.

At last, Big East roused himself and clambered up to the next level of tumbled rock. I climbed up after him, sat down, and hummed a greeting. He ambled circuitously in my direction and returned my greeting hum. He snuffled my hand and then turned and hustled away. He repeated this approach several times. At last, satisfied that he had a better understanding of my nature, he waddled off into the gloaming.



A photograph of a rocky hillside with several trees. A bear is visible in the background, partially obscured by the trees and rocks. The scene is set in a natural, rugged environment with large, light-colored rocks and thin, bare tree trunks. The lighting suggests a sunny day, with shadows cast across the rocks and trees. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

Is it possible that even Big East sees the value of forming alliances? As I lingered in the fading light, I continued to ponder the ways the world might soon change. Anyone who is paying attention to the condition of the natural world knows full well that we are nearing a tipping point. COVID-19 might offer us a welcome springboard to tackle the existential threats to life on Earth. I resolved to seek new alliances and strengthen old ones. If you want to find your own bright lining to the COVID cloud, I suggest seeking out a steep, rocky west-facing hillside near you. Plan to arrive there on a sunny evening around 6 pm. If you're lucky, you might even meet a potential ally.