An excerpt from “Walking on Water” by Frances Backhouse.
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When you walk city streets, what lies beneath your feet? Concrete, yes, and rocks and soil, but that’s not all. Almost certainly there’s also water flowing down there. Brooks, streams, sometimes even full-grown rivers—gagged and bound and interred by urban infrastructure. You might not know those watercourses are there, but all over the world, activists are searching them out and working to bring them back to light and to life.

I was introduced to this idea by something called the Fernwood Community Green Map. It was part of a citywide a project guided by a University of Victoria geographer and carried out by community volunteers. In Fernwood, Dorothy Field, a visual artist, poet, former farmer and veteran environmental campaigner, led the map-making team. At first she wanted to produce a cartographic work of art and was particularly interested in recognizing the area’s first inhabitants—the Lekwungen, known today as the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations. But another member of the team soon piqued her curiosity about the water trickling below Fernwood’s modern surface.

I picked up a copy of the free map soon after it came out in 2015 and eagerly unfolded the stiff paper, which opened to a sheet the size of a placemat. On one side, archival photos, explanatory text and an 1863 city survey map offered a historical overview. On the reverse, a hand-drawn map showed current landmarks and the watery vestiges of the past. A blotch of blue ink superimposed on the contemporary street grid represented Harris Pond’s obliterated footprint.

One look at that blotch and I instantly understood why one of the tallest poplars in the city towered above my home and what that spectral voice in my basement had been rambling on about. For there was my house, perched right on the edge of the pond.

A thin blue line, dubbed Rock Bay Creek by the community mappers, snaked away from the pond, heading for the sea a few kilometres away. I traced its route along familiar streets where I had never suspected its underground existence, to Rock Bay, where it once formed a small cascade and tumbled into the ocean.

Sometime during the four years it took to research and create the community map, Field heard the word “daylighting”—that is, uncovering part or all of a concealed waterway. As a poet she loved the word and as an environmentalist she loved the concept. “So when we finally made the map,” she recalls, “like a fool I said, ‘We’d better daylight the creek.’” She now admits she “didn’t have a clue” about what that would entail, but with those bold words, Rock Bay Creek Revival was born.

Field, and our little creek, are part of a global phenomenon. When the hidden hydrology movement took off a couple of decades ago it was mostly driven by ecological and aesthetic considerations. Now, climate change has upped the ante. As droughts grow more common and record-breaking rainstorms make unprecedented demands on urban water systems, the need to

reimagine our relationship with the streams and rivers we've forced underground is becoming critical. The most colossal example of that reimagining is South Korea's restoration of the Cheonggyecheon River in downtown Seoul, which involved demolishing a four-lane elevated highway at a cost of roughly half a billion Canadian dollars. At the other end of the scale are small volunteer-led projects, like the one underway in my old neighbourhood in Victoria.

A few years ago I went on one of Field's creek walks. As the group strolled along she drew our attention to the contours of the land, pointed out how water-loving poplars, cedars and willows revealed the creek's covert course and told us about houses with hand pumps in their basements. At one intersection we paused by a storm drain and bent down to listen to the murmur of water. It hadn't rained for days and the street was dry, but Rock Bay Creek was clearly alive down there in the dark, the invisible veins of our local watershed.

Of course, fully re-revealing the creek isn't an option, with most of its path now covered by roads and houses. The only places where it might reasonably be returned to a more natural state are three pocket parks that the early developers left as green space because they were too swampy and prone to flooding. "We have to be very happy that they didn't know how to build on wet spots a hundred years ago," Field says. Now we have the opportunity to uncover short sections of the creek in those places and to establish rain gardens—small bowl-shaped areas that collect rainwater from roofs and driveways and divert it from the sewer system. These can help stave off the inundation of streets and basements during exceptionally wet weather.

So far, there's no firm plan in Victoria to put the ideas for Rock Bay Creek into action. "It's not impossible, but it's pretty tough," Fields says. "And now with Covid, it's not going to happen right away, that's for sure." But she is heartened by any sign of support from the city. A recent budget document mentions daylighting, which she attributes to the realization that the city's aging stormwater management system won't be able to cope with the kind of rains that climate change has in store for us.

Even getting Rock Bay Creek back on the map is progress. Its sinuous inked line forms part of the blueprint that nature has given us. And the more clearly we can read that blueprint, the more likely we are to consult it as our cities confront a new era of environmental problems.