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MARGARET KOVAL \*83: Hello again, Princeton. As coronavirus continues disrupting our lives this spring, we're reaching out to Princetonians everywhere to hear how we're continuing our collective and personal missions, how we're staying together while far apart, and how so many of us are working to serve the wider world. In this episode of We Roar, a campus leader in sustainability reflects on Earth Day in the time of COVID-19.

SHANA WEBER: I'm Shana Weber. And I direct the Office of Sustainability at Princeton, and I also lecture for the Princeton Environmental Institute. So April of this year, April 22, 2020, is the 50th anniversary of the original Earth Day in 1970. And the realities that we're facing now with COVID-19 have made us rethink how we celebrate not only the anniversary, but how we think about sustainability and environmental issues more broadly.

And what we're learning from this moment in history is really profound. So if you walk outside right now, no matter where you are almost anywhere in the world, things will sound different now than they did a month ago. And in an exercise that my students did a couple of weeks ago — and they're scattered all over the world right now — they noticed the same thing.

[ BIRDS CHIRPING ]

We're in this extraordinary moment where the silence — the human silence — is allowing other voices to come forward and be noticed. So bird calls, for example — they're not being drowned out by other sounds. One of the pioneers of the modern environmental movement, Rachel Carson, who wrote the book "Silent Spring" back in the '60s, that was all about pesticides, DDT, effects on wildlife, and how lethal the chemical was.

And now, here we are more than 50 years later, and we're experiencing a very different kind of Silent Spring. It's the silence of humans, and the resurgence of wildlife voices, and the sounds of the wind. So it's a really unique moment, and it certainly has caused me to reflect in a very different way than I've been able to in a long time.

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One of the things that we're focused on right now is, how do we help take care of people through this? And one of the ways that we're noticing is really powerful is the fact that experiences in nature, even brief moments, walks outside, can be incredibly stress-relieving. And this is documented. There's an enormous amount of research that shows the physiological and emotional benefits of time outdoors.

Blood pressure declines. Learning capacity increases. There's all kinds of very interesting benefits. And I think we know this instinctually. So I'm sitting at home right now in front of a window, and I did that very deliberately because I'm on meetings all the time now on my

computer. But by sitting next to this window, it feels better and I feel more relaxed. I can glance out the window and see green, and see birds flying by, and that's soothing.

[ BIRDS CHIRPING ]

So that part of it — the mental health and wellness part of a connection with nature — is something that's emerging so strongly for so many people whose only solace right now is to be able to get outside and walk around. Can't interact with friends. We can't do our usual social things, our usual exercise classes or whatever we might do to help relieve stress. This is one of the only things we can do now. My students talk about it as almost like they've awakened to something that they've forgotten.

One of the things that is part of this unifying global human experience is the knowledge now that there's no arguing the fact that we're all incredibly interconnected. The global pandemic clearly illustrated how intimate those connections are and how quickly we link with people physically all over the world.

The concept of interconnection is something that ecologists have talked about forever. It's part of the foundation of our field, is these interconnected systems. But it's hard for people to identify with that viscerally. And here, we have this global event that makes that incredibly clear.

I wonder if that elevated awareness of global interconnectivity and also this global awareness of a different sense of quiet and a different sense of connection with the solace that can come from nature will last. And I profoundly hope that it does. And it's incredibly important to continue thinking about our own fragility and planning for, how do we bolster Earth's ecosystems and natural support systems that we all rely on so that we can be more resilient to these kinds of global disruptions and prevent them, potentially?

I'm a scientist by background and ecologist by training. So part of me is very, very curious about the data that will emerge from this moment. This is, essentially, a global experiment, and it's not one that we could have forced. There's no experiment we could have conducted to see what would happen if we shut the economy down. We've been forced to do it by this event, this incredibly disruptive, painful event.

What that does is it opens up all kinds of incredible opportunities to investigate the impacts of this kind of massive pause in human activity. So in the months and years to come, I can't wait to see what it is we learn about pollution effects and how clean the skies are around the world right now. The short-term and long-term behavioral impacts, the short-term and long-term economic decisions we make.

This is a moment to rethink a lot of things. Already, there's some very interesting information emerging that is distressing, on one hand, and encouraging, on the other. Some of the distressing information, in my opinion, is that at this moment when we're seeing massive decreases in pollution and air pollution, we're also seeing the potential rollback of air quality standards in order to stimulate the economy.

On the other hand, the good things are, as I mentioned before, this global sense of interconnectivity. It remains to be seen what comes from that. There can no longer be the excuse

that human beings simply won't change their behavior when it comes to sustainability.

Many, many will say that, well, it's just too hard to get people to conserve energy or it's too hard to get people to think differently about what they purchase or changing their lifestyle such that so many disposable, single-use plastics aren't necessary. That argument no longer really carries much weight because we've just demonstrated that we can radically shift our behavior overnight if the need is perceived as dire enough.

There is no question that global climate change is a dire situation. It's just slower than the immediate impact of something like COVID-19.

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I think if this is a fire drill for things coming in the future, as difficult as it has been, it is showing us where our systems are weak. In the past, whenever we've discovered where our systems are weak, we tend, as a society, to figure out how to strengthen those weaknesses. We are absolutely capable of changing dramatically and doing so with flexibility, and creativity, and innovation. And I think an enormous amount of creativity will come from this moment. We've shown we can do it.

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