



# Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

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## A Life in Balance

“It may be that when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

— Wendell Berry

When we think about the idea of balance in our lives, it’s often in the context of *work* vs. *life*. While it may be tempting to blame (or favor) one over the other, (and we often have elaborate stories to support our claims), a bigger problem, in my experience, is the “*vs.*” part ... the part we rarely consider. It’s as if there’s a battle to be won. Battles lead more to “negotiated settlements” than to resolutions. With neither “side” ever honored fully, there’s no true balance.

I lived this fight for 30 years of my adult life, thinking brute force could overpower the enemies. Completely unaware an alternative even existed, I didn’t consider slowing down enough to look. So I failed to realize that the enemy was *me* – how I’d learned to see and think. No wonder “solutions” were elusive; I was trying to solve the “*vs.*” problem and not the “*me*” problem, clueless that both were of my own creation.

So as I painfully learned, my *life* would not be in balance until *I* was in balance. This dilemma led to some big questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What does my life want from me? (This, rather than its common opposite.) How can the world benefit from my presence? Who can’t I *not* be? See this [article](#), a story of my introduction to life balance. Answers to questions such as these live *inside* us, not “out there” in the world where we’re trained and accustomed to look. To discover them requires purposeful silence – space for deep self-reflection. But if we’re stuck juggling the “*vs.*” issue, we can’t even imagine time for this kind of quiet. How can I *add* something to life when what I need most is to *delete* something? Also, and perhaps worse, it seems we’re afraid of what we’d discover if we *did* stop and look.

Answers to life’s “big questions” are not like answers to math problems. They “show up,” on their own, in the spaces between things, even between thoughts. But if you never stop, there are no spaces, no “between” anything! Without such silence, you miss this amazing source of personal wisdom altogether. At today’s speed of life, however, how would you ever know there *was* any wisdom in there, so why stop to look? ... Well, here’s why.

Silence focuses the mind on the *present* moment. That’s the moment you generally *miss* while you’re using your energy to worry about the *next* moment instead. In silence, you not only notice your thoughts, (including the ones that may be driving you to find balance through force), but you begin to trace those thoughts back to the [unconscious] beliefs that created them. *That* is key to finding balance, for as you begin to see how your thinking creates your reality, your thinking changes. And guess what? So does your reality. No surprise, perhaps, but this now leaves you in the place to consciously *choose* your thoughts, and in turn, the course your life takes. It’s not about leaving your job and finding your true calling (although that has merit), but about being at peace with yourself *no matter* “who’s calling.” ☺

Call it meditation, self-reflection, time-out, prayer, quiet time, or just doing nothing. A regular practice of calming the mind is a pathway into your deepest self. It’s a way to reconnect with your authentic truth and greatest potential. As you experience silence, however, you may notice “voices in your head,” unconscious messages telling you to revert to the everyday background noise to which you’re so habituated. Because we’re often taught that being silent means we’re unproductive, we fill our lives with noise, then wonder why we feel so uncomfortable being alone with our own thoughts. Nature, by contrast, exists against a backdrop of silence. Despite the noise a crow can make, it is silent most of the time. A noisy bobcat would fail as a hunter. Trees make little noise as they grow or as they shed their leaves. Although opposite the model we follow, nature displays much of what we’d love – resilience, balance, peace, integrity, productivity. You are inseparable from that. The silence your mind fights off is the silence your inner self longs for.

Your discoveries are unique to you; they point the way to your truth. When you find it, and then use the energy of this “authentic you” as a guide, *life creates its own balance* (so *you* don’t have to). Not only is this energy renewable and sustainable because its source is always inside you, it also feels like “home,” because it *is* ... the home of your true self.

**Exercise: Personal Silence:** My life experience has taught me that by adopting regular daily quiet time, during which I may calm my mind, observe my thoughts, ponder my pondering, and simply be present in this moment, my world becomes dramatically larger than I ever imagined. The *awareness* gained from this practice has expanded into every corner of my life. I don't miss so much; I see more clearly; I see more. Life's "small stuff" stays small. Patterns, possibilities and connections show up that I could never know existed with my mind continuously filled by unconscious automatic "chatter" ... even though those possibilities are always there.

**The practice:** Sit quietly alone for 20 to 30 minutes each day, in a place free of distraction. (If finding a place free of distraction is your biggest obstacle, you really *do* need this!!) Ideally, it would be a place to which you can return each day, a place you might come to know as your own. If you're so inclined, a place in nature is best (plus, you really get to know yourself when you're out there in a snowstorm!) Relax your body, take a few deep breaths. Focus on a simple object in your view. Breathe purposefully; just listen. That's it; there's no right or wrong; be present; be quiet; release judgment. Yet despite the "simplicity" here, you'll likely find thoughts continually arising, often in the form of inner voices (things to do, fears, etc.) You might choose to view them as passing clouds; just watch each as it goes by. No judgment; just notice. As we seem to do so often with our thoughts, there's no need to attach yourself to a cloud and wrestle it to the ground. Success, since we seem to need a sense of achievement in all we do, is measured by being true to your intention each day – a very simple intention: show up, shut up, listen, learn.

**Life lessons from nature:** I'm partial to suggesting this "assignment" to some of my coaching clients. It's especially powerful for those who are afflicted, as was I many years ago, with the belief that achievement is everything and that the only way to be successful is to never stop. The assignment is this: "Do something outrageously fun for yourself this week for under \$20." (I once had a client who turned everything he touched into money. No idea how he manifested so powerfully, but for him I added the restriction that he couldn't *make* more than \$20, either!)



This assignment was not my idea. It was given to me many years ago, another attempt by my mentor to cause my gaze to shift a wee bit toward my inner world. I was a hard-driving perfectionist at the time, a workaholic by any standard, and tragically addicted to "getting it all done." (These might be viewed as my 'credentials' for writing this month's article.) So when I designed my "outrageously fun" experience, of course it had to fit *within* the insanity my life had become at the time. Always longing for more time outdoors and in nature, I decided to get up at 3am, make coffee and a picnic breakfast for myself, drive to the seacoast, (Rockport, MA), sit on the rocky headlands overlooking the harbor and ocean, enjoy breakfast, watch the sun rise, **and** be at work by 8am. Even then it would be a tight squeeze, because in January the sun doesn't rise until 7:10am. Ha!

I stepped out of the car at 4:30am, instantly mesmerized by a sky impossibly filled with stars. I made my way down a short trail I knew, and settled into my camp chair at the edge of the rocky hill. I'm neither a stranger to, nor an avoider of, cold weather, so I was prepared. But with a stiff breeze (off the water, of course) and an air temperature of **11° F**, I will admit it was a challenging few hours. But something about that challenge made this time more meaningful to me.

What matters in all this is that, in choosing something "outrageously fun" for *me* (we all have different definitions), I created a crack in the armor, an opening to the "quiet space" within me, where I could experience my true self ... so I could entertain questions like "who am I?" and "why do I do what I do?" I've noticed that when I'm doing something I truly love (such as satisfying a deeper longing), those pesky voices in my head seem to release their grasp on trying to make me someone I'm not ... so who I really am can come out to play. That morning was life-affirming, and will live in my memory forever. Writing about it now, it's hard for me to believe it was 25 years ago. Seems like just yesterday.

**Book of the month: *The Art of Stillness*, by Pico Iyer.** The more complex, chaotic and uncertain our world becomes, and the more we depend on technology to "keep us ahead of it all," the more we desperately seek a break from tension, stress and overwhelm. We're generally afraid to stop and create this time, however, in increments either big or small, for fear we might lose what has become the race of our lives. Iyer makes a compelling case for slowing, even stopping, in snippets as small as a few moments a day or as long as a 3-week retreat. He came about his observations by getting lost himself, as a travel writer. A practical guide to a place where simple *being* matters. ... And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.