



# Purposeful Wanderings

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

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## I Thought I WAS Thinking

“We keep our island in our mind, and when it’s time to find home, we know the way.”  
– from the movie *Moana*

The Zen card I drew this morning was “Right Thought.” It read, “*You are what you think. Think it today, become it tomorrow. Nothing can help you or hurt you as much as the thoughts you carry in your head.*” So, I began to notice the thoughts running through my head. There’s never a shortage: gratitude, worry, wonder, judgment. What thoughts do you carry in *your* head? Do you take the time to look ... being an observer, rather than as a participant alone?

As prone to habit as we humans are, we’re generally unaware of the thoughts that occupy our minds, largely because they’ve been in there so long they’ve just taken up residence. If we were forced to look, our perspective might even be this: “My mind is full; it’s filled with thoughts; they must therefore be *my* thoughts; so I must therefore be thinking.”

Although we’re generally too busy to consider deeper reflection, there’s a problem with this cursory response. Chances are good that the thoughts in your head – the ones you think you’re thinking – belong to someone else. Starting early, repeated lessons from others create our thinking framework, which becomes habituated as a “prevailing viewpoint” – a largely unconscious way we learn to see life. Not surprisingly, this way of seeing depends heavily on the *outside* world (because that’s where it came from). By assuming it’s actually our own, however, we unknowingly rely on it to create the well-being and happiness we’re working so hard to achieve. Our happiness doesn’t live “out there,” however, but *inside* us – the one place we never learned to look. So, until we stop and discover the power of our conscious thought, (which we usually don’t), we live someone else’s life, not our own. Thusly deceived, we wonder why life is difficult.

Here are but a few of countless thought frameworks commonly “adopted” in our world today. Step back from “thinking” for a moment or two and see what these perspectives might offer ... about yourself or about others in your life.

**Science** is intended to help us explain what can be known rationally about our world. As a viewpoint, it posits this: “I must be able to separate a thing from its environment, measure it, repeat it, predict it and control it; then I know it’s true.” (Humanness *isn’t* these things, but that doesn’t seem to stop us from seeing life in such mechanistic terms.)

**Religion** is intended to help us make sense of what *can’t* be known rationally. It shows up as a *range* of viewpoints. At one end, “I have devoted my faith to what is written; I need not look further.” At the other, “I have personal faith in what I can’t know for sure, where I find comfort and strength in a chaotic world.”

**Being “right”** is a defensive strategy, adopted to protect a weak sense of self. As a viewpoint, it declares, “I’m always certain. I’m certain I’m *right*. I’ll prove it by showing you that you’re *wrong*.”

**Victimness** is also a defensive strategy, blaming others for what’s seen as hopeless. As a viewpoint, it cries, “I’m always certain, too. I’m certain I’m *wrong*. I’ll prove it by showing how bad my life is, and how ‘they’ made it so.”

**Tribalism** is the home of the “pretend thinking” I wrote about [last month](#). As a viewpoint: “I don’t have the courage to think for myself so I’ll adopt the ideas of others, then defend them as if I *had* experienced it all personally.”

All of these are simply viewpoints. They have *no independent truth of their own beyond what we give them*. All are developed by someone else (even if that someone is your bruised ego). Each may have its role (or not), but substitute for your own truth should not be one of them. When you live through the thinking of *others* (science, religion, politics, media, personal history), well-intended or not, you abdicate responsibility for *your own* thinking, consciously or not.

The alternative: become a student of your thinking, perhaps adopting **curiosity** as your life viewpoint, thereby allowing your *conscious presence* to guide your steps. Claiming full responsibility for your thoughts is key to direct experience of life, personal freedom and happiness. It took me far too long to learn this. Forced early in life into “science as worldview,” only 30 years later did I see how, through my adopted mechanistic rigidity, I’d failed both myself and others. The past 20 years, however, framed largely by “not knowing,” have opened me to keen awareness, self-trust, happiness from the inside, and a more authentic sense of self ... plus the ability see “pretend thinking” so clearly.

**Exercise: Your prevailing viewpoint:** In order to adopt a life viewpoint that honors *your own unique truth* (the only path known to create a life of happiness and meaning), you can start by getting to know the viewpoint you hold *today*. That way of seeing may well be the unconscious result of old lessons, life experiences, preconceived notions and the habitual thinking they create. As is true for many things that are obscure or hidden from plain view, it may be helpful to look for *shadows* they cast in your life (your life experience). You can discover the thinking that created this reality by tracing the shadows back to their source (your [unconscious] lessons and beliefs). So, stop for a few moments each day and reflect on how your day went. Include observations of things that worked, things that didn't, and even some conversations you had with yourself. For each "event" you notice, ask what *kind* of thinking might lead to that *kind* of result. (This is *not* the same as asking *what you were thinking*; you'll just make up an answer). Looking at the *kind* of thinking (your "viewpoint") lets you be more objective about what you notice. If you need a start, see if any of the examples from the main article could help explain your experience. No judgment; just learning; get to know yourself.

Then shift your practice to the present rather than the past. Notice the choices you make *as you go through* your day. When you catch yourself wanting to *do* more, *change* more, *try* more or *judge* more, see if, instead, you can simply *notice* more. Work only on non-judgmental awareness. This exercise has the effect of shifting your awareness from unaware (last month, perhaps) to awareness of the recent past (above) to awareness in this very moment. As you continue this practice, your growing awareness allows you to choose your thinking (your viewpoint about life) in each moment. This is the ultimate in personal power. As you *choose* new thoughts, you begin to *habituate* new thoughts.

Note: about this month's quote, from *Moana*, the ancient Polynesians didn't keep just a simple picture of their home (island) in their minds (as we might assume); they kept in their minds the *complete navigational path* (directions, positions, timing, winds, waves, stars) they had followed for every moment since leaving home, often months at a time, so when it was time to return home from their exploration, they truly *knew* their way. Mostly, we can't even *imagine* the depth of that kind of conscious thought or knowing, so far have we strayed from this, the true nature of our humanness.

**Life lessons from nature:** Over the course of the 20 years I led polar bear tours in the Canadian Arctic, I experienced as much about the *human* ecosystem as I did about the *tundra* ecosystem. Part of my job as a leader/naturalist was to make sure that people found their experience both enjoyable and educational, and went home with a perhaps intangible sense of what makes our world a special place and worth protecting. I didn't count on some of the challenges I would face, however. I recall a man on one such tour who, while seeming to enjoy seeing polar bears (I mean, why else subject yourself to -60° wind chills), was gripped with anxiety that there was no TV. (Note: we were 20 miles from "town," in a featureless expanse of wind-blown tundra, based in a specially-designed but rustic polar bear camp. There *was* in fact a TV, but it was for educational nature videos, and I rarely used it, finding both the tundra itself and real human conversation far more educational.) Yet I had to help this guy calm down.



Later that day, another participant was standing at an open camp window, doing a video of two polar bears sparring outside the camp. Hmm. I quietly asked him if he could connect his video camera to the TV. He was perplexed, but went along. Within minutes, Mr. Anxiety was sitting comfortably, watching (*on TV*) what was going on (*live*) 15 feet away. Happy. While this might be viewed as a case of creative problem-solving (which I claim it was), it was also an illustration of a loss so prevalent in our world. It's been my experience, supported by many incidents, (perhaps none as obvious as this one), that our loss of direct connection with nature has become a contributor (if not cause) of much of the stress we feel in our lives these days. Lost in his anxiety, that guy no doubt failed to see the connection, but when we experience what is real, true, and deep inside us, we find peace, if only unconsciously, which leads to a kind of mental clarity that's just not possible with the mind tied up in knots over life's superficial "challenges." What's your everyday experience of the natural world? Is it direct, from purposefully being immersed in nature? Or do you watch nature shows on TV? Or do you not have a regular experience of nature? Or is it only to slap a mosquito on your arm?

**Book of the month: *Wilderness Essays*, by John Muir.** Muir is a national icon of the "direct experience of life" that I write about here. His writing is excellent; his stories are compelling; his openness to new ways of seeing shows in every word. Whether you've read his work before or not, you might be refreshingly struck by the clarity and honesty of his words, especially in the midst of the soup of bravado and divisiveness we see today. You may just find they soften everyday stress a bit, or relax an overworked mind a bit, or connect you a bit more deeply with your inner truth. And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985