



Purposeful Wanderings

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

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The Problem with Cause-and-Effect

"To pay attention. That is our endless and proper work." – Mary Oliver

One of the principles that frames our lives and thought processes is that of **cause-and-effect**. Things happen for reasons; results have causes. Flip a switch; a light goes on. Go out in the rain; you get wet. Stepping back a bit ... work hard; you (most often) achieve. Treat someone poorly; you (most often) strain/lose a friendship. Through experiences such as these, you become adept (and confident) at associating effects with causes, often because you can *see* them at work. And just like "things," **thoughts** create effects, too. Those who see life through a lens of *what's possible* most often live happier and healthier lives than those who see through a lens of *what's wrong*. Cause-and-effect at work, even when the "cause" is invisible (a thought).

But let's look at where this association breaks down, where our confidence (and consciousness) fail us. Perhaps you experience life as **struggle**. Confident with your assessment of cause-and-effect, you look around for causes ... in what's going on right now. What do you see? Life is difficult; you need to compete; money is crucial; some people are problems; life *should* be fair; *you* should be in control. These things are real ... *in the present moment*. So, guess what? You name them as *causes* of your struggle. I mean, why would you **not** do that? You "know" how cause and effect work, right? Then ... you may proceed to blame the offenders, or set out to "fix" what's wrong. For many, life unfolds like this ... one struggle after another, "caused" by events, situations, other people, money. I don't know about you, but considering the amount of fighting and blaming, it seems at least *some* would have eliminated struggle by now. Yet that's not what appears to be happening.

Perhaps it's time for a shift in perspective. What if there's a *delay* between cause and effect – of hours, months, maybe years? Our ability to **see** cause-and-effect fades, yet our conviction that we **know** it *anyway* persists. So we often make associations without validity. Let's rewind a bit here – back 10, 20, maybe 50 years depending on your age – to childhood lessons. You know, lessons that life is difficult, that you have to compete, that money buys happiness, that some people are mean, that life *should* be a certain way, that *you should* be a certain way ... those lessons. Guess what? You **learned** exactly what you're experiencing today. Those lessons (just a bunch of thoughts, really, and the *thoughts of others* at that!) created your truth back then, even your sense of who you are. And it's all manifesting right now – as **struggle**, decades later. Confident, however, that causes live 1) with others and 2) in the present, you miss all this. So while you're trying to solve the wrong problem, your unconscious mind (keeper of old lessons) tells you: "You learned life is a struggle; now it is; therefore, you must be right. Even better, you learned struggle pays off in the end; you've achieved a lot; therefore, you must be right." If you **like** struggle and stress, maybe this is all OK, and you needn't consider new ideas. But maybe you don't.

Life *can* be hard; people *can* be difficult; obstacles *do* exist. But rarely do they cause you struggle. What causes struggle is how you learned to think ... about life, about people, about obstacles. By mistaking "them" as cause, you're led down a path of fixing the wrong thing. Then you're probably surprised struggle persists.

The path beyond? Expand your view: 1) accept that causes can precede effects by years, even decades; 2) learn to consciously *notice* what's happening in this moment (effect), as observer, not just as participant – not so you can blame, but so you can 3) *trace it back to its true source* (cause). Noticing reestablishes the lost cause-and-effect link between what you experience (in the *present*) and thoughts that created it (in the *past*). When you **see** how old thoughts cause your struggle, you can release outdated thinking, along with the fight and blame.

While you're reflecting, you might also ponder what life might be like today if, back then, you'd learned the most crucial life skill of all – *conscious, objective, non-judgmental awareness of this very moment*, and of who you are in this moment. It's the most powerful tool you could have to steer life's next moment as you choose. By the way, this skill is innate; it's always been inside you. It's just that you learned to ignore or even deny it in the pressure to accept all the "other" lessons ... ones that said answers live in the external world, rather than inside yourself.

Exercise: The threads of life experience: think of life's lessons and experiences as *threads*. You don't choose threads (stuff happens), but you *do* choose how you weave them into a fabric – your “life story.” Without clear awareness of threads, along with a sense of cause-and-effect, life's lessons “live you.” As you grow awareness, however, you become free to weave a new story – your own. There's no need to change anything you're doing, or even “try” to do anything at all. Instead, reflect on your life today, and perhaps its struggles. See each element as a ball of thread. Then, as might a detective, see if you can unravel the ball ... back to the old thought, lesson or experience that created it. As noted above, you may discover old lessons – life is difficult; the thinking of others is more reliable than your own; the kind of person you are is measured by your achievement; your own unique creative essence doesn't matter as much as these other things. With growing awareness, you'll likely also find the *authentic* you – the one who may have become lost in life's pressures to achieve/conform – the “you” who can create all day long (*without* struggle, stress, anxiety). With clear views of “both stories,” you become free to choose the course your life takes from here. It's one thought away. A cautionary note: your “thinking” will likely tell you that *noticing your thinking* is nonsense. So, if you're to benefit from an exercise such as this, you need to be on the lookout for that block, and be rigorous in adopting a regular/everyday practice of self-reflection.

Life lessons from nature: Cause-and-effect is everywhere in nature. It's “how nature works.” Sometimes effect follows cause immediately (wind uproots a tree). Other times, effect follows so long after cause that we struggle to understand it (Hawaiian islands continue to emerge from a single volcanic ‘hot spot’ under the Pacific Ocean.) Let's zoom in on an interesting example: California. California is an *effect*. It's the effect of many [not-so-easy to discern] causes. The Pacific Ocean plate is sliding underneath the North American plate, causing the land to rise. Mountains form. Depending on conditions below the surface, some become volcanoes. (Formed this way, these mountains aren't as “solid” as, say, New Hampshire's White Mountains, which look like a single piece of granite.) Over time, rain and wind break mountains down. The “stuff” of the mountains slides downhill. Two examples: 1) the entire “plain” on which Los Angeles sits (about 1000 square miles) is largely made up of this “stuff.” 2) mudslides common in southern California are largely made up of this “stuff,” too, with a lot of water added. Cause-and-effect ... operating over periods of time longer than human history. No doubt our inability to “see” this happening resulted in our choice to build cities *on top of* said “stuff” ... only to live in anguish (even surprise) when the fruits of our labor are destroyed ... unaware that nature has been *creating* this way for millennia. So perhaps only from this big picture view does California make sense. From our more myopic view, it makes problems. It's cause-and-effect either way. (I have a geologist friend who will read this, and perhaps point out some inaccuracy in the details of my story; yet I'm betting she'd agree with the big picture of cause-and-effect nature.)



MY NEW BOOK: *A Field Guide to Life: Navigating the Challenges of Our Lives and Times*. Available soon (stay tuned). If your life is a struggle, there's a reason for it – and it's not the reason you may think. This book explores 11 common sources of struggle we experience today (*effects*), and – through ideas, perspectives, examples, personal reflection and exercises – helps you trace them back to their *true causes* (most often thoughts from the ancient past, lessons of others, and your unquestioning willingness to see them as “truth”). Topics include our relationships with Silence, Not Knowing, Reality, Critical Thinking, Conscious Awareness, Communication, Conflict, Self-Care, Nature's Wisdom, Living Authentically and Living Sustainably. If you have the courage and openness to allow new ways of seeing to change you, this book may be an option you didn't know you had, one that will open pathways never imagined possible – back to dreams you may long ago have abandoned as hopeless.

My (first) book: *Living Authentically ... in a World That Would Rather You Didn't*. Its *premise* is simple: in the midst of a world that has lost its way, you need never lose your own. Get to know, then honor, your unique truth; the self-trust that emerges will light your way forever. Insights, perspectives, personal reflections and exercises ... so you can make your life your own, not someone else's. It's all right [here](#) – intro, samples, purchase link – [for you or as a gift](#).

Book of the month: *Breath*, by James Nestor. Just as we were rarely taught to know and appreciate our own consciousness and uniqueness, we were rarely taught to know our physical presence either. As Nestor offers in great depth: 1) no other creature on earth can harm its health by how it breathes; 2) no known native culture has breathing-related issues; 3) most of [western] society does. He shows – through story, experiment, science, example – how learning to breathe properly can not only improve health, but can reverse many medical issues. Heavy, science-based (yet accessible to a layperson), often sobering ... and filled with possibility. And if you're on Cape Cod, you'll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.