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Spring 2018

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Connecting With Self Through Mother Nature.

Paths Forward:

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Connecting With Self Through Mother Nature.

An astute member of the LifeMap community and one of our Northern neighbors (think maple syrup, congenial politeness, and a national anthem within the reach of normal, human vocal cords) recently wrote that he had noticed I have been revealing more of myself in this year's editions of LifeMap. I haven't done so purposefully but after re-reading a few I am inclined to agree. I have never tried to hide my opinions but I have made a conscious effort to convey information in such a way that even those who might not share my point of view could find value in the content I rigorously screen on behalf of my readers. Maybe it's my stage of life or a late-blooming sense of self-confidence or the understanding that some of the most personal issues are sometimes also the most universal. So, with that in mind I will share some aspects of a personal journey that I've been

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will share some aspects of a personal journey that I've been on this year.

In his long, modernist poem, *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot began "April is the cruelest month." As a student years ago I could no more figure out what this poem was about than the man in the moon. And the pleasant, well-intentioned nun who was my English teacher was of no help. In my adult re-reading I now understand *The Waste Land* is to poetry what James Joyce's *Ulysses* is to novels. Not that I have it all figured out, mind you. Unscrambling all of Eliot's literary allusions requires someone with a more poetic sensibility than I possess. What I have learned, however, is that some modern, free verse poetry communicates things to me - stirs things in me- that I do not fully understand.

From my passion for history I have some understanding of the post-traumatic psychology of WWI's lost generation. I can see how, after the murderous carnage of the "War To End All Wars" it could seem to Eliot that even the season of Spring itself could have lost it's promise, it's allure and that perhaps even the land itself had lost it's fertility and ability to bring forth life. April in New England, where I grew up, can be especially cruel offering a warm sun that was missing for months on one day and drowning one's spirits the next in a cold, grey rain.

Maybe that's why I so love the month of May. It does contain my birthday though outside of certain milestones I don't consider that a big deal. Memorial Day is always important to me as it reminds me to hoist the parting glass to the better men who have gone before me. But I do love May. There is nothing more sensual than the fragrance of lilacs in bloom drifting in through one of the first open-window nights of the season. Just heavenly.

Living in Florida I now enter spring less depleted. Without the need to brace myself for winter's onslaught this year in gratitude I made an active choice to embrace Mother Nature earlier, more directly and journal my thoughts and reactions. My experiences have motivated me to read (and in a few instances re-read) how others have made use of these kinds of natural experiences. Below I reference a half-dozen or so books that have served me as guides of a sort over the last few months. While my original plan was to move in a more outward direction, it turns out that the most distance I traveled was inward. Should that be your cup of tea I hope you find something of value here that you might enjoy.

Paths Forward:

* To drop some weight and get more fresh air I decided to get out walking more regularly. It's interesting to me how much more one can observe and enjoy of one's surroundings when you put down the electronics (i.e. phone, music, emails) and challenge yourself to stay in the moment instead of jumping mentally ahead to the rest of the day or ruminating on yesterday. It takes a bit of practice but there is a lot more to be gained from a good walk than just working up a good sweat.

Growing up in Massachusetts the transcendentalists like Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson were mandatory reading. But other than his essay *Civil Disobedience* (which, like many, I read in the '60's & '70's) I had never delved much into Thoreau even though I had gone swimming in Walden Pond while playing hooky from high school. In 1851 he gave a lecture on the spiritual value of walking which was published posthumously a year later as an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* (still one of our most important magazines). If you are curious about how to really see what is around you especially when you are outdoors I recommend [Walking](#) by Henry David Thoreau. You may not experience for yourself the lost beauty of America's 19th century fields and forests but his lyrical descriptions will settle you nicely into a state of mind where you hear more of what is around you, recognize different scents, feel the internal rhythms of your body and more acutely perceive whatever beauty you may have missed that is all around you.

* I'm *not* an avid bird watcher - the sort who travel great distances, with their binoculars and notebooks, outfitted from their tweed caps down to their rubber wellies. Where I write when I'm on Cape Cod I can look out a second floor window and see the typical shore birds I grew up with - a variety of gulls and ducks, sandpipers dodging the incoming tide on their tiny little feet, the occasional gannet or cormorant, the Canadian geese who won't go home, the long-gliding shearwaters who make me crane my neck to follow them and, yes, on trash day the smart-ass crows - yakety-yaking away at 5 a.m., unabashed busy bodies who, like most burglars, work in crafty pairs. When I relax reading on the front porch I am often kept company by a family of chickadees or a couple of cardinals. We whistle and chirp to each other in a call and response routine thanks to my favorite teacher Miss Marcella Malinowski who opened the world to me from a 5th grade classroom by, among any other creative techniques, playing records to teach us bird calls.

In Florida, on the Gulf Coast, it's a whole other deal. I still sit up straight when spotting a stately bald eagle. There's the great horned owl couple who spookily talk to each other in the dark from two streets away and woe to the baby bunny or squirrel who stays out past bedtime. Outside the five-foot wide ground floor window next to where I write here waist-tall ibis, egrets, and herons sometimes stand absolutely statue-like and other times move with a stately gentleman's stride as they stalk the bushes and windowsill for the little geckos who stare in and flirt with me. But I've started to notice hummingbirds. I'm fascinated by them. I've caught myself staring at them for minutes at a time when I'm supposed to be working. And then suddenly - poof - they're gone. They are colorful and dainty and airy and speedy. They seem playful and curious. They can disappear and reappear like magic. When I spot one I suddenly feel lucky and they make me smile. I don't remember seeing them growing up but that was in the DDT days before Rachel Carson and the *Silent Spring*. If these little guys amuse, intrigue or delight you, do what I did and go out and get [The Hummingbird Book: The Complete Guide to Attracting, Identifying, and](#)

[Enjoying Hummingbirds](#) by Donald and Lillian Stokes.

I have learned what incredibly intelligent and powerful little animals they are. By luck I have flowers here that attract them but I'll be using the Stokes' advice on how to draw them to the Cape.

* Speaking of Cape Cod I've heard it said that one book more than any other inspired President Kennedy to set aside 40 miles of coastline running through six towns along the Atlantic-facing shore to create the Cape Cod National Seashore in 1961. [The Outermost House: A Year of Life On The Great Beach of Cape Cod](#) by Henry Beston has been waiting for me on my bookshelf for a couple of years before I recently got to it. In 1928 Beston wrote this nature classic after observing natural life from a small, 20 x 16 cottage he dubbed "the Fo'castle" in the dunes of Coast Guard Beach in Eastham. Like Ernest Hemingway he had seen action in WWI and served as an ambulance driver at the horrific Battle of Verdun where recent estimates indicate there were 976,000 casualties. Shaken to his core he retreated to the outer beach at Eastham in search of peace of mind and solitude. He stayed there off and on for two years, leaving only occasionally. His prose reflects his appreciation of Mother Nature's power, fury, mystery, and infinite beauty. Beston argued for reattaching ourselves to the natural world of migrating birds, the cycles of the tides, the shifting dunes, and an infinite universe of stars. His words are as heartfelt as they were 90 years ago. *"The world today is sick to its thin blood for the lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water, for air, for the dear earth itself underfoot."* It is reported that Rachel Carson said that Beston was the author who most influenced her writing so it is no wonder he is considered the father of the modern environmental movement. To me, Henry Beston is a kindred spirit in our mutual love of the Cape. There are two more Cape Cod books related to the two above that are still waiting for me on that shelf. They are: [Cape Cod](#) by Henry David Thoreau and Henry Beston's [Cape Cod: How "The Outermost House" Inspired a National Seashore](#) by Don Wilding. I look forward to getting to them in the next couple of months.

It's funny how certain books just show up at the right time. My dear friend Cheryl Richardson has a new book that I think you will like as much as I do: [Waking Up in Winter: In Search of What Really Matters at Midlife](#)

Never one to shy from powerful intuition Cheryl listened to that inner voice we all have but often suppress or ignore. What she heard was a message that now - at midlife - was a darn good time to reevaluate her life to assess and in some cases uncover or rediscover what *really* mattered to her.

Cheryl's inner journey is reflected in her frank journal entries about work, marriage, friendships, and life priorities. Only the bravest writers will offer up their life experiences as a case study but Cheryl is one of the brave-hearted. LifeMap community members know how much I value the journey toward a more satisfying and meaningful life. If this kind of exploration and inner journey appeals to you then so will this

volume. Maybe the time is right for you like it was for me.

* In our culture a very common measure of our psychological health is how effective we are in managing our interactions with other people. But what is often overlooked is how successful we are at making time available for ourselves: for us to be alone and to use that time in our own best interest. It is said that a major distinction between Western and Eastern philosophies is the former's focus on doing versus the latter's focus on being. I think this is the reason that solitude often gets confused with loneliness. Loneliness refers to unhappiness due to a lack of companionship. Solitude is the state of being alone - which I find to be quite energizing and nourishing.

Does it make you antisocial or misanthropic if you enjoy your solitude? Absolutely not. Becoming completely reclusive or socially isolated is certainly indicative of a problem but making time to be alone, to listen and sort through the thoughts buzzing around in your brain is one of the most healthful things you can do for yourself. Given today's 24/7 digital connectivity we are at the beck and call of whomever reaches out to us whenever they chose to do so: bosses, customers / clients, colleagues, family, friends. Yes, there are some obvious benefits to this technological development but many folks have privately shared with me that we are losing something as well and oft times it is space to be alone. With this in mind I recently re-visited two books that, in different ways address this important issue. I have written before about [Solitude: A Return to the Self](#) by Anthony Storr. Citing numerous examples of brilliant scholars and artists- from Beethoven and Kant to Anne Sexton and Beatrix Potter- Storr makes a strong case that solitary activity is essential not only for geniuses, but also for the likes of you and me as well. Written almost 30 years ago this book is more important than ever to help you tune out the "noise" in your life.

* As I've walked around the area around my home these recent months I remembered a book from years past that I really enjoyed about another walk. You may find this memoir less instructive than those above though I'm very much sure you'll enjoy it. It may take you a bit of effort to find it but it's well worth it.

An idea comes to Kevin O'Hara, himself a Viet Nam veteran from Western Massachusetts, while ensconced in a pub while on a visit to family in Ireland. The brainstorm is to travel Ireland's circumference by donkey cart. [The Last of the Donkey Pilgrims](#): by Kevin O'Hara is subtitled *One Man's Journey to Discover His Roots*. It is a fascinating, amusing, and insightful journey and as with most journeys what O'Hara discovers is mostly himself. If you've ever been to Ireland you'll know what I'm referring to when I say he captures with a linguist's ear the cadence and lilt of the Irish tongue that can suggest you go straight to the Devil in such a way that you'll enjoy the trip. If you don't laugh aloud when his Aunt Cella pronounces, "I think you're a half-boiled eejit!" then you have no sense of humor entirely. Over the days and miles O'Hara falls in love with his willful but

endearing donkey Missie and ends up walking beside her for 1800 miles because he just can't bring himself to add to her burden. In a brilliant and tender piece of writing she narrates the epilogue of the story. Do yourself a great favor- take this walk with Kevin and Missie - and then plan out a good walk for yourself. Who knows what you'll find.

LifeMap (sm) is about encouraging you to put some time aside to focus on yourself.

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For the past 30 years I've surveyed successful job hunters and captured their proven shortcuts, insider knowledge and time-saving / stress-reducing tips.

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