

Your Life Well Lived
Wellness Advice for Mind, Body and Spirit

56 Sunsets

Surrendering to a place and a time of solitude

by Carol Pearson
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It wasn't the first time I'd been alone. I'd traveled to London on business, flown cross-country on my own any number of times, and taken a weekend escape by myself now and then.

But this was different. This was an entirely new rabbit hole.

Officially and recently divorced, I was single and solo after 24 years of being married to my senior prom date. And I was about to spend two entire months in an 800-square-foot cottage on the Gulf of Mexico, just steps from the ocean on a little spit of sand called Cape San Blas.

Intentionally embracing our solitude (as opposed to simply experiencing our loneliness) has been shown to have specific benefits — namely, freedom, creativity, intimacy and spirituality.

(Long & Averill, 2003)

My own quest was for inner peace — a cessation (even temporary) of the chorus of voices in my head that had an opinion on every action I took, every plan I made. I was desperate to find some inner quiet and turn off the committee that ruled and judged my life. I needed to rid myself of the underlying anxiety I'd been sparring with for years.

Like Alice in Lewis Carroll's classic novel, I felt I'd lost my true voice over the years and was speaking, acting and living to please the rest of the world — at the expense of myself.

"You're not the same as you were before," the Mad Hatter says to Alice. "You were much more ... 'muchier.' You've lost your 'muchness.'"

Maybe here I would get my "muchness" back. After two days on the road, I pulled into the

sand drive leading up to my little yellow fortress of solitude and had a moment of defiant glee.

The first several days would be filled with visits from family (my daughters, on winter break from college, and my snow-bird parents who were passing through).

Still, I carved out some time each evening just for me, enjoying the sunset in solitude. I had promised myself I would journal while I was here, having already experienced how healing and powerful the practice could be.

As the sun sank down, I began to write:

Day 1 — Here

Arrived just before sunset, after two days in the car. Serene, peaceful ... and so many colors in the sky. It will be good here.

I wrote self-consciously at first, monitoring my thoughts to please a nonexistent audience, much the way I'd judged everything I did in my life, with a critical eye and a harsh judgmental tone. Those inner voices can be a constant to so many of us, as Tara Brach explains in her book on radical acceptance.

"Each day we listen to inner voices that keep our life small," Brach writes. "The way out of our cage begins with *accepting absolutely everything* about ourselves and our lives." (Brach, 2003)

To me, this meant completely accepting my "failed" marriage, my single status, the emotional toll it had taken on our two daughters, and learning to do so without judgment or regret. Talk about a tall order.

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Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World (2003)

Nautical readers are so infatuated with Patrick O'Brian's seafaring novels that this 2003 film adaptation probably had too many expectations surrounding it. But taken on its own, it's both a ripping adventure yarn and a delicate character study — the latter coming mostly in its look at the friendship between Capt. Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe in fine form) and Dr. Stephen Maturin (Paul Bettany), whose voyages during the Napoleonic Wars are tracked by O'Brian through his literary series. Director Peter Weir makes us believe we're aboard H.M.S. *Surprise*, as we hear every groaning timber and flapping sail; the ship's derring-do off the coast of South America is marvelous to behold. A side trip to the Galapagos Islands — the film's only sequence on land — gives a heady glimpse of nature in full flower, a contrast to the civilized warfare of men. For all the fun, the film leaves behind a lovely sense of how Aubrey and Maturin keep the human flame burning despite their extreme circumstances. They read, they play music (violin and cello), they hold deep conversations. Finding one's place on the compass has more than one meaning in this watery world.

MUSIC REVIEWS

The mystery of what's next, the unexpected journeys of our lives and our relationships, expressed through music, for your enjoyment.

by Joe Rodriguez / Freelance music writer



"The River & The Thread" (Album) — Rosanne Cash, 2013

Johnny Cash's daughter took a trip down through the Deep South to help restore her father's childhood home. During the journey, she immersed herself in her family's roots and learned more about herself in the process. The musical results take us down the twists and turns of the backcountry below the Mason-Dixon Line. Delivering a smooth mix of folk, blues and old-time country, the songs trace her lineage. "When the Master Calls the Roll" takes the listener back to the Civil War, during which Cash's ancestors fought on both sides of the battlefield. "The Sunken Lands" is her way of sharing the experience of growing up in Arkansas, her father's boyhood home. The gems on this album are strung along like the small towns that grace the Mississippi. Give *The River & The Thread* a listen and be transported.



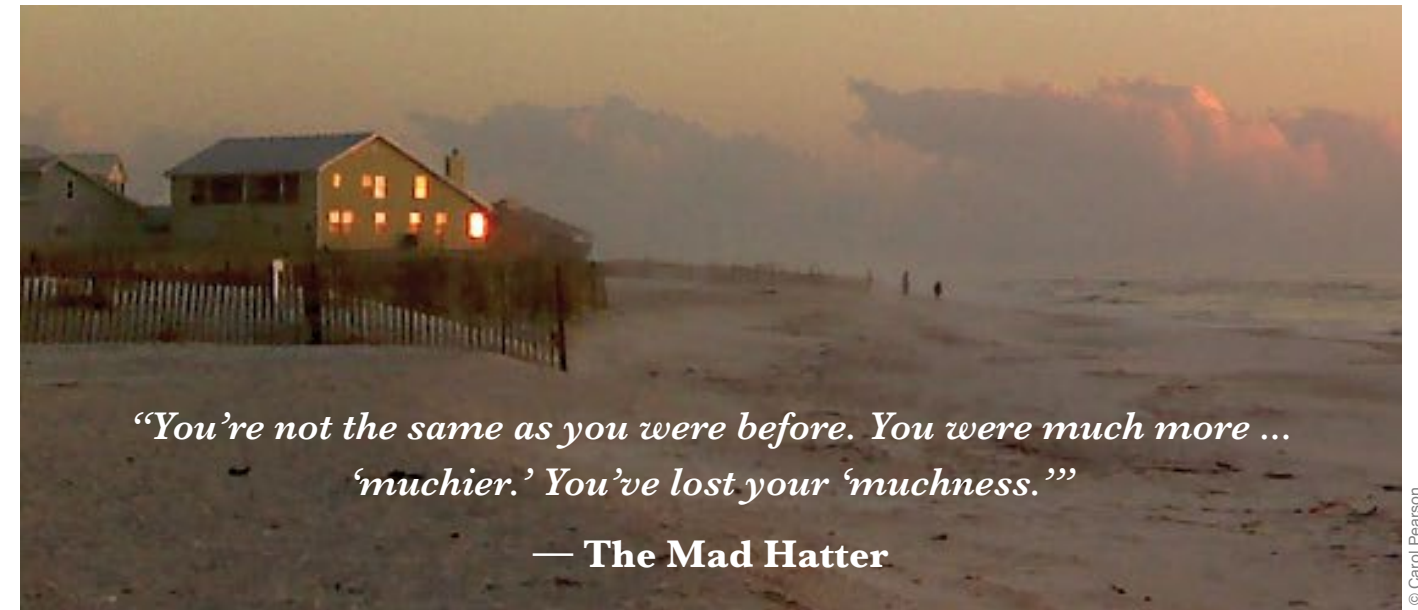
"There's a Light Beyond These Woods (Mary Margaret)" (Single) — Nanci Griffith, 1978

The debut album from Nanci Caroline Griffith, a kindergarten teacher turned folk singer-songwriter, contains this title track named for her best friend. It weaves a somewhat auto-biographical story of two best friends planning for adventure and determined to see the world outside their small town. In reality, Griffith was the one who stayed home and settled down while Margaret went to NYC to live out the wild fantasies they dreamed of when they were young. Eventually, Griffith becomes the adventurous traveler, singing and playing clubs and living out the life she always imagined. This song catapulted Griffith from small-town Texas teacher to award-winning country artist whose career has spanned more than 30 years.



"Life Is An Adventure" (Single) — Violent Femmes, Viva Wisconsin, 1999

This obscure gem really never saw the light of day until it was tossed on to the *Rock!!!* album, comprised of throw-away tracks from past releases. The track, which enjoyed new life on the live album *Viva Wisconsin* is an autobiographical depiction of this Milwaukee alternative post-punk band and their "we are just going to go on this path and not look back" attitude. The message is simple: If you believe in yourself and are willing to live without fear of what is ahead, then life will always be an adventure. Just do what you want to do, live for the here and now, and don't look back. Rock!



"You're not the same as you were before. You were much more ... 'muchier.' You've lost your 'muchness.'"

— The Mad Hatter

The days took on their own kind of rhythm, crashing and receding like the waves outside the cottage door. In that rhythm, I found time for deep introspection every morning while I meditated or walked on the beach and calm reflection in the evenings as the sun sizzled out in the waves.

While I could feel a growing peace, it came at the price of fresh anxieties and fears as my old demons fought to hang on:

Day 7

Had the familiar welling up of an anxiety attack today, and hated every moment of it. Triggered by ... the change of plans? The gray day? Whatever the cause, it seems the closer I get to breaking free of my past patterns of fear and anxiety, the more I recognize the symptoms when they start. I will not go back to living this way ... and maybe my ego knows this and is doing all it can to keep its hold.

I went through a painful week or so where I couldn't go deep, could barely muster up a handful of sentences at the end of each day, afraid of the thoughts that were forcing their way to the surface. I spent my time frying oysters and baking blueberry pies, anything to keep my mind off the obvious issue.

Finally a huge truth dawned on me:

Day 15

Fear tried to grab me today, the old anxiety about work, earning my own way in life, future, etc. Took a bit of doing, but I shook

it off. There is nothing wrong, there is no one judging me, and everything is fine. Enough already. I can't believe I used to live this way all the time.

Bella DePaulo, Ph.D. writes that the simple fact of being solo means we are not monitored or judged by our usual suspects. "In this state of unselfconscious being we are free to think, free to listen to our hearts without external interpretation." (DePaulo, 2011)

Halfway through my time on the beach, I knew this was true. I was surprised to realize one day that my anxiety, that old familiar "friend" I lived with for so many years, was gone, replaced by ... nothing. I felt calm, present and at peace:

Day 28 — Halfway to Here

Life is meant to be joyous. Creation sings all around us every day. Yet we have decided to cloak the experience in fear ... fear of losing what we have, afraid to try something new because we might lose that too ... and so in the process, we lose the only thing it is possible to experience — the moment.

Yet, I knew it still lurked, waiting for a moment of weakness to rear up, but I accepted that, embraced it as part of my past and a possibility for my future. And in accepting it, it somehow lost a significant amount of its power over me.

I threw myself into the next month, facing the tough emotional work and embracing the ever-growing sense of inner peace. One month later, I packed

up to head home, peaceful and relaxed, spent yet happy, ready to get back and start writing my next chapter:

Day 56 — As Is

While I might not see the long road ahead, I see the next step in front of me, and I put my foot firmly in front of me again, walking on. Life is roaringly beautiful ... and I walk on.

Like Alice, emerging from the rabbit hole, on the drive home I left behind the crazy but self-inflicted characters, ignoring the Queen of Hearts' decree to chop off my head and throwing her playing cards back in her face. It was time to live my own life, in all its messy, glorious muchness. ♦

Sources:

Portions of this article originally appeared in the author's blog, "56 Sunsets" on Tumblr.com. To read more, visit capesanblas.tumblr.com.

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