

Outdoor Insight The Unity in Our Differences

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On a journey of discovery the lessons may not come easily, but the experience can transform your life. Halfway into one such journey, a six-week backpacking trip in the spectacular eastern Sierra mountains, the dramatic change from summer to fall mirrored the change that I was about to undergo, a shift as magical as the landscape transformed by the stunning fall colors. Little did I know that Nature held such a profound lesson for me, demonstrating with simple clarity how **our choices in any moment—not our circumstances—are what makes life heaven or hell.**

Thorough planning, preparation and follow through brought a feeling of purpose and the anticipation of sharing a grand learning experience with my buddy. Seeing nature as a teacher turns the trails in life into pathways leading to heaven

right here on earth. Never knowing what to expect except for the adventure of the unexpected, simply having the faith to take action in harmony with this purpose reveals the wisdom in nature's subtle voice. As a photographer, my camera becomes a tool I use to "hear" that voice more clearly. My intent to capture what's most important becomes a way to align my inner values with my outer experience.

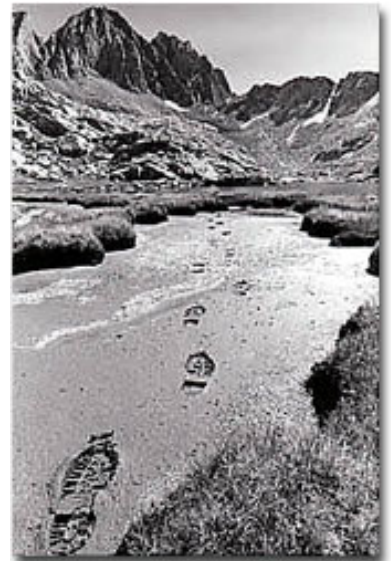
I found that the pathways leading out into nature were actually leading into a deeper connection with myself, others and the healing energies of the natural world. Serenity lay not in the outer world but the inner one. The quiet beauty in wilderness mirrors the path to peace and stillness within us all. As we embarked on our adventure into nature's classroom, I was eager to share this transformational discovery with my buddy.

Communing with beauty that could aptly be described as spiritual, I was having the time of my life, when, seemingly out of the blue, my buddy told me he wanted to cut the trip short and head out of the backcountry as soon as possible. "WHAT!?" I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Two years had gone into the preparation, many hours and dollars invested, and all of a sudden he wants to forget it all! How could that be?

We were in the eastern Sierra, camped on an isthmus at Thousand Island Lake when everything changed. I was enjoying a cup of hot chocolate protected from the chill inside the tent as the day's last light faded into darkness. All was well. However, listening to my buddy's somber, apologetic tone revealing his discontent, I was suddenly transported to another place.

Now I was clutching my hot chocolate in a desperate grasping for a modicum of comfort, huddled beneath thin fabric in retreat from the cold and wind while the temperature and sun steadily dropped. Sitting with my arms and legs crossed, I entered a world in which I was increasingly aware of the slight discomforts, the numbness in my toes, my folded body posture and the restriction of so many layers of clothing, that just weren't there moments before. Frozen between two conflicting worlds in that moment of confusion, my mind grappled with opposing realities. Reflexively, I turned and blurted out, "Are you serious? Why would you want to leave?"

"Well," he said, with a forced patience, "For three weeks now I've been waiting for the weather to get better, but it's not. It's been cold... Not just a little, I mean, really cold! And every time I want to enjoy myself, I can't. The wind comes sweeping by and it's making me miserable."





Listening to his words, I slowly began to realize that although we had been sharing the same trip and experiencing the same outer reality, our inner realities couldn't have been more different. I thought backwards, trying to make sense of it all. Yes, it had been a little cold, but until he brought it up, I hadn't noticed it. We bought extra layers in town so the cold wouldn't be a problem. And yes, I could recall some wind, but I couldn't remember it being a burden. We argued back and forth. This was no small matter; you don't just throw away the trip of a lifetime because the weather's a little colder than usual! How could our experience be so dramatically different? He went on explaining how everything he enjoyed about the mountains was taken away. He couldn't nap in warm meadows. He couldn't jump in the lakes and streams. He would say, what really makes the trips enjoyable for me is fishing, but every time I try to fish, I can't, because it's too cold and windy. The wind has been blowing the whole trip making it hell.

"Wind?" I thought to myself, "Is he really saying it's so windy it's making the trip hell? How could that be? Everything's been great. What's he talking about?" Exasperated I finally said, "What do you mean, wind!? WHAT WIND?"

In the brief silent pause following that ill fated question, a distant hiss from across the lake whispered in the night. Growing steadily louder for several long moments, the whisper became a howl forewarning a powerful blast of air hurling towards us. W-H-A-M! The tent shuddered violently, bending and straining in the thrashing gale. Vindicated, he just looked at me. I wasn't sure which message was louder, the one in his face that said, "So're you just playing stupid?" or the words he shouted over the din of flapping nylon, "THAT WIND, damn it!"

An unwelcome reality suddenly washed over me. Everything was fine until that moment. How could I have been so unaware of this "hell" the whole time? Trying to make sense of it all, I replayed the past weeks in my mind wondering whether the "heaven" I was living in was a lie?



Looking back I realized that I wasn't living a lie, I was living a different story. It was the stories, our internal dialogues, which set us apart. The world we experienced wasn't the one out there, but the one in here. Yes we were indeed on the same trip, exposed to the same circumstances, and yet experiencing two entirely different worlds because of the way our stories differed by the questions directing our thoughts.

In my world I was simply unaware of the potential misery, because I wasn't LIVING in the wind or cold - *I was living in the calm between gusts and the comfort between layers of warm clothing.* The questions directing me sounded like, "How can I see and experience all the beauty, balance and adventure around me?" While my buddy's questions, "Why does it have to be so cold and miserable?" were directing him to experience more of the misery in his own unmet expectations. While I was focused solely on what I love from within, revealing all that was right and good with what was without; he was focused solely on what he loved from without revealing the inevitable disappointment of seeking happiness in his expectations for the world outside himself.



This critical difference in focus is what allows us to not only see past life's discomfort, but avoid it altogether treating the unexpected as just another part of the adventure and the challenges as just another piece of the puzzle to be solved. By focusing on our love from within the world reflects that love from without. Choosing love from within directs us to love's gifts, the peace, joy, comfort and fulfillment even in amidst the cold wind in the world we experience.

This is the way nature teaches us about life. Her curriculum is conducted through metaphor, the way dreams communicate in pictures. Looking beneath the surface at the underlying meaning reveals the important messages. Pay attention, watch and learn. Nature is a wise teacher. What might nature be mirroring for you in your own life adventure?

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About Jon Lewis...

Jon uses nature and photography as a unique pathway to explore personal insight. Living in Leucadia near San Diego, he is the founder of Life Tools Coaching and Photography offering inspirational photographic art, workshops, outdoor learning adventures and group or one on one coaching. To contact or learn more about Jon and Life Tools, visit his website at www.lifetools.org, call (760) 230-1367 or send an e-mail to jon@lifetools.org.

