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## Of Work and Water

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# OF Work AND Water

I hate to hear adults scold children for “drifting off” because we do it all the time, especially at work. After all, the practice is just like sleep; it may not look like much from the outside, but we need some of it every day to keep going.

Look closely at the places where people work and you may find bits of their “drifting-off” lives showing. They look up from work to a certain spot in the office and for a moment, or an hour, are elsewhere. Tucked into the corner of one colleague’s book shelf is a scorpion in a chunk of amber. How often does the sight of it return her to a float trip through the Grand Canyon, and to the morning ritual of shaking out her boots? Dead scorpions are, in my experience, rarely found in offices. Pictures of children are more common. They always seem to be out of date. “Oh. He’s changed so much since then. That one is almost three years old.” It’s no wonder people keep old pictures in their offices. If their stories are even close to true, family folks tend to go home to cope with their children’s homework and hormones. The inner world is so much calmer and more stable in memories. One friend used to keep a picture of himself picking up his high school prom date. He has assured me he hasn’t seen her in thirty years, but the picture is probably still in the top, left drawer of his desk under tea bags and exams. I wonder where he goes when he drifts off.

We need to have these places we go in our minds when work gets... well, like work. Even interesting jobs, like college teaching, require that we use knowledge and skills over and over again. So even those of us who love our jobs, and certainly those who

by William Levin



hate them, at times need other lives that can be entered without having to move from the desk...at a moments notice...without anyone knowing. In fact, I am doing it now.

On the wall over my computer is a chart of Buzzards Bay, and next to it is a watercolor of my sailboat. Someone looking something like me (he has too much hair) is at the helm. We are close-hauled under full sail, charging along a shore line I don't quite recognize. It has the low, scrub-pine look of much of the Elizabeth Islands in Buzzards Bay, but the sand is the wrong color. I think. It has been a few weeks now, and the details are fading. I can look at my chart and tell you the names of the islands Naushon, Pasque, Nashawena, Cuttyhunk and Uncatena and Nonamesset, the little ones closest to Woods Hole. Their Indian names evoke a time when the islands were not owned by the heirs of Malcolm Forbes, and there were no signs warning "no landing." The islands extend south west from Woods Hole for sixteen nautical miles to form the southern boundary between Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound. You will reach them in about two hours sailing in my semi-slow Sea Sprite (named "Late Bloomer") if you leave Sippican Harbor about noon as the sea breeze comes up, then sail a course of 190 degrees magnetic. It is not the kind of boating many people associate with summers afternoons, the kind done on flat water with slack sails. When I drift off at my desk I remember sailing by precise compass headings and worrying about the soundness of my gear. It is a special kind of relaxation that not everyone understands. It needs describing.

Late Bloomer is moored half an hour from work. The gear I need to sail her, an emergency tool kit, wool sweater, jeans and flashlight are in a waterproof bag beside the door to my garage. From a seated start in my office I can be on route 495 south in nine minutes. In the car on the way there I am usually still working. There are always details of my work life I need to note on a pad next to me. I may make up my mind about something I have been writing or will teach the next day. I can even recall working out the requirements of a research project while rowing out to the boat. But when I drop the mooring line into the cove, the door is shut on every detail of my life except the boat and the water. Sailing demands it, and I accept what sailing requires: its preparation, attention to detail, care about the weather, and most of all, concentration on what is happening on the water and on nothing else.

Buzzards Bay is only technically not the ocean. Out of shelter of the inner harbor, just a few dozen yards from the children playing on the beaches, there is real weather. You can count on it almost every day. What happens is that on summer and early fall mornings the sun heats the dark canopy of trees in the Myles Standish Forest, causing the air to rise. The water of Buzzards Bay is not warmed as quickly, so the colder air from over the bay rushes in to fill the void, and the sea breeze starts across the water from the southeast.



By two in the afternoon the wind is often up to 15 miles-an-hour and it has begun to bunch the surface of the water into a short, steep chop. Depending on the tide and the strength of the wind, the waves often average five feet and are separated from one another by some thirty feet. What that means to a twenty three foot boat is that a ten mile sail requires fifteen miles of motion, assuming you count the

up-and-down. A boat with a thirty foot waterline can span much of the opening between waves, so its ride is somewhat smoothed out. But a boat like Late Bloomer, with its nineteen foot waterline, climbs the face of each wave and slides down its back, often heeling over so that the mast is at 45° to the water. The waves usually come in fairly predictable sets of six or seven, then a flat or simply choppy area slides under the boat, and another set must be negotiated. But at the helm I cannot afford to depend upon this pattern, because rogue waves several feet larger than the average for the day arrive with no warning. One afternoon some friends and I were enjoying a roller-coaster ride through four and five foot waves when we were hit by a series of waves between which you could have hidden a small garage. The wind did not change to warn us. The color of the water didn't either. But our view of the sky did. One of my guests was, to put it generously, not a sailor, but to her this was a whee

of a ride. The corkscrew motion of the boat combined roll, pitch and yaw. Wedges of green sea water big enough to stop a fullback slogged into the cockpit. I pasted a huge smile on my face to conceal from her the fact that she was confusing the deadly elements with an amusement ride.

And there is the sound of the wind. I turn my head the right amount this way or that and it gets in my ears, like breath across a bottle top, and it can peep, or hoot, or moan, or shriek. The wire and rope rigging turns the boat into a stringed instrument. The pitch of the vibrating lines becomes a familiar scale in time, so decisions about when to shorten the amount of sail are sung to me, or they are pounded on the mast by taut halyards. Sometimes, the sound the wind makes is so singular that it might as well just say in English, "Turn around and go home, stupid."

I am there now though I am at my desk. I am there in the same way as I am on evenings after rough sailing when closing my eyes during my hot shower makes the floor of the tub roll. I know that this may not be your kind of fun. I'm not trying to convince other people to do it, just to understand. Understand that we really do leave one world for another when we slip the mooring in the cove and set out to who knows what. Understand that on any day it may matter intensely that the sails, lines, wires, pulleys and other gear on board work correctly, and that we cannot know beforehand if that day is this one. And most important of all, understand that it is a good for all of us to have such places to go when we are not at work, if only to give us a place to revisit without warning or obvious movement when we are.