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Of Work and Water

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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 bookshelf 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 They always seem to be out of date.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...
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. 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 sloshed 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 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 cry, or sound like the wind makes is so singular that it might as well be 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 didn't either. 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 sloshed 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 sail. 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 sloshed 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.

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