I find myself constantly impressed with how quickly the sensational world compresses itself into sameness and mundanity, how easily our species etches routine tedium into the structure of every day. Whatever it takes, I think to myself . . . whatever it takes to revivify experience, to bring my mind to life, may well be worth the cost.

Like many people in the world, academics and artists chief among them, I delight in the life of the mind. In my love-hate relationship with the office, I find myself often seduced by the lure of my book-filled lair, knowing deeply the spell that occurs when I enter Frandsen Humanities Room 038, hit the light switch, and then turn on the gleaming white dome of the eMac. It is quite possible to lose entire days staring into the screen of the machine, absorbed in words and ideas, translating life and life’s intuitions into text. Even for a scholar fondly devoted to the world beyond the words, the temptation to perch in a semidarkened room staring for many hours at a computer is often overwhelming, seemingly unavoidable. And yet sometimes it seems not to be enough.

I write these words in March 2004, sitting on the porch of my rustic casita in La Manzanilla, Jalisco, Mexico, where I am participating in an Earthwatch program coordinated by my PhD student Jerry Keir, director of the Great Basin Institute. Half a dozen volunteers and university students and a similar number of Guadalajara-based ecologists have come together for the week to discuss “Mexican Mangroves and Wildlife” and to conduct bird and crocodile censuses and studies. I squint into the sun as I write these words, savoring
Placing the Academy

the humid sea breeze. Families walk past on the beach, a hundred feet away. Dogs wrestle for control of flotsam and jetsam. I watch an elderly man bodysurf amid jellyfish and stingrays, oblivious to the painful presence of the creatures that have been washing ashore all day. The sun lowers beyond the tropical sea as afternoon passes into evening, and my squint tightens. The dazzling sun corresponds to my properly bedazzled mind. “You are not in Reno anymore,” I tell myself.

In truth, even this extraordinary scene would become ordinary if I lived here all the time, as many do. Jerry Keir points out that the tropics seem to induce such torpor among residents that he anticipates difficulty in accomplishing his conservation objectives. Neither the locals nor the expatriots can be roused easily to activism on behalf of mangrove swamps, threatened crocs, or endangered sea turtles.

But torpor has not yet addled me, reduced me to a condition of unawareness. My flight touched down in Manzanillo just twenty-four hours ago, and when I arrived here at the beachside camp, it was so dark that all remained mysterious until morning. I had no inkling of the glinting Tenacatita Bay, the palm-lined beaches, or the pelicans and terns diving for fish until dawn, when I left the thatched-roof hut and trotted to the surf for my morning run. For me, as an academic, this sort of experience—arriving in a new place at dusk and waking to an astonishing world of unfamiliar beauty—is one of the ultimate pleasures. The question is how does this contribute to “thought,” to work? And are these merely the self-satisfied musings of a privileged traveler?

A large, black frigate bird, with its noticeably arced wings and v-shaped tail, flies overhead. There are many of these birds here, circling high above the fracas of the pelicans and gulls. Ornithologist Al Gubanich, who has accompanied me to this week’s program, tells me that the frigate birds scavenge and steal to make their living, benefiting from the industry of other birds. I sometimes wonder if academics do much the same thing, hovering over the sweep of reality, allowing others to struggle through life, and then descending to pick up the pieces and offer hazy explanations. The frigate birds of the species.

Several months ago, while speaking at a gathering of nature writers in Australia, I found myself referring to literary critics as the “third wheel” of the literary world: those who provide context
and commentary for “texts,” while others experience the world directly and render that experience in rich and riveting words. I believe the contextualizing perspective of the scholar is important, and yet, to me, it doesn’t quite seem enough. I love the telescoping process of engagement and retreat, conscious living and detached contemplation. The attractions of this rhythm—coming close, going away—may be what induce me to do both personal essays and formal, analytical “scholarly writing,” sometimes combining the two in so-called narrative scholarship. Perhaps this rhythm parallels the process of “going away to think” and then coming home to see the familiar anew.

My reflexive comparison of academics and frigate birds is only half sincere. I do think some kinds of academic work are exploitative and self-serving. But I also recognize the idealism and selflessness—the taste for beauty, elegance, and justice—that can drive intellectual work. I take to heart the title of historian Richard White’s well-known essay, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” Sometimes I rephrase it in my mind: “Are You a Literary Critic or Do You Work for a Living, Do You Contribute Meaningfully to Society?” I do actually believe environmentalists—and literary critics—“work for a living.” I suspect Richard White—despite his forceful complaint against self-righteousness, privilege, and arrogance—would agree. And yet I appreciate the warning not to become complacent and self-satisfied, oblivious to the toil and suffering of others, to different ways of knowing and expressing. When I see the elegant frigate birds floating free of the mob below, I find myself wondering how the flock of literary critics serves the rest of its species and, indeed, serves the planet. Travel can shake us free from accepted routine and enable us to use metaphor as a tool of self-examination and critique.

Name one activity your mother would have forbidden you to do. Had it occurred to her, it probably would have been the following. Walk down a dusty, lightless road in rural Mexico next to a mangrove swamp filled with crocodiles. Hop aboard a small metal boat with a local biologist and three friends. And then launch out into the steamy darkness, headlamps on, searching for red beads in the blackness—the signs of floating dinosaurs.

Last night my colleague, Al Gubanich, and I joined Paulino Campos of the conservation group Bosque Tropical on a nighttime crocodile survey in the white mangrove swamp of La Manzanilla.
We clambered over a small wire fence to reach the skiff, shoved off from the fecal-smelling bank into the brackish water, and paddled our way into the middle of the first lagoon. Here and there we saw red dots, like cigarette ends. At about eight-thirty on a cool, March evening, this was not an ideal night for crocodile viewing—but even to be out on a dark body of water in pitch-black night with a single animal of this kind would defy the fiercest warning of one’s mother.

We maintained a calm chatter as we drifted further into the swamp, staying in the center of the water to achieve the best possible viewing of each bank. Eventually, Paulino, who’d begun the trip in the rear with an oar in hand, traded places with Rudolfo and used a headlamp to spot “crocs” hiding in the shoreline mangroves. Again and again, he exclaimed, “There’s a croc! I see another”—his practiced eyes noticing life where the rest of us observed only empty space. We marveled at the discernment of his experienced eyes in contrast to our novitiate blindness.

Eventually, near the site where local people are contemplating the development of a crocodile farm, Paulino caught sight of a small croc near the bank, leaned forward from the front of the boat, and grabbed the eight-month-old animal in his bare hands as easily as I might have snagged a water lily. We spent twenty minutes measuring and examining the hapless animal. I was struck by the softness of the saurian skin—the twenty-inch juvenile looked as if it was wearing a suit of armor and yet it felt like soft leather. It became motionless, passive, under our attention. Paulino handed the small croc to each of the passengers in turn and snapped digital pictures of us posing with croc and pretending to release it into the saline soup of the lagoon. He said this is what he does even when he captures large crocs on the shore—animals reaching up to two and a half meters in length. He invites local people and tourists to come and touch the animals and pose for pictures with them. This helps them to understand the crocs and to value them rather than think of them as hostile, mysterious monsters lurking in the hidden depths of the mangroves. It’s clear that, in his own way, as a conservation biologist, Paulino has thought carefully about the rhetoric of environmental education.

We spent two hours in the boat, pushing ever further into the tightening vice of the mangroves, fighting our way through the jigsaw puzzle of branches. Sometimes the glint our headlights caught was only the reflection of a spider dangling in its web. I wondered
what other living creatures were awake and moving in the darkness—snakes, insects, wildcats, birds. Occasionally, the clanking of our oars on the metal boat startled roosting herons, who squawked and flapped loudly aloft, unhappy to be rousted from their night’s rest.

We made our way back to the beach where we had begun our evening journey, pleased to have held a small croc and come slightly closer to appreciating its intimidating otherness. Al and I clambered out of the boat while our Mexican companions stayed aboard to return it to its hiding place. We walked back to the camp with our headlamps off, a little less afraid of the dark.

There’s something about the process of coming face to face with the exotic, the scary, or the bewildering—of “normalizing the new,” so to speak—that emboldens me to breathe in experience more deeply. Floating among the mangrove crocs at night has helped me to open my mind and senses more widely to the experience of La Manzanilla. I suppose my goal is to carry home some of this renewed openness at the end of the week, a state of mind I can direct toward my everyday work and surroundings.

This morning I took a brief walk along the beach before breakfast. A hundred yards from camp, I found a plump red fish lying on the sand. Three days ago, I suspect I would have gingerly kicked it with my sandal, reluctant to infect myself with whatever disease resulted in its beaching. Today I pick it up and marvel at its red skin and its redder-than-red eye. It is a jewel of life, present on the beach as if by magic. Soon it will feed the ever-hungry shorebirds—willets, night herons, turkey vultures. Sometimes it takes an encounter with living jewels on faraway beaches to respark our inquisitiveness about gems and germs of meaning in our ordinary neighborhoods. This reawakening to the daily meanings of our lives, hidden in texts and present in the physical world, is a big part of why I travel. Through my life as a writer and teacher, I wish to pick up and examine the brilliant red fish of reality.

“You stay home,” admonishes poet Wendell Berry. “I am at home. Don’t come with me” (199). This, of course, is the quandary, the anxiety, of the place-conscious scholar. Should we wish to sustain our species on this planet, we must learn to live more lightly—to use fewer resources and trample less aggressively on this surprisingly delicate globe. Chances are this will be a very difficult lesson for
us. We seem programmed to accomplish whatever is in our power, and we have a devil-may-care attitude about the consequences. If we can do something today, we'll do it—tomorrow will take care of itself. Or so we seem to think. This mañana attitude is not limited to any particular culture; it's certainly as true of the mainstream view of conservation in the United States as it is anywhere else.

In his brief poem “Stay Home,” Berry pricks my conscience and leads me to consider the virtues of my traveling life and the possible virtues of a more sedentary, home-rooted life. I choose to take the poem as a prompt and point of departure for such meditations, not as an absolute statement of prohibition—a literal condemnation of movement and exploration. I suspect the work was written precisely with people like me in mind—and with himself in mind, for Berry, too, is a traveling writer and public speaker. The point is not to push everyone into sudden immobility but to nudge those of us who travel frequently to do so more mindfully, with more awareness of the costs of such a life to ourselves and to the planet.

Environmental activists and scholars sometimes joke that a “bioregionalist” is someone who travels around the country urging other people to stay home. This may not be far from the truth. But most bioregionalists understand that we can all benefit from more engagement and attentiveness to our home places and from the revivifying experience of movement across the earth.

The bathroom in my beachside casita is walled from the sleeping area by vertical rows of slender bamboo poles nailed side by side. There is plenty of room between each pole to peer through the wall into the bedroom and through the front door beyond that, out to the beach and the ever-pounding surf. Standing in the bathroom a few minutes ago, I found myself looking past the upright screen of my laptop to the rows of waves beyond, new waves pouring themselves onto the beach every six or seven seconds, on and on and on. The process is so routine and yet so variable. No two waves are quite alike, and yet the process has occurred uncountable times. Perhaps there is nothing more beautiful in all the world than the simple act of waves falling upon sandy beaches. Perhaps, as well, there is nothing more routine.

I think to myself that the ultimate lesson of this particular journey to tropical Mexico may not be how to savor the exotic. That is a lesson that needs no teaching—a lesson as automatic as breathing. No—the lesson here was present in the waves I heard breaking...
immediately upon arrival at this dark beachside camp and has been witnessed each day when I awaken to run along the surf and dodge jellyfish and spiny puffers. The lesson of the routinely pounding surf—the utter everydayness of the motion. Water and sand doing what they must do in relation to gravity, wind, and rock. Is this not what we, too, ultimately seek? To know what we must do and then to do it?

Let me see if I can recall my travels of the past year—Spring Break at Zion National Park in southern Utah, a late-March trip to speak at an international symposium on environmental literature in Okinawa, a talk to the senior class of St. Bonaventure University in upstate New York in April, ten days in New England in early June to participate in the biennial meeting of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, a week in Mississippi in July for the thirtieth annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, and ten days on Australia’s eastern coast in October for the Watermark Nature Writers’ Muster, followed immediately by two days at Iowa State University, plus various family trips to Seattle and Washington, D.C., mixed in with the work-related wanderings. Each of these journeys has been delightful and inspiring in different ways. The drain of falling behind with my teaching, writing, and editing responsibilities at home is outweighed by the pleasures of interacting with new and old friends and absorbing various landscapes.

I draw my title for this cluster of informal meditations from Gary Paul Nabhan’s 2002 book, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*. Although the bulk of his book focuses on the experiment in local eating that he conducted in Tucson, Arizona, in the late 1990s, he actually begins his discussion by telling the story of his trip to see family members in Lebanon and the experience of eating local delicacies with distant relatives in the Bekaa Valley. Traveling to experience other people’s local places and cultures and ideas triggered Nabhan’s own experiment in local living.

Much the same thing tends to occur as I respond to each of my own journeys. Place is a central component in my academic life, and place, for me, is built from the tension between going away and coming home. I’ve found that my own working life is fundamentally shaped by my habit of traveling to visit new landscapes and talk with literary and scientific colleagues in order to gain perspective on the meaning of my life at home. My teaching and writing at
home are rooted in the specific physical environments of office, house, and nearby mountain trails, and the experience of these places provides a kind of ballast or core of meaning that helps me to appreciate and understand the implications of my travels.

When I travel, I try to wake up each morning and go running. This week, Earthwatch participant Bob Lewis, a semiretired dentist from Seattle, said, “You can take the boy out of Oregon, but you can't take Oregon out of the boy” when he saw me return from an early morning run. These runs are one of the key features of my traveling regimen. I ran competitively for many years in junior high, high school, and for part of college, but now I run simply for fitness and for geography. I experience places most vividly while oxygen deprived, moving steadily through neighborhoods and along trails and beaches. One of the frustrating aspects of being at home is the tendency to become so compulsive about rushing to the office each morning and staying late “to get things done” that meaningful exercise drops by the wayside. And yet using my body helps me to be at home in this body—and being at home in my body enables me to exist more fully in place and to think about the implications of placedness in literature.

I wake up each morning while traveling and explore the neighborhood, ranging from Naha’s winding alleyways in Okinawa to the cornfields skirting Ames, Iowa, to the man-made and natural debris washed up on La Manzanilla’s three-mile beach. Not only does this running help to sharpen my attention for the rest of the day, but it gives me a view of the layout of the place—a view unavailable from most meeting rooms. I pay close attention to the shape of the land, the direction of the wind, the feel of the air, the types of trees and birds I see and hear. I feel as if I begin to belong to each place as I pass through it, breathing steadily and knowing it with the strain of my leg muscles.

I once told an interviewer that many of the ecocritics I know are “muscular scholars,” people who enjoy using their bodies on mountains and hiking trails as well as their minds in offices and classrooms. I realize that academics in general are often quite interested in physical fitness, understanding that their mental abilities are linked to the health of their bodies. Growing up, I spent quite a bit of time in the summer running with my father and his colleagues at the University of Oregon, and I have clear memories of the psychologists and biologists and literary scholars gathering
in the locker room before noontime runs. But it seems to me that ecocritics are particularly given to this sort of activity and that our actual work is enhanced and deepened by getting outside and testing our strength and frailty against the physical features of the landscape. From early on, as the community of ecocritics began to gather under the auspices of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment and similar organizations, there has been a tendency to make field trips—and often significant hikes and climbs and river trips—an integral part of our academic culture. I recall, for instance, several days of hectic meetings at Boston University last summer during ASLE’s fifth biennial conference, followed by a climb of Mt. Monadnock in New Hampshire with more than a dozen colleagues on the last day of the academic meeting, intellectuals continuing their conversations while huffing up the trail in a chilly June rain.

I lay awake most of last night listening to the explosive smack of waves on the nearby beach, frustrated by the disruption of my rest. At home the sounds of night are almost indiscernible, even when the windows are open during the warmer months. Sometimes we hear doves cooing outside the bedroom window. Here on the beach at La Manzanilla, there is a steady rhythm of shushing water withdrawing into the sea followed by the thwack of a new wave, shush then thwack, shush then thwack. Paulino Campos tells me he loves the sound of the crashing waves here, but to me they are a disruption, even sometimes an annoyance. This is in so many ways a beautiful place—a good place to rest and put my life and work into broader perspective. And yet at the same time there are inconveniences and annoyances—the sleepless nights caused by the thunderous waves outside the casita, the mosquito and sand flea bites, the inability to control my own diet as at home. Travel has its benefits and its banes—not to mention this would be to distort the truth. But even the frustrations can, and perhaps should, be savored—even pain, fatigue, and aggravation are interesting dimensions of life.

“La vida tiene sabor,” says the Coca-Cola billboard we passed en route to Barra de Navidad yesterday afternoon for a few hours of shopping and lounging in the jellyfish-free surf. I savored those words as we drove, quickly forgetting that they come from a corporate advertising campaign. Life has flavor, life has flavor. The words lose their consumer context, and it occurs to me that this is absolutely true—life has, indeed, many flavors. And this is what I try to
remember in everything I do, even during the sometimes numbing process of reading freshman papers and discussing familiar pieces of writing with jaded students. Life has flavor, I suggest to my students. Life has flavor, I remind myself.

In the process of traveling to distant beaches to lie awake to the whip-crack of dropping waves and the nasal hum of mosquitoes, I am saying to myself, “La vida tiene sabor.”

Life has flavor, and life has risk. One of the risks is complacency and tedium. As I meditate on the sound of the waves, I remember the sea life I find washed ashore each morning, particularly the striking spiny puffer fish, so different from the shells on the Oregon beaches and the stinking alewives on Lake Michigan’s shores I’ve known since childhood. Each morning while running here in La Manzanilla, I’ve wrenched my back by dodging tattered fish carcasses and still-breathing puffers. Multicolored, covered in inch-long white spines, with striking white bony beaks, these fish of tropical reefs are clearly out of their element lying on the beach. Soon they will be food for insects and birds. After five days of observing them, I take a moment to look them up in a field guide to “reef life” and learn that they are “black-blotched porcupine fish” (*Diodon liturosus*). They are meant to inhabit coastal reefs in the tropical Indo-Pacific. To be honest, I do not know why they’ve ended their lives on the beach at La Manzanilla. But it occurs to me that they’ve somehow allowed themselves to drift free from the reefs of home and become complacent in the relatively calm waters of Tenacatita Bay—and then suddenly their benign environment thrashes them violently onto the sandy beach, where they wash, stunned, to their sunny doom.

Our species, too, is prone to complacency, perhaps even more so than most other organisms. We insulate ourselves from risk—Americans are particularly eager to achieve security, to have insurance protecting us from loss of property, loss of health, loss of life. Here in Mexico, the unavailability of true security is all too plain. Floating through the crocodile estuary, I watch schools of tiny fish leap momentarily ahead of the boat, knowing that they will soon feed baby crocs and multitudes of long-beaked fishing birds—herons, egrets, kingfishers, stilts—perched in the nearby trees. Sitting yesterday beneath the cloth umbrella at Barra de Navidad, I reflected upon the many hawkers wandering from one cluster of tourists to the next, selling trinkets, multicolored baskets, and even
donuts and cakes. We marveled at the man with the broad basket of chocolate-covered donuts, eager to unload calories to bikini-clad vacationers. A weathered, dark-skinned woman, seemingly beyond her sixties, lugged heavy buckets of arroz con leche and ceviche to prospective customers—no one was buying. “That’s a hard way to make a living,” someone from our group muttered. “Imagine feeding your family like that,” said another. On a day with no sales, one would have no income. There is no security.

But back to the example of the porcupine fish: imagine the significance of a benign environment suddenly turned lethal. This is, perhaps, the core message of environmental literature, science, education, and activism. Many people today can see the future coming. They know what’s happening to the planet and to specific, local places. And they wish to get the word out. Sometimes these writers and educators sound like Jeremiah, seeming to issue exaggerated warnings of unrealized catastrophes. More often, their fate is that of Cassandra—a classical story I learned from Alan AtKisson’s recent book, *Believing Cassandra*: they can see the future, but they are fated not to be heard, to be believed.

The evening before leaving on this trip to Costa Alegre, Mexico’s “Happy Coast,” I was hosting visiting author Bill McKibben in Reno. His talk was titled “Global Warming, Genetic Engineering, and Other Questions of Human Scale.” He began his lecture with a brief bible lesson, summarizing the book of Job, in which God admonishes Job to remember his small place in the scheme of the universe, for after all only God can determine the tides of the sea and other elemental natural processes. Bill then rehearsed, as he’s done hundreds of times in the past decade, the facts and figures of global climate change, convincingly demonstrating the fundamental changes occurring in our planet’s atmosphere and down on earth as well, chiefly the result of our releasing so much carbon into the air through the use of fossil fuels. Next, Bill explained the field of “germ-line” genetic engineering, a process by which contemporary scientists have been able to mold (without a great deal of control) the minute genetic codes of life. Bill concluded his lecture by suggesting that, unlike Job, we can now reply to God that we, too, are able to affect the large and small dimensions of nature. We have that power. And yet the consequences of wielding this power may well be to create a planetary environment deeply inhospitable to our own continued existence. It seems, for instance, entirely likely that in the coming decades, there will be a profound shortage of
water for drinking and agriculture, and desalination of sea water will not be able to compensate for this shortage. As Bill stated the other evening, these ideas make him sad and worried, and he travels to give lectures in order to make his listeners "sad," too. This elicited a nervous laugh from the full auditorium at the Nevada Museum of Art. Why would a speaker wish to make his audience sad? Could this really be so?

After other questioners were unable to summon an explicit prognostication about the future of life on earth from the speaker, a final questioner struck home by reminding McKibben of his ten-year-old daughter. “What sort of life do you expect for her?” the man asked from the audience. “I’m afraid her life will be very difficult,” was the answer. “We are approaching an ecological bottleneck, and it’s unclear who will make it through—which species will make it through.”

A boy wades into the surf before me, shirtless and in gray shorts, carrying over his left forearm a circular net that he casts into the sea with a quick motion of his right hand. He can see glints of silver in the water that indicate a school of fish. He casts his net, crouches to help it sink into the water just beyond the surf, and waits for the fish to become entangled. Then he gathers a dozen wriggling fish into the folds of the net and wades ashore to his waiting friend, who carries a red plastic grocery bag, laden with their catch. This, too, is a ready metaphor, a literal casting of one’s net into the sea of reality, hoping for a worthwhile take. I continue to watch as the young fisherman scans the surface of the bay in search of more fish, much as the flock of pelicans circles down the coast, also seeking nourishment. And here I sit, perched at my yellow wooden table on the porch of a simple casita, shielded from the rising sun by the thatched roof of palm fronds. I scan the view, I watch the neighboring encampment to the left, and I listen to my friends and Earthwatch colleagues under the palapa to my right. I am reminded of my constant daily search for ideas and words, the substance of my own life.

Before me, the sea is placid here on the Happy Coast. The fishing boy has moved on in search of richer waters. There are no tourists. The water has become glassy and reflects the sky’s wispy clouds. And then suddenly the next wave crashes ashore, and somewhere along the curves of Tenacatita Bay, porcupine fish and jellies are cast from the benign environment of the bay onto the hostile sand.
I come to this place for a change of scenery, yes, and also for an enlivened perspective on the familiar scenery of home. No matter where I travel on this planet, I can never forget where I normally dwell, the other places I visit, and the fact that the place I inhabit at any given moment is connected fundamentally to the places I’ve passed through before. My senses are sharpened, my view broadened, my consciousness deepened.

I have gone away from home to think, and now I am ready to return home, still thinking. There will be no crashing waves, no gasping porcupine fish, as I gaze from the windows of home at the snowy foothills of the Sierra. But the waves will pound ashore in my memory, motivating my continued efforts as teacher and writer, until my next journey.

Always the push and pull of home and away—I reflect on the pull of home as I fly back from Manzanillo to Los Angeles and then to Reno. The last few days of this Earthwatch trip have been filled with learning and adventure, and now it’s time to return to the eastern slopes of the Sierra, to the quiet mountain nights with no surf pounding nearby, to the dining room table where I work at home (tomorrow will be a day of grading student papers), and to the office lined with thousands of books and networked via phone, fax, and e-mail to the rest of the world. Despite the fact that I have been almost wholly “off-line” during this week on Costa Alegre (apart from one call home to let Susie know all was going well), I have felt in many ways more deeply engaged with the specific concrete details of place than I do in my hurried, abstract life of the mind at home. Yesterday’s itinerary began with a six-kilometer kayaking trip on the Rio Cuixmala, including a pineapple and trail mix snack enjoyed on a pristine Pacific beach near the Cuixmala Biosphere Reserve. After loading the eight kayaks back on his trailer, Dave Collins from Immersion Adventures drove a bumpy, dusty back road to the village of Tanacatita, where our bunch of students, professors, trail crew leaders, and retiree volunteers donned fins, masks, and snorkels and spent an hour bobbing in the sea, observing fluorescent tropical fish near the fringing coral reef. While birding from the kayaks, walking along the beach at the mouth of Rio Cuixmala, and gazing downward at the reef life, our only task—my only task—was to be as fully present in these places as possible. To pay attention. To practice the mindful condition I so often speak and write about in my classrooms and my office.
Without such an opportunity to live the mental processes I think about abstractly, these processes would eventually cease to happen—and I would cease to believe in them. I fear my work itself would grind to a frustrated halt.

Indeed, following yesterday’s trip to Cuixmala and Tanacatita, it was finally my turn to offer a formal presentation to the Earthwatch group. At 4:00, tanned and sweaty after the day’s activity, full from the beachside Mexican seafood I’d eaten at our late lunch, I lectured on “Art and Activism: Literature and Environmentalism in the United States and Mexico.” I expected the group to fall asleep and feared that my own voice would be drowned out by the pounding surf near the wall-less, thatch-roofed palapa at our La Manzanilla camp. But just the opposite occurred. I introduced my three premises—that words are powerful, that there is a physical world surrounding us of ultimate importance and meaning, and that words are not merely mental toys but also tools of activism. I read and commented on Ofelia Zepeda’s “It Is Going to Rain” (emphasizing the idea that poetry emerges from ordinary experience and values attentiveness) and John Daniel’s “Ourselves” (showing how careful, intensified use of language elevates the ordinary into the magical, deepening our appreciation, combating complacency). Then I asked crocodile biologist Paulino Campos to read Octavio Paz’s “Viento, Agua, Piedra” (“Wind, Water, Stone”), University of Guadalajara undergraduate Diana to read Homero Aridjis’s “Ballena Gris” (“Grey Whale”), and ornithologist Sara Huerta to read Aridjis’s “Poema de Amor en la Cuidad de Mexico” (“Love Poem in Mexico City”). We talked about Paz’s use of poetry as a medium for contemplating profound, timeless concepts of nature’s interconnectedness and Aridjis’s activist use of poetry to combat air pollution in Mexico City, destruction of gray whale calving waters in the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve near Baja California, and the logging in Michoacán that threatens Monarch butterfly wintering areas. Despite a day of physical exertion and parching sun, the group was alert and lively. Seventy-seven-year-old Oyvind Frock, one of the Earthwatch volunteers, raised his hand at the end of the session and read a poem he had written during the lecture about the week’s experiences in La Manzanilla. The discussion of nature and language and science and Mexico’s future was energetic and emotional over dinner.

As my friends made their way one by one to their tents and I prepared to return to the casita and climb under the mosquito netting,
I felt the push and pull of travel and home with new intensity. I regretted the fact that I would be leaving the group the following day to return to my office and classroom, following a morning of birding in Barranca del Choncho, an afternoon adventure capturing and measuring crocodiles, and a sweaty dash to the Manzanillo airport. And yet I realized, too, that I can—that I must—take away from La Manzanilla a commitment to reengage myself with the specificities of Reno. Naturalist Ann Zwinger once wrote that traveling by plane offers her a splendid sense of isolation for writing, and especially editing, a sense of being enclosed in a “blessedly impersonal aluminum tube” hurtling through space, undistracted by the daily realities of home (288). I know what Ann means and share this feeling of momentary freedom. And yet as I glance away from my laptop to appreciate the meta-bird’s-eye view of the Sea of Cortés en route to Los Angeles, I understand that this freedom is an illusion. The opportunity to “go away to think” is an extraordinary privilege. It is a gift, and with this gift come inevitable responsibilities.

This sense of my work as something more than a way to “pay the bills”—as a way of contributing positively to society and to the planet—preoccupies me every day. Life and work, self-interest and altruism—I have trouble recognizing any distinctions among these processes and attitudes. When I go away to think, I do so with an appetite for joy and an earnest hope to do work that others may find helpful.

Sunday morning, back home in Reno, Nevada. After a run through the neighborhood hills, I pour a cup of coffee and walk down to our rustic backyard with the dogs. A week ago, I would have restlessly toured the yard, looking for projects to do. Today, I look for a plastic chair and find one resembling the shape of those at the La Manzanilla beach camp. I then find a spot in the sun and take a seat for ten minutes, gazing at the mountains, listening intently to bird song. I recognize the coo of the mourning doves, the bubbly cackle of the California quail. I hear chatter from many small birds and feel an urge to grab my field guides from the house and identify birds I’ve always been content to categorize lazily as what birders call “LBJs” (little brown jobbies).

With my “habit of attention,” as Thoreau put it in his journal (351), sharpened at the beaches, mangrove estuaries, and arid hillsides of Jalisco, I settle back into home. And then I come back inside, boot up the computer, and return to work.
Bibliography


