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Fossicking the Ten Essentials

*(She) came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone...
~ee cummings*

Fossicking: An Australian and New Zealand term for 'rummaging' and 'prospecting,' and specifically for 'picking over the abandoned workings' (of gold, precious stones, and fossils.)

The Ten Essentials: A term coined in the 1930s by The Mountaineers Club in Seattle for a list of necessary equipment to take on hikes. Updated in 2003 to the functional systems approach used as the headings in this essay.

1. Navigation.

Using Google Earth instead of a compass or celestial navigation, my current location is 43.4 degrees South and 170.18 degrees East. High noon. Franz Joseph Glacier, at the foot of snow-capped Aoraki/ Mt. Cook, South Island, New Zealand. I'm sitting at the bottom of a huge rock and ice slide at the terminal face of the glacier where its melt waters run into the Waiho River.

The sun is out and there's no breeze in this deep canyon dug by the glacier. It's January 2014, high summer here in the land of the Southern Cross, so it's warm enough to take off my jacket. There seem to be no bugs—no biting flies—no mosquitoes—and no birds to be seen or heard. Feathery waterfalls are cascading down thousands of feet from the sheer cliffs surrounding the canyon. The smell is elemental, metallic. All surfaces my body touches are gritty, covered with the fine glacial flour that turns the river waters to milk, that turns my skin to alabaster, that crunches lightly between my teeth, tasting of bitter iron.

The rocks at my feet are newly fractured, jagged, split open quartz crystals of dazzling white and pale green. I pick one up and gaze into it like a crystal ball, considering its history—considering my history—and considering how it is we came to meet here at the foot of an ancient glacier. Then I become aware of the sound of rocks skittering down from the top of the pile behind me. I will myself to stay, but I turn so I can keep an eye on the rocks. I'm aware of the folly, knowing I could never run fast enough to escape being buried when the rock and ice pile finally gives way. I'm on the supposedly safe side of the yellow rope barrier put up by now absent park rangers. As the sun heats the valley and the rocks begin to fall more steadily, I decide to walk back out of the canyon.

I retreat from the rock pile because I'm leading a group of fourteen young women college students from Seattle on a study abroad program. I'm responsible for their health and safety for the three months we're touring New Zealand. I lead them away from the glacier, back into the primeval temperate rainforest of towering

tree ferns and vines. The steady din of cicadas and the occasional tremulant trills of bellbirds and tui envelop us.

When we've returned to the forest path, I tell the students I'll meet them back at the van in a few minutes. I duck down a deserted, quiet side path for a few moments of peace—away from the students' raw enthusiasm, raucous singing, and selfie-picture-taking in front of every scenic view—including the rock pile of the retreating glacier. As I've driven them around the South Island in a mini-van, some have taken to yelling out the van windows "Hey cows!" or "Hey sheep!" to scare the herds and then laugh hysterically. Those are the Biology majors, a fact I find ironic. I was a Biology major thirty odd years ago. Was I ever that young?

On this study abroad program I'm ostensibly teaching community and environmental health, but what I really want to teach is the value of travel as critical self-discovery. Not the navel-gazing, bathetic sort of self-discovery, but rather the sort that leads to greater knowledge of and tolerance for uncomfortable aspects of ourselves and of people we view as 'different' from us. I want to expose the students to the deep satisfaction of getting past being picture-taking tourists, instead, becoming travelers, perhaps even pilgrims walking towards the far horizon to arrive home.

It isn't working out well. So far, halfway into our trip, it's more like a case study of how not to lead a study abroad program. We're traveling around so much it feels like we're never *here*, in New Zealand. Staying in ten different cities and villages in as many weeks, passing through and ticking off the have-done-have-been-there bragging list of photo-ops, sky-diving, and bungy-jumping: I feel more like an

adventure tour guide (and an emergency room nurse) than a teacher. It's not helping that we're staying in youth hostels full of international backpacking nomads who proudly proclaim they have '*done* Franz Joseph,' they have '*done* Milford Sound,' they have '*done* Rotorua,' as if these are all colonial conquests—places and natives and experiences to be possessed and bragged about. But I signed onto this program late and had little hand in its design, so I'm trying to make the best of it.

As we drive and tour and wander, I ask myself: Do we discover more about ourselves through movement or through rootedness to one place over time? If, as Lucy R. Lippard contends in her book *The Lure of the Land*, 'space' is passing through coordinates and 'place' is pausing to make meaning of the space, does it follow that space is to tourism as place is to travel? And if so, what is essential for the work of transforming space into place, tourism into true travel, into pilgrimage?

I remember my own travels outside my passport zone—outside my comfort zone. I try to remember lessons I learned through my travels, lessons that can perhaps inform my teaching here with these cow and sheep scaring young women.

2. Sun Protection.

I was thirty-two years old and was in Bangkok, Thailand as part of the U.S. Women's Swan Boat Team for an international competition. Our team practiced for a year in a flat, stable dragon boat on the wide Potomac River in Washington, DC. In contrast, swan boats are graceful three-ton teak round-bottom boats. When our team entered our first real swan boat to practice on the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, we almost tipped over. It was the end of the rainy season with the river above flood

stage. In amongst the water hyacinths, a bloated dead pig floated by belly up. We quickly regained our collective balance. In the final race, we came in second, barely beaten by a rugged team of petite Thai female farmers who were used to swan boats, flooding, and dead pigs. Their strength came from survival, not sport, so I was glad they won.

I stayed in Bangkok for several weeks after the competition ended in order to do some research for my dissertation on health issues of street children. It was the first time I'd ever been completely on my own in a foreign country. As I walked the streets to observe the children, while trying to avoid sunburn and heat exhaustion, I adopted the local custom (for Thai females) of carrying an umbrella to ward off the intense sun. I soon discovered the hidden benefits of using an umbrella: it gave me a protective bubble within which to negotiate the crush and noise and heat of the megacity.

3. Insulation.

My whole body was sore. The week before my thirtieth birthday I had competed in the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Race: nearly five miles of cold, fast moving water between Annapolis, Maryland and the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Post-divorce, I was coping with life by basting my brain cells with endorphins: running, rowing, and swimming every day—but mostly swimming—at least two, sometimes three or four miles each day in the downtown YMCA. No matter how much I showered and sprayed myself with perfume, I smelled of chlorine. There were times in the pool

when I'd feel myself slowly dissolving into the water, pulled down into the dark blue depths. I relaxed into it and felt I was breathing through gills.

This was my first open water competition. I was pushing myself to try something I was afraid of: swimming in the foreign territory of deep water. I had twelve percent body fat and had cut my hair into a sleek bob to make it easier to swim. For the Bay Bridge race I wore a neoprene vest partial wetsuit given to me by my YMCA swim coach. This was my first open water swim. I knew there were male triathletes who did these races—I did laps with them in the pool and enjoyed outpacing them—but I wasn't prepared for how aggressively they started the race. From the shore I plunged into the icy grey water and was immediately pushed under by men clawing their way over me. I sputtered, swallowed bay water, then muscle memory took over and I fell into the familiar rhythm of freestyle.

Halfway through the race my hands and feet went numb. Then my arms and legs went numb. Then my face began to go numb. When I turned my head to the side for a breath, through foggy goggles I saw the looming concrete pillars of the bridge and the black race number written on my left bicep. I hallucinated that the bridge was a war ship and that the black number on my arm was a Nazi concentration camp number—a concentration camp from which I was escaping. I realized I had hypothermia and should grab onto an orange safety kayak floating nearby. Instead, I kicked harder and got through the churning center channel to warmer water. With the warmth I became lucid and finished the race. The wet suit vest from the Bay Bridge swim rubbed a deep abrasion on my right shoulder blade; like a brown birthmark, it's a scar I carry still.

4. Illumination.

My own junior year study abroad program was with SEA Semester, out of Woods Hole National Oceanographic Institute on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Sea Semester is a twelve-week intensive course on sailing and oceanography. I had just turned nineteen. We sailed on a 125' Topsail Schooner research vessel to Nova Scotia, Labrador, and Newfoundland. We took nautical science, marine science, and an English literature course on the lore of the sea. I loved night watch duty on the bowsprit, and was mesmerized by the glittering spray from the phosphorescent algae. I would lean out over the bowsprit and feel myself diving into that flowing luminescence. It was a kind of cleansing, simultaneously a deep relaxation and exhilaration with the white noise of the whooshing bow waves, the cold spray on my face, the briny sea-smell, and the shimmering lights. Obviously, from a nautical safety perspective, I was worthless on bow watch at night.

Near Newfoundland we sailed through huge displays of Northern Lights and followed the migratory paths of blue whales. I was at the helm the day our marine biology professor spotted a 70' blue whale off our port bow. "Prepare to come about! Follow that whale!" the Captain yelled. As I turned the ship's wheel, I felt like yelling back, "Call me Ishmael!"

5. First Aid.

The most intense pain I have ever felt was when I was sixteen, at night, in a small church without electricity or running water, in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. It was my first real brush with death.

I was with a youth group doing service-learning projects in rural Mexico. We were sleeping on the floor of the church when a tiny but potent scorpion stung me on my finger. I woke up screaming. Someone turned on a flashlight to see the scorpion scuttling away. We were in a small mountain village that had no doctor or clinic. The primitive dirt roads were impassable in rain. It had been raining for the past several weeks and had just begun to clear. The nurse on our trip gave me a shot of adrenaline and had me lie down outside on a wooden bench, my head in her lap. The Brazilian preacher and leader of our trip placed his hands on my head and started praying in Portuguese. I remember looking up through the tree canopy at the bright stars and thinking it must be serious if he was praying over me. It felt like hours that I held my throbbing, swelling hand, while looking up at the dazzling stars, before I realized I wasn't going to die on an Oaxacan mountaintop, thousands of miles away from my home and family.

6. Fire

On that same trip to Mexico, our group did some sight-seeing, including driving up the primitive dirt road to the top of Nevada de Toluca, an old volcano standing at 15,354 feet. It wasn't a tourist destination since tour buses couldn't make it up the road. We were alone at the top, walking the desolate, bare rock rim of the crater,

looking down into the caldera through a fine freezing mist to the two crater lakes at the bottom.

On our way back down the mountain we saw a horse-drawn cart that had been piled with firewood, upended, the logs partially blocking the rutted dirt road. The horse had broken his leg. As we drove by, the cart driver pulled out a pistol and shot the horse in the head. Dark red blood ran over the road as the horse convulsed and then went still. The stark violence of the shooting mingled with the desolation of the caldera and the sting of the scorpion, to become the haunting essence of Mexico.

7. Repair-kit

My little red Swiss Army knife accompanies me on all my travels. I've had it since I was in college on my study abroad program. It's a small women's version of a basic knife: knife blade, sharp scissors, metal nail file, tiny tweezers (that work well for plucking eyebrow hairs, as well as for removing splinters), and a little metal pen for emergency writing. The company that makes the knives has replaced the pen with a nail cleaner, a fact I find retrogressive and depressing.

8. Nutrition.

I ate smoked salmon every day on my month-long solo trip across Ireland. I spent half my time on the Dingle Peninsula on the West Coast. I was in my early forties, on a quest to replace the dream of having another baby, with dreams I could reasonably pursue. The fish fed those dreams.

In indigenous cultures reliant on salmon—like the Pacific Northwest Indians—the salmon is a symbol of immortality, of our lives continuing. This is, after all, what we wish for through having children, through writing, through teaching, through any creative endeavor. We want them to live on, to carry pieces of ourselves back upstream into the future.

The West Coast of Ireland is one of the few places on earth where when I arrived for the first time, I felt as if I had always been there. It felt uncannily familiar, like home.

9. Hydration.

I was forty-three, nearing the end of a six-month teaching and research stint in Northern Thailand, and had decided to make the somewhat yuppified pilgrimage to Angkor Wat before going home. So I could say I had ‘done’ Angkor Wat? Standing in the shadows of the temple at sunset, touching the carved stone murals, I felt the power of time and of beauty—and of thirst. I felt dizzy as the last of my sweat dried on my skin. I placed a small pebble from Angkor in my mouth to slake my thirst.

10. Emergency Shelter.

It’s mid-February 2014 and I’m at 43.53 degrees South, 172.62 degrees East, in the earthquake disaster Red Zone in the Central Business District, Christchurch, New Zealand. The earthquakes changed the coordinates of Christchurch, so I wonder if these are still accurate.

Christchurch is listed as #2 in the January 10, 2014 *New York Times* interactive article “52 Places to Go in 2014.” It comes in just after Cape Town, South Africa, which they say is “A place to meditate on freedom and the creative life that followed.” For Christchurch they state, “witness a city in transformation” and “see the rebirth of a quake-ravaged city.” They note that Christchurch is finally able to welcome tourists, three years after the last, most devastating earthquake in 2011. Disaster tourism, trauma tourism, dark tourism, thanotourism: visiting traumascapes, places transformed by tragedy. I hadn’t realized that is what we’re doing, until we’re here, amidst the still-fresh devastation.

I’m sitting in the temporary structure of Pallet Park, an open-air performance area and café built of blue-painted wood pallets. The ground around me is littered with concrete rubble, glass shards, broken bits of brick, and the fine asbestos-laden dust from ongoing demolition of the remaining broken buildings. The dust is settling in the ginger beer I’m drinking. I pick up a piece of thick safety glass from a demolished shop’s window. I consider keeping it, but then I throw it away. I don’t want that sort of macabre memento weighing me down.

Nearby is the Temporary Cathedral built of cardboard, designed by the Japanese ‘emergency architect’ Shigeru Ban who specializes in post-disaster building design. Throughout the Red Zone, wherever there isn’t an empty lot or a transient structure, iron struts and shipping containers prop up ruins of once majestic old stone buildings. Orange safety cones and wobbly wire fencing mark boundaries for where it’s safe to walk. This is no place for tourists, but here they are—here we are. A red double-decker “Red Zone” earthquake tour bus lumbers by.

In the Automobile Association of New Zealand travel magazine I'm reading, I notice something odd. There's a full-page ad for a Christchurch jewelry company specializing in charms for bracelets. They show photos of 'wee house-charm mementos of the earthquakes.' The charm houses have caved-in roofs and broken chimneys. They come in silver and gold.

What is sacred and what is profane? Do the boundaries change after the earth cracks open and tries to swallow an entire city?

In Christchurch I begin having dreams of emergency oxygen masks dropping from the blue sky. In my dream I forget to put on my own oxygen mask before helping my students. I pass out and awaken in a cold sweat. The disaster dreams follow me over the Southern Alps to the West Coast of the South Island, into the small village of Hokitika, a former gold-mining town now turned mostly ghost town. In tourist brochures they promote fossicking in streams nearby where you can pan for gold. Their beaches are the main source of New Zealand pounamu—jade. I take long walks on the wind-swept, desolate beaches along the Tasman Sea. I find so much jade that I can't carry it all. It's like stumbling into Smog's lair laden with mountains of jewels. I catch myself and I step away from my desire to collect them all. I wait for the spirits of the place to give me one perfect stone.

And they do. A rogue wave from the wild Tasman Sea nearly sweeps me away. As I regain my footing, a stone rolls over my foot. I reach down and grab it before the retreating wave sucks it back. The stone is wobbly egg-shaped and perfectly sea-smoothed, with swirls of jade ranging from pale green to almost black.

It sounds odd, but I've taken to holding this rock at night to fall asleep, like a security blanket. Who ever heard of a security stone? But I'm in Maori-land where pounamu is a spirit stone. Perhaps the ancestors of the Maori fell asleep with stones in their hands. I recognize the danger of going native, of falling into the white person's trope of romanticizing the Noble Savage, the people of the land. But there's something dislocating, otherworldly pulling me in.

The American anthropologist Keith Basso, in his book *Wisdom Sits in Places*, quotes one of his Apache informants as saying, "'Wisdom sits in places. It's like water that never dries up. You also need to drink from places.'" Basso describes how the Apache embody a moral reality of a place, an interior landscape that influences their sense of place, their sense of self.

You have to drink from places. Drink, not sip, not simply suck on a tiny piece to slake your thirst. Is travel always just sipping? Or are there pieces of travel that you can fossick—and savor—long after you're home?

March 2014. 38.14 degrees South, 176.25 degrees East, Rotorua, North Island, New Zealand.

My students are no longer yelling at cows and sheep—albeit at my prompting. They are still taking selfie-photos and giggling hysterically, singing popular love songs at the top of their voices, planning their next bungy-jumps and skydiving adventures. But our time in Christchurch shook them up, sobered them, depressed them even. They have their own versions of disaster nightmares. And haunting Hokitika has given them times of solitude, a place to consider weightier matters than simply

sightseeing or thrill seeking. For some, it has returned them to their spiritual roots; for all, it has returned them to the power of family, of community, of home.

I know these things because they write about them in their weekly reflective essays I assign. Perhaps some students are writing what they know I want to hear, but I observe them having quieter times spinning off from the group to be alone. What they write becomes more nuanced and richly layered. They write about how it's easier to keep busy doing exciting things, meeting different people, going to new places, that are distractions from sitting with their thoughts and uncomfortable feelings. They write about having the time and distance necessary to begin to unpack icky baggage they carried here from home. They write about how wonderful it is when they're able to share their uncomfortable feelings with friends or family or classmates or even with me, and then realize they aren't odd, or crazy, or alone. This seems so basic, elemental. But I remember: I was once that young.

If wisdom sits in places, perhaps it follows that you have to sit (still, quiet, alone) in a place long enough to be able to receive that wisdom. And perhaps, in turn, rootedness is enriched by movement and by memories of travel.

April 2014. 47.61 degrees North, 122.33 degrees West. Seattle, Washington, USA.

I remember the exhilaration of movement and novelty and reinvention of self in different places and with different people who know nothing of your past. I remember the shock and pathos of being exposed to violence. I remember the strength of the travel scars I carry. I remember how uncanny it is to find new places that somehow have always been home. I remember the deeper knowledge of a place

that can only come through introspection and solitude, through connection to the land and its people.

Beside me here on my desk sits my sea-smoothed, layered jade pebble of ponamu. The pebble—and a poem fragment from T.S. Eliot—helped navigate me home: I have arrived where I started, knowing it for the first time.