

Death's Secretary Tries to Forget on Cape Cod

JFK wanted "to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds,"

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Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, May 22, 2023

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We have come to Cape Cod for a few days to forget the man-made world that is too much with us. I have asked my forgettery to get to work. As my childhood friends used to say to me, "Eddy spaghetti, use you forgetty." The adults had no idea what they meant. Many still do not.

Here slowness reigns and forgetting seems possible, even if for just a few days. In mid-May, the beaches are deserted except for the swooping gulls, the sandpipers prancing across the sand, and a few seals eyeing you from just off-shore. An occasional frigate bird glides past. The wind rushes through your ears, making conversation almost impossible.

But no words are needed here, for the ocean speaks its own language and the tales it tells are deep. You can only hear them if you shut up and listen. It utters reminders of the immensity of creation and the puniness of human aspirations. The sea dismisses with a roar the pretensions to power of the Lilliputians.

One minute it glistens in the bright blue sunshine and says all is well; then suddenly, as now, the sky and sea turn very dark and foreboding, the increased wind whipping the whitecaps into a maniacal threat. There are limits, it wails, and do not try to exceed them, for if, in your hubris, you attempt it, you will discover that when you think you're on the top, you'll be heading for the bottom.

As the Greeks knew so well, Nemesis awaits your response.

If you stand on the forty mile long strand of the sandy outer beach and look out to sea, you realize that no matter how well you sail through life, and how deftly you tack your boat, you are not ultimately in control. Those who seek to control others lack the spirit of the wind, the unseen mystery through which we move.

Henry David Thoreau stood on this beach looking out to sea and wrote:

A man may stand there and put all America behind him.

I wish it were so simple. To forget the man-made world that is too much with us isn't easy. Ironically, it can only be briefly forgotten, for when we come to a beautiful and wild sea shore like Cape Cod when rarely a soul is around, the contemplation of its majesty implicitly draws us to compare it to human endeavors. I look out across the wide Atlantic and see not just its wild power but the feeble pretensions of the Atlanticist countries that think they can still control the world. Their illusions die hard as their sand castle empire crumbles before the incoming waves.

And here on this long stretch between bay and ocean, it is hard to forget that 10,000 years before the Pilgrims came ashore, the native peoples lived here and were eventually driven from their land. Not far from where I stand sits the Nauset Light house, named for the Nauset original free people that once lived here. You can travel all across the United States and even if you wish to forget, there are constant reminders of the genocide of the native peoples by the European settlers. You bow your head in shameful remembrance.

Of course, to forget, it is crucial to remember to try to forget, and in doing so you are caught in the human web of thought.

We tell ourselves, let us go then, you and I, to contemplate the sea and sky, to let go of all the world's woes and pack up our sorrows and give them to the elements as we vacate our minds. Then – ouch! – we are jerked back by the sight of a dead sea gull on the sand or a plaque informing you that the long stretch of outer beach you walk with the ghost of Thoreau was preserved as the Cape Cod National Seashore by President Kennedy in 1961. You find yourself walking with many ghosts: dead writers, sailors drowned in shipwrecks, ancient dead horseshoe crabs along the strand, and an assassinated president who loved this sea and land. You realize that nature, while beautifully majestic, is also a cruel taskmaster, but not as cruel as humans, so many of whom seem to revel in killing.

You struggle to dismiss the thoughts associated with these aperçus, yet you immediately wonder if they are auguries of past events or harbingers of something else. You feel you have been ambushed by another reality. You hear Billy Joel's words from his historical song, *We Didn't Start the Fire*, "JFK blown away, what else do I have to say."

You is I, of course, and although these words are addressed to those who might read them, I am also writing for myself, and I sense my word usage was a way to distance myself from what I sometimes find hard to accept: that for some reason of character or experience or both, it is my fate to be unable to escape for long from what my perceptions suggest to me. Wherever I have gone on that strange word "vacation," I have been trailed by thoughts that others may consider inappropriate for the occasion. Un-vacation thoughts. Wherever I have traveled I have always felt like William Blake as he wandered through each chartered street of London:

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

Is it a blessing or curse? I don't know. Such knowing is overrated. My father, an eloquent and brilliant man with deep religious faith, used to end his letters to me with the words:

quién sabe (who knows)?

There is, however, another form of knowing that is vastly underrated; it is historical, a knowledge of history that illuminates the present. I mentioned the Nauset people who lived on Cape Cod when the Pilgrims first temporarily dropped anchor in what is now called Provincetown Harbor. The Nauset people's story, like those of the other native people's across the United States, is tied to the U.S. history of empire in significant ways.

This country was conceived in the blood of all the original free peoples who lived here for eons. They were massacred to make way for the white technologists who sent their iron horses west as they slaughtered the horse riding natives – including the Pueblo, Pawnee, Comanche and Lakota nations – and other natives who went by shanks mare.

This history is crucial knowledge, for without it one cannot grasp the demonic nature of today's U.S. wars throughout the world. The history has always been demonic. Nemesis is surely watching now, for what began in the blood of others, has a tendency to blow back on those who first unleashed the fire. Those of us alive today might not have started the fire, but if we don't know and recognize its long-term spiritual effects, we can't understand today's U.S. provoked war against Russia via Ukraine or much else.

If you wish to praise the American Revolution, you should be sure to emphasize its demonic side. The mythology of the shining city on the hill needs to be abandoned. American exceptionalism needs to be jettisoned together with reminders of Washington and Jefferson, both rich slave holders. There are no exceptional countries. The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution read beautifully on paper as ideals, but those who promoted them were far from it.

Is it exceptional to massacre the native peoples and steal their land?

Is it exceptional to have built an economy on the backs of slaves kidnapped from Africa?

Is it exceptional to plunder foreign lands and make them part of your own?

Is it exceptional to wage endless foreign wars, assassinate at will, and steal the resources of other people to fuel a deranged consumer society?

Is it exceptional to grant full freedom to criminal corporations to pollute the land and water?

Is it exceptional to create endless crises and use propaganda to transfer vast sums of wealth from regular people to the super rich?

Exceptional perhaps, but only in the sense that other past empires considered themselves god-like and immune to Nemesis's warning of retribution for such crimes?

A dark wind is blowing across the beach now. The sand stings. I see a storm coming, so we will leave for now and go to the nearest restaurant where we will order a dozen oysters for a buck a piece and drink some wine to enjoy our last day here. When the dozen are gone, perhaps another dozen will taste even better. All will be well for a small slice of time. I will remember to forget.

I might later remember a photo of Gabriel García Márquez's face, the look of a bon vivant who told stories to preserve the mystery of our ordinary, extraordinary lives. The fierce

journalist who exposed the mystifications that are used by the powerful to deny regular people their democratic rights. A man who could enjoy life and oppose oppression.

If you can believe it, I will remember that he spoke of “the mission assigned to us by fate.” And that the great English essayist John Berger says of him, when comparing his face to that of Rembrandt’s blind Homer:

There is nothing pretentious in this comparison: we, Death’s secretaries, all carry the same sense of duties, the same oblique shame (as we have survived, the best have departed) and the same obscure pride which belongs to us personally no more than the stories we tell.

Berger adds that Death’s secretaries are handed a file by Death that is filled with sheets of black paper which they can somehow read and out of which they make stories for the living. No matter how fantastic they may seem, only one’s incredulity blocks one from entering their truths.

JFK had a secretary named Lincoln, Evelyn Lincoln, who late one night when tidying up his desk, found a slip of paper in his handwriting on the floor. It wasn’t black. On it was written a prayer Kennedy loved. It was a message from Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln: “I know there is a God – and I see a storm coming. If he has a place for me, I believe that I am ready.”

It’s worth remembering that was soon after the Bay of Pigs when Kennedy said he wanted “to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds,” and that he had just returned from a meeting with Nikita Khrushchev where he was shocked by Khrushchev’s apparent insouciance to an accelerating threat of nuclear war.

Death’s secretary can’t forget.

And yet those oysters. Their taste upon the tongue! So exquisite! The sea’s sweetness in every swallow.

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This article was originally published on the author’s blog site, [Behind the Curtain](#).

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