

A man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat, a blue long-sleeved shirt, and blue jeans is walking across a grassy hill. He is looking towards the right. The background shows rolling hills, a coastline with a bay, and a clear blue sky.

I Only Went Out for a Walk

Finding My Wilderness Soul
on a California Ranch

Doyle Hollister



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on a California Ranch*

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*To the twins, Jane and Clinty,
and to my wife, Joanne, for decades of patience*

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I Only Went Out for a Walk



The Dream

*The great sea
frees me, moves me
as a strong river carries a weed.
Earth and her strong winds
move me, take me away
and my soul is swept up in joy.*

—Eskimo woman shaman, Uvavnuk,
in *Women in Praise of the Sacred*

THE DREAM THAT INITIATED the flood of words came to me one late morning, just before I awoke and rose for the day. Dreams at that time are often very lucid. They can have strong emotions to them, and they linger. So it was with this one. It began with a flickering image of myself as a young boy, around the age of ten, with my family—my father, mother, brother, and friends—enjoying a day at Bulito Canyon beach, the main beach for our family on the old Hollister ranch. We did not frequent the beach. We spent much more time in the backcountry. When we did go to the beach, there were a few regular activities we engaged in, one of which was to play, wade, swim in, and explore the large slough, which formed an estuary between the canyon's creek and the ocean. It was there that the reflection in my dream occurred.

In the dream we were dallying in the estuary and ocean as usual, when I had a moment of greater awareness. I sensed that

all that was happening there with my family in this beautiful landscape was unique, a very special time. It was as if I were two people now, one young boy enjoying a normal day at the beach, and another boy standing in the background observing and reflecting on the meaning of the moment. The feeling that accompanied this image and realization was profound. I felt a deep sense of joy, an exuberance, almost ecstasy.

My perspective then switched as I turned around, still in this altered state, and began to look up the coastline. The family and the slough faded into the background, and I found myself somewhere around Bulito Point, all alone, walking west along the beach toward Cojo Canyon, the last canyon on our ranch. It was not clear where I was, but what was clear was that I was all alone. The feeling was still elation, but now there was an underlying peacefulness. I felt that I had returned to a very important experience in my life, one in which I was walking by myself, all alone, far from family and friends, in the wilderness here the beach, yet not feeling lonely at all. Quite the contrary, I felt distinctly serene, joyous, and complete.

The dream lingered for some time. I was profoundly immersed in the moment of my coastal walk in dreamtime. Then I woke up. But still the strong euphoric sensation continued as I lay in bed drifting into reflections of the many times I had walked all alone along the ranch coastline as a young boy.

I contemplated the fact that for most people the experience of walking along a coastline is probably a unique encounter with self and nature. It is a sensual realm: the constant sound of the surf breaking in the background of consciousness; the wind whistling caressingly past the ear; the soft, dry sand that squeaks when one's foot rubs across the surface; the cool, moist sand just abandoned by the outgoing tide; the pungent scent of fresh kelp left on the beach by a storm; perhaps the stinging windblown sand painfully pricking one's ankles on a breezy day; maybe even the

magnificent sight of offshore windblown surf with spray that flies off the tops of the breaking waves and freckles the water behind with sparkling sunlit beads. All of these capture the mind and body in a special way when on walks on any beach.

But what crashed through into my awareness from my dream was the absolute pristine solitude of such moments, and the rapture that came with the realization that I was totally alone. Yes, family may have been three or four miles away; but other than them there was not a soul for fifteen to twenty miles. In this solitude I felt a mix of fear and excitement: the fear of being completely alone in the wild, and the excitement of the same. Occasionally I would come across a sea lion camouflaged in the massive mounds of kelp on the beach, and the sudden movement of such a large mammal, with its immediate barking, would send my heart and adrenaline system flying for a minute or so. But that was the extent of the physical threat. The real fear or threat came from within myself: my age, my solitude, my isolation, and the direct contact with the wild. But paradoxically it was the seduction of this wild that lured me to wander farther, around the next point, to experience what I might experience, wilderness unknown.

Lying in bed that morning after the dream, I began to realize how absolutely spellbound I was by the beauty of the coastal environment: the blue-green color of the sea, the formations of pelican gliding silently by, the spontaneous sculptures of white sand dunes, the tan-white shale cliffs crumbling down to the sand surface, and high on those cliffs the mud nests of swallows like Anasazi cave dwellings, and the small sand cliffs left by the ebbing tide. Beauty on and on. I thought that at my age then I wouldn't have described what I beheld as beautiful; it was simply exciting to my young soul. I began to consider that something very important had happened to me in those times wandering alone on the beach and in other wild places on the ranch. This

PART I

Childhood Memories

*My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So it was when my life began;
So it is now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

—William Wordsworth, 1779–1850



Santa Anita: Power of Place

As humans, we also require support for our spirits, and this is what certain kinds of places provide. The catalyst that converts any physical location—any environment if you will—into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feeling

—Alan Gussow, *A Sense of Place:
The Artist and the American Land*

THOUGH EACH WILDERNESS PLACE has power unique to itself, whether it be the mesmerizing beauty of the ocean waves breaking on gray-white sandy shores, the still serenity of the flatlands, or the tumultuous energy of the wild California backcountry, nothing has more power than wilderness places where some life experience has occurred. When something has been experienced at a specific location, that place, now imbued with memory and story, becomes what Native Americans referred to as a place of power in one's personal history with the land, and that place takes on much more meaning. Having been blessed with thousands of acres of wilderness to roam for most of my childhood, I can now, as an elder in my sixties, wander about the ranch and be filled with lucid memories of experiences specifically connected to certain places. The memories involved are crystal clear and can invoke all the sensory experiences that

went with the original moments. Though there are myriads of places on the ranch that have power for me, one stands out in particular, as it was also the place where my grief, in response to my eventual loss of the land, flooded my life after a decade and a half of denial and complete disconnection.

This particular place of power was the area around the Santa Anita Canyon slough, where the large canyon's creek reached the ocean shore. Santa Anita Canyon is a spectacular canyon in every way. It is a wide and winding canyon that was second only to Bulito Canyon with regard to its use by our family and ranch hands. Its best asset was the water that came from a perennial creek that could be followed from its outlet at the sea to the neighboring San Julian Ranch on the other side of the coastal mountain range. But the specific power spot for me was the slough, where the creek finalized its journey. The slough and its surroundings were rich in wildlife and environmental variety. The beach, cupped by a beautiful small bay, was protected by very similar and dramatic shale promontories on each end. Swallows would build their mud nests precariously on the steepest upper parts of these cliffs. The slough and beach area seemed to join together in a joint endeavor to collect an abundance of driftwood, which would settle around the edges of the slough itself. The ever-changing ecosystem here, where salt and fresh water mixed, always negotiating their eternal marriage, made for a rich gathering of shorebirds, ducks, pelicans, seagulls, herons, and egrets. The slough itself was always changing its depth and width, and as such was a constant source of intrigue to a young boy. There was also a dark and foreboding tunnel that allowed the creek water to flow under a man-made earthen railroad embankment. The dark, moist alluring tunnel was a world of mystery, and its temptation added immensely to the allure of the area. Then there was the train, a man-made entity that day and night would burst thunderously into one's

awareness when one least expected it, breaking one's entranced state of mind.

So it was at this particular place, the Santa Anita slough, that my brother, friends, and I would seek adventure for weekends at a time. The experience would begin even before we got there, as getting there was an adventure in itself. Our usual means of travel was either by foot or, in later years, in a glorified go-cart built on a chassis like that of a Model-T Ford, and powered by a Briggs and Stratton lawnmower engine. If we were careful we could fit three persons in this vehicle and, holding our guns and sleeping bags, we would take off into the darkness of some promising night, using flashlights for headlights, directing ourselves excitedly toward the Santa Anita slough.

The travel was always a source of some anxiety, since it was always possible that the little car would not get us there. But the real excitement began when we arrived. We grew up in a hunting community, and so the focus of our endeavor was to wake up early in the morning and strategically plan a hunt for the wild ducks that often stopped in the slough on their migratory travels. When (and if) we arrived at Santa Anita, we carefully parked the little car on the opposite side of the ridge from the slough. Then, with all our gear in hand, we quietly and slowly stole our way over the ridge, down through the mustard stalks and various brush patches, working our way down to what we referred to as the "elephant grass," a rich, thick, bulbous grass that grew about fifty yards above the water line of the slough. The grass was our mattress and was extremely comfortable as we lay on top of it in our sleeping bags.

Here we would situate ourselves, roll out our sleeping bags, tuck our guns under the bags to keep off moisture, then snuggle in and wait for dawn and the hunt. The night, however, was always filled with wonder, excitement, and threat, so much so that we hardly slept. There was excitement in just being miles