

### The Path of Tomorrow

The soft, pale sand sinks beneath my shoes as I gaze at the empty and darkened path. This path which stretches out before me, looks as if it has never been traveled on before, yet many students have already embarked on their own journey using the same trail. I myself, am waiting for my own cue to go. The anticipation to begin overwhelms me, and overshadows the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

Our instructions were to follow the sand path lined with a few brightly glowing glow sticks. Despite their brightness, only a small surrounding area was illuminated. We were instructed to follow this path to where one of our teachers awaited our arrival. This trail however, was to be traversed alone and without a true beacon to guide me.

Eventually, I received my signal to go, and immediately all my confidence and excitement was blown away by the cool breeze. The wondrous, elegant live oaks which had welcomed me in the light now towered over me, twisting into evil looking forms. I saw now the daunting scrubby oaks around me, and the dunes of sand that marked the path. The flora all around created illusions, such as what looked like eyes staring me down with no good intentions. I then recalled what we had seen earlier: mouse and snake tracks, and some giant wolf spiders!

I trembled with fear—fear that was fueled by the feeling that someone or something was out to get me. I was uncertain how much longer my mind could handle the cloud of loneliness and darkness. So, to relieve it sooner, I began to run.

The sand under me made my feet sink and slip with every step, challenging my muscles to work harder. The ever constant sinking of the sand caused me to tire out much quicker than I initially anticipated, and I failed to shake the thought out of my mind that what I was doing was

ultimately fruitless. I stopped, gasping with either exertion or fear. I had no choice but to reduce my speed down to a walking pace.

I panted as I swiveled my head around to see what was behind me. But why did I bother? I could see nothing but a dull, fuzzy outline of the landscape. Anything could be stalking me, ready to pounce, and I wouldn't know. This uncertainty of what could be inching closer to me, or what was to come, was my true underlying fear; the thing that had been disturbing me this entire time.

So what should I do? I am alone, and in darkness. I am unable to go and ask for assistance now. It pains me to be in this solitude, and to have no shoulder nearby to rest on or a simple light to guide me. All alone, I could only think of the worst. I didn't consider relaxing or telling myself it'll be okay. It seemed pointless to tell myself that, for I think if it is from me, it means nothing.

As I continued to walk I stared at the black abyss that was the sky now. Fear had consumed me; the cool breeze whooshed by with malicious laughter. The finish line however, did finally reveal itself. The final glowstick signified the end of this seemingly interminable path. I was welcomed by my teacher and those who had already completed their trip. The fear that clouded me washed away quicker than a wave taking the sand from the shore. I smiled with relief, and was overjoyed that I hadn't given up.

I glanced back at the blackened path, the chill of loneliness still lingered. But I made it through; I made it through the storm of loneliness and fear. Why though? How did I make it through? I assumed the pain and dread of being alone was enough to push me over the edge of what I thought was possible. I knew that deep down I didn't want to be alone, and I recognized that if I continued going, I would eventually find the group.

Once our group was finally reunited, we mounted our bikes once more for the day. We pedaled back to camp, each of us processing the experience of navigating the darkness alone. This journey had concluded our final night in the Outdoor English class. The sublime wilderness was full of adventure and discovery. With that in mind, I slept that night in the tent, keeping the ocean, the biking, and the path in mind. I smiled as the few warm tears rolled down my cheek.

So, why does that matter? It matters much, for we will all encounter and be met with those lonely times throughout life. The golden brown leaves and the pale sand will not be the same every time I come, for they will change with the seasons and the breeze that comes through.

The waves will splash on the dark shore joyously. The laughter from the seagulls will fill the air. The shells will glisten once again, and that sandy path will be traveled with many different stories. The darkness will not last forever. You have to push through to see the sun rise, and once you do, it is unforgettable.

Saddened yet refreshed, I have no regrets. I think about my journeys often. I wholeheartedly thank the outdoors for letting me sit on its beach, and walk on its challenging path. It has forged the person that I am today. As I look back on what I leave behind, I am surprised to find myself smiling with joy, and not overcome by sadness.

I cannot urge people enough, to simply step outside and sit. The beach we hiked at False Cape State Park was the wildest beach I have ever seen, yet I found my place in it. Honestly, I wish I had done this all sooner. Everything I learned these past years was connected to the outdoors. I thought I could only learn from others, but in nature I found what I could learn from within. I will find my way to you as often as I can, for you taught me, put me back together when I was broken, and walked with me even when I felt I was truly alone.

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