

THE ART OF NATURAL NAVIGATION

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Natural Navigation is the rare art of finding your way using nature, including the sun, moon, stars, weather, land, sea, plants and animals.

TRISTAN GOOLEY

Navigation is one of life's invisible essentials. Alongside eating and sleeping, it is crucial to survival. We do it every day without even realising.

Guided by the latest GPS sensors in the palm of our hands, we meet friends, try new restaurants and travel to new countries, except we navigate looking down at our smartphones and not up at the stars as our ancestors once did.

So if technology can lead us safely and efficiently to our destination, why are more and more people switching off their phones and rekindling the age-old art of natural navigation instead?

Be Movement met with Tristan Gooley, founder of The Natural Navigation School and author of The Sunday Times bestseller, "The Walker's Guide to Outdoor Clues & Signs", and asked him why natural navigation is going through a revival, how to get started and how he's navigated his own personal journey.

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Tristan Gooley, writer, explorer and founder of The Natural Navigation School

WHY IS NATURAL NAVIGATION AN "ART" AND WHY IS IT GOING THROUGH A RENAISSANCE?

I love the word "art". I read somewhere there are 26 different definitions of the word, which fits natural navigation because there are so many different ways of looking at the subject.

There's the practical side - an art is something which we repeat and we practice until we become better at it, it's a skill - but there's also art implying something creative.

Natural navigation is based in science. I don't use or teach or write anything where I don't understand the science behind it.

However, to me it becomes an art when we transcend the purely practical and when we start to do something that influences the way we think and the way we feel, much in the way that great music, great art and great literature does. It shapes our understanding of who we are and our surroundings.

We start by learning that if you follow the North Star you do actually go north. It sounds incredibly simple, but for many people that is a profound philosophical experience. The next stage is you suddenly realise you're finding your way just using clouds and this takes you to a level of connection with your environment that is not about practicality.

You quickly get to a point where everything around you is teaching you something and leading you into a more interesting place, philosophically as well as practically.

The thing I witnessed is that people are ... they're not necessarily anti-capitalistic in any way, but they are appreciating more and more that the richness of life is not purely monetary. We need food, we need shelter and we need lots of other little things to make life more



comfortable, but once we get out of that zone it's still a great mystery as to what exactly leads to a happy and fulfilling life.

We're all feeling a bit odd about what we're meant to do with our time. If we're lucky, if we've got 12 hours to spare at the weekend and we have a little bit of money to keep the cold and hunger at bay, what do you do?

[Natural navigation] is very much this idea [of] adding a thin layer of richer experience every day. The more we notice, the more we get out of life.

MUCH OF THE KNOWLEDGE COMES FROM ANCIENT CULTURES. HOW DOES MODERN SOCIETY CONTRIBUTE TO NATURAL NAVIGATION?

It's a very exciting thing for me. I can be looking at how Odysseus uses The Bear Constellation to find his way ... but I'm [also] using a lot of cutting edge research. Sometimes I'm using academic papers that are only a week old.

[So] a lot of what I do is take knowledge that's being discovered for one purpose and say "Actually there's a navigation application for that."

[For example], a lot has been studied about how people walk through towns. People flow out of stations in the morning and go back there late in the afternoon, so if you're lost in a town, if you go against the flow of people in the morning or with the flow of people in the afternoon, you'll find yourself at a station.

WE OFTEN CONTROL OUR IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH PRUNING TREES, FOR EXAMPLE. DO YOU FORESEE THE TECHNIQUES OF NATURAL NAVIGATION CHANGING BECAUSE OF THE INFLUENCE WE HAVE ON OUR ENVIRONMENT?

The more a tree has been managed [or pruned], even if it has been thoughtfully managed, the less easy it is to use the natural navigation.

[But] occasionally you have fun examples. I had somebody who took my course five years ago and they sent me an email after a holiday in the Canary Islands. They said "Earlier in the holiday I saw this tree and it was growing 'all wrong.'" It was very heartening to me because I'd obviously given him a good sense of how a tree "should" grow in response to the elements of course.

He said it wasn't until the last day of his holiday that it clicked ... The sun was bouncing off the mirror glass of the building on the opposite side of the street.

So the tree was following the rules. It's just the sun was being reflected.

WHAT SORT OF PERSON IS INTERESTED IN NATURAL NAVIGATION?

Navigation has the reputation for being a sort of geeky kind of expertise that's only relevant to one in a thousand people, but in fact it's relevant to 999 out of a thousand people, particularly if you want an interesting life.

[And] a connection with nature comes when it adds something to your fundamental interest. As human beings, we tend to have an interest in certain things more than others.

Constructive rebels are people who I really admire. It's that looking deep inside and saying "Who am I meant to be?" and doing it with integrity to the point where you come out the other side.

Some people find food and drink fascinating - the cooks [and foodies] amongst us. Their connection with nature might come from foraging.

Some people have a real interest in health and well-being. Natural medicine is a great example [of a connection with nature].

Travel [is more obvious] ... There are very few people in the world who have no interest in

travel, which I'm delighted to say means there are very few people who couldn't have an interest in natural navigation.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO DO TO BE A NATURAL NAVIGATOR?

To be a natural navigator, notice and question. One of the most important things from my perspective is not getting distracted by names [of everything]. In every country we call things differently and so clearly the name is not the important thing, [so] what's important is noticing trends, asymmetry.

Natural navigation really is about deductive thought. It's about seeing something as a clue to direction.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO START?





How I found my way through [those years] was to say “Every time you try to do the things that everybody else is doing, it’s not really working for you on many levels and so just go with your heart.”

But the challenge with that - and a lot of young people find this - is if you go out on your own you remain on your own and nobody really wants that.

So I was making a lot of decisions which led to a lot of loneliness. I don’t just mean physical loneliness, like being out on a mountain on my own (which happened a fair amount). I mean that feeling of going to bed at night and feeling “Well you have chosen something that has no support network, or there’s nobody in the world saying this is a sensible thing.”

It's not about whether you're more accurate than an instrument. It's about you noticing half a dozen things you never have before.

I encourage people not to see natural navigation as a sole activity. You don't have to go on an expedition. You don't even have to go on a walk. Just look out of a window, even in your office, and ask "Which way am I looking?"

You've become a natural navigator.

[And] it almost doesn't matter how you answer it [and] if you are wrong ... because the chances are ... you don't need it to get through the day.

Then using the sun, using the wind, using urban clues, satellite dishes, whatever you want, you can come up with some sort of answer.

As I said, it's not about whether you're more accurate than an instrument. It's about you noticing half a dozen things you never have before.

I say to people "If you do that [for] two minutes a day, you'll find that within a week [you'll notice] actually where the sun is rising and that philosophically takes you on a little journey around the solar system."

That small journey is more interesting than most things on a smartphone, or any other things we might choose to fill those two minutes with.

NATURAL NAVIGATION KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNIQUES CAN VARY DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU LIVE. WHAT'S AN EASY ENTRY TECHNIQUE FOR SOMEONE LIVING IN ASIA?

Start with the urban clues. See if there's a trend with the direction the satellite dishes are pointing, because they tend to ... point to similar satellites, [or] look at the direction of the sun at the beginning, middle and the end of the day.

[Singapore's latitude of 137km north of the equator] is interesting in itself because it means in December the sun will be due south in the middle of the day and in June due north in the middle of the day. If you put anything on the ground that casts a long shadow in the middle of the day in December or June it will be quite easy to find the direction, and just notice how it changes between June and December.

It will rise due east in September and March, it will

What qualifies as discovery and adding value are the things that make people go "That's genuinely enriched my life a little."

rise well south of east in December and rise well north of east in June and that's just the start point.

A lot of people, even very experienced travellers, are first shocked that they have no idea that the sun rises in different places every day, but then are pleasantly surprised when they work out why.

We're on this great fairground ride. It's called 'Planet Earth' and it circles the sun. Once you fathom that and realize it's changing where the sun is, that's quite a fun moment for a lot of people.

A 100 YEARS OR SO AGO, THE GREAT EXPLORERS WERE DISCOVERING NEW LANDS. NOW IT SEEMS IT'S ALL BEEN DISCOVERED. WHAT'S THE ROLE OF AN EXPLORER TODAY?

I think it's two things. You must make a discovery and you must communicate it to other people. [And] the explorers who are worth their salt are the ones who are adding something of broad value. The value is not monetary ... Generally these days it's philosophical.

What qualifies as discovery and adding value are the things that make people go "That's genuinely enriched my life a little."

Let's say a scientist finds that the smell of a certain flower stimulates our blood flow and makes us feel more alert. Perhaps a few dozen people go and do that [smell the flower]. It's enriched their lives slightly. That's a discovery, it's communicated and it adds value, so to me that person is more of an explorer than some of the people who are better termed [as] endurance athletes.

THROUGH YOUR BOOKS, TALKS AND NATURAL NAVIGATION SCHOOL, YOU'VE SPARKED A RENAISSANCE IN NATURAL NAVIGATION. HOW HAS THE JOURNEY EVOLVED?

Like a lot of young people, I sort of found my teens and twenties quite confusing and daunting.

How I found my way through [those years] was to say "Every time you try to do the things that everybody else is doing, it's not really working for you on many levels and so just go with your heart."

Tap Mun, Hong Kong
Photography by Thomas Leung



EXPERIMENTAL TRAVEL

But the challenge with that - and a lot of young people find this - is if you go out on your own you remain on your own and nobody really wants that.

So I was making a lot of decisions which led to a lot of loneliness. I don't just mean physical loneliness, like being out on a mountain on my own (which happened a fair amount). I mean that feeling of going to bed at night and feeling "Well you have chosen something that has no support network, or there's nobody in the world saying this is a sensible thing."

What's been lovely over the past six years in particular is that I've gone from feeling I'm on my own to feeling I'm part of this burgeoning reawakening and community.

WHAT SPARKED YOUR PASSION FOR NAVIGATION?

I was one of those kids who would see a hill and think that it might be a bit more interesting at the top than the bottom, [so] I was fascinated by navigation mainly because it's the skill that allows you to shape journeys. I take the view that on any journey you're either a navigator or a passenger. If you are slightly rebellious, then [a] navigator is much more appealing.

I realised at a deep level that either I am going to shape [the journey] or someone else is.

Remember those car journeys where you jump into the passenger seat and half-an-hour later you arrive somewhere and you're like "I've no idea where I am [or how I got here]"?

It still happens to me occasionally, but the danger is that that happens in life. You sort of wake up ... and go "Whoa, I've been in the passenger seat for 20 years. This isn't good! (Laughs) I should have looked out of the window."

WHAT'S THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF YOUR

JOURNEY SO FAR?

On a personal level I'm just very grateful because, you know, I don't think I would blame the world if my Natural Navigation School didn't prove to be successful. If you're going to do something crazy, you can't always expect guaranteed successful results. (Laughs)

On a broader level, I love the fact that I've found something that grows for me in terms of potential and I think that that's something that people can relate to. It doesn't matter what you're doing but, if you feel that you are learning about the broader world and about yourself every day, that's probably worth sticking with.

I was not somebody who enjoyed formal learning. I passed exams if I absolutely had to, but ... sitting in a classroom with a syllabus didn't feel like a terribly good model for understanding the world.

I've found my little way of trying to understand the world a bit and that's probably the best thing.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST SACRIFICE YOU'VE HAD TO MAKE?

Probably the biggest sacrifice I've had to make is not having day-to-day colleagues. I work with a lot of people and a lot of them repeatedly, but I don't get the water cooler [conversations].

It's not a big sacrifice, but in all honesty it's sometimes nice to be part of a team.

My whole life I was a rebel. I wanted to strike out on my own and I found myself on my own. This is wonderful and I'm delighted ... but the biggest thing I've had to give up is ... you can't strike out on your own and be part of a team at the same time.

WHO DO YOU ADMIRE?

I empathise much more with people who have

done things that are more intellectually brave than physically brave.

The people who really inspire me are the people who have a true passion for [something] and follow it regardless of society's view ... and then prevail through that [with] integrity.

Quite a few are writers [such as] George Orwell. Almost every decision he made in life, I respect. The establishment didn't work for him ... and he just rebelled against it, but in a constructive way. Instead of just kicking against everything he said "Okay, what am I going to do?" and he went and did it.

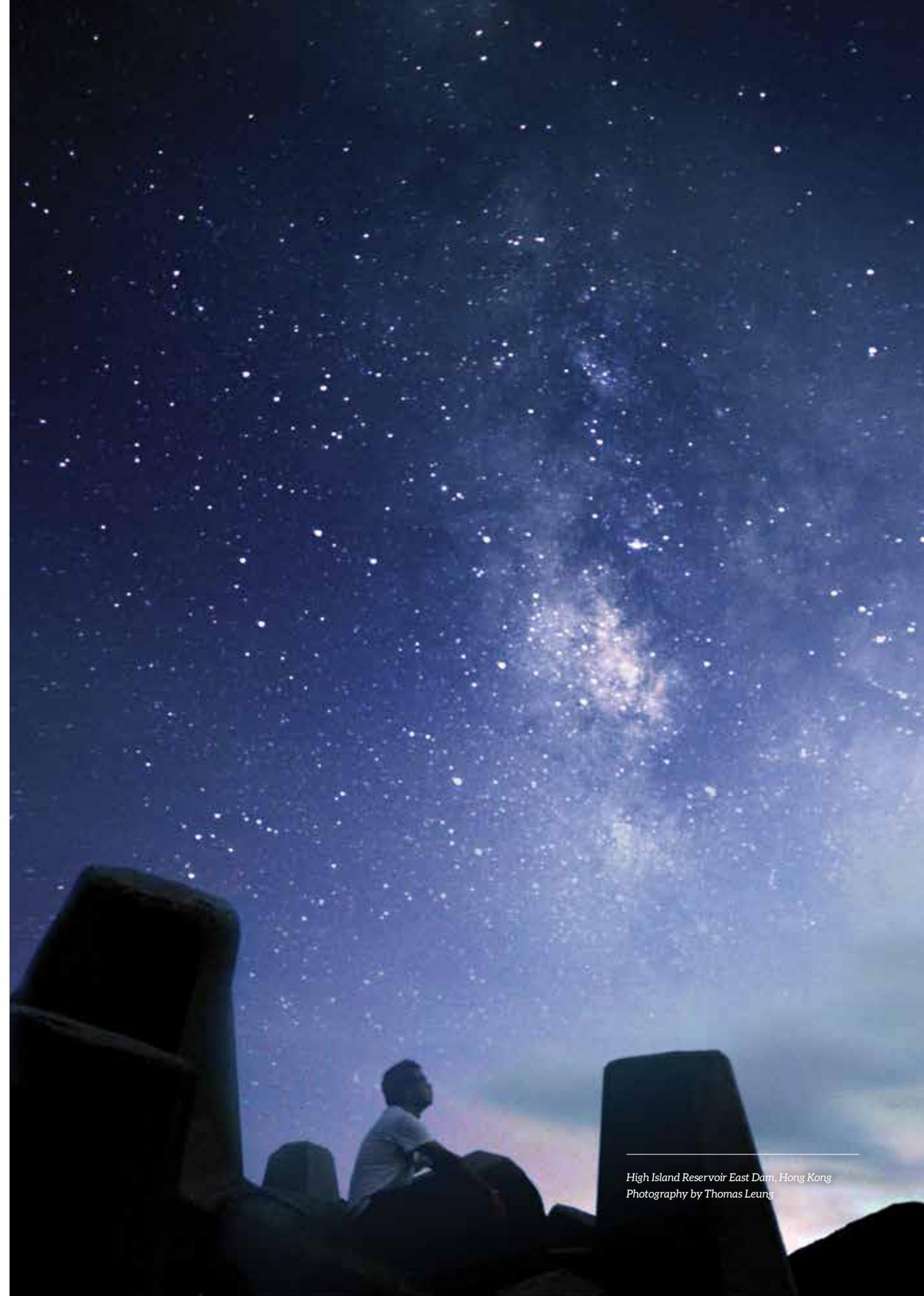
[So] constructive rebels are people who I really admire.

It's that looking deep inside and saying "Who am I meant to be?" and doing it with integrity to the point where you come out the other side.

WHAT DOES COURAGE MEAN TO YOU?

My personal view is that it is overcoming the desire to fit in. We all have that feeling and it starts very young - peer pressure. The peer pressure when you are a kid takes a different form when you're an adult, but it's always there and I still feel it to this day.

It always surprises me how much my thoughts at the end of the day can be influenced by the group of people I've been with. I have some alternative friends and some sort of conforming friends. If I spend two or three hours chatting with conforming friends, I suddenly go to bed thinking "What am I doing? I should be earning lots more money. I should be wearing a suit" (Laughs) And so courage is recognising that pressure and just saying, "No, stay true."

HOW DO YOU MAKE A PRACTICAL LIVING OUT OF NATURAL NAVIGATION?

It's about niche and I think we live in a very exciting time of the internet. Providing that you are genuinely passionate and you build up the knowledge in a niche area, the internet allows you to access enough people to make a living out of something that would have been impossible 30 years ago. I couldn't do what I do without the internet.

If you follow [your niche] for long enough, with enough passion and integrity, then there's a very good chance you'll make a living out of it.

WHAT FURTHER ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR OTHERS?

Read widely and try things. •

