

### *The Preserve welcomes a long lost friend*

As I opened the gate to the preserve, a rush of emotions flooded my mind. The crisp blue sky of the fall afternoon provided the perfect backdrop to the green trees and shrubs enjoying the warm sunshine. Why don't I come here more often, I sternly asked myself? It's not far, it's in my backyard, literally. I live in a community that is bordered on the south by a state preserve and on the east by the intercoastal waterway. How many times have I sat at home and said "I want to go experience nature and pondered where to drive?" Now here I was in a short 10 minute walk, in the midst of what I crave every day.

With camera in hand and a sense of purpose, I began meandering down the trail. Yep, meandering, something I don't do very much anymore. I pride myself on getting places the shortest way possible and hopefully before others. Slow was the word today and my sense of purpose? Just soak up everything like the cracked drought stricken ground eagerly soaks up the gentle rain.

I approached the signs for a hiking trail and wondered "was this a new trail?" or had my absence been longer than I remembered. Either way, I took in the sites like a child's first visit to a museum. What I call the "boring" signature Florida landscape of scrub brush and sand welcomed me like a group of long lost friends. Along the trail I heard a rustling ahead. I raised my camera in anticipation of a wild boar, a snake, or the ever elusive panther. It was just small sparrows flitting about and enjoying their community tree. I stopped and watched them hoping they didn't see me and instantly fly away. They flew without a care and just went wherever they decided. I soon moved on and experienced more wonders along the trail.

Like nature itself, the trail changed along the way. Scrub brush gave way to a mixture of trees which gave way to mixture of growth so dense, I felt like I was in a South American jungle rather than a few minutes from home.

Rounding a corner, I saw a glimmering thread across the trail. A tiny spider's web was catching the rays of the afternoon sun. Spider webs aren't unusual in these parts, what was unusual was that I going slow enough to see it. I hadn't seen any footprints in a long time so who knew the last time a person walked this way. Making sure my passing wouldn't damage the shimmering web; I gently placed my camera bag on the ground and slowly crawled under. All day long I solve complex problems, but figuring out the simple act of not disturbing a spider's web was much more rewarding.

The more I explored, the lighter I felt. All the usual noise in my head was being replaced with peace and wonderment of the world around. It's a good thing mental clearing isn't visible; otherwise I'd still be picking up trash from that trail. All the running around I normally do didn't seem to matter anymore. Just being and enjoying the moment right here, right now was the most important thing.

Along the way, several open places just begged to be stretched out in. Sitting and letting whatever thoughts come and go through my mind was surely relaxing. If I drifted off to sleep, it would be one of the nicest naps in ages.

Losing all track of time as I explored, I finally decided to slowly make my way back. I hadn't told anyone where I went or how long I'd be gone. I walked slowly and took in all the sights in reverse. Everything looked different on the way back. Reaching the gate, I paused before going through. Like leaving a world of peace and beauty and stepping into one of chaos, I took a long look at the preserve. Thankful for this time to rejuvenate and become clear, I confidently stepped through and shut the gate behind me. Often we look long and hard for answers, peace, or just solitude. Often, what we want is closer than we think and it's been right there all along.

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