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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

**Feel the Earth Breathing:
A Lesson from Portugal**

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
January 2025
Originally July 2022

Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson scholar-in-residence David Frew. The Jefferson first published it in July 2022.



Atlantic Ocean, living and breathing just below our winter retreat in South Carolina

One of my neighborhood friends was a first-generation Portuguese kid. His father had grown up on Europe's Atlantic Coast in the 1920s and was intent on telling stories about the Old Country. They were stories intended to help his son (and sometimes his friends) understand and appreciate the family heritage. Their family had come to Erie because of its location on the Great Lakes, the local fishing industry, and Erie's large Portuguese community. One lazy August day when we were sitting on the bluffs over Presque Isle Bay, my friend repeated a story that his father had told him. "If you close your eyes and listen very carefully," he said, "you can feel the Earth breathing. But to do so you must be close to a large body of water. An ocean or lake," he added. We both closed our eyes and listened that day. Intently.

I knew and respected his dad and assumed that there must have been wisdom imbedded in that story. I wasn't exactly sure what I was hearing that day, or on the other days when I wandered to the bluffs by myself. But I continued to go there and listen.

Listening from the beaches at Presque Isle seemed more productive. When I went to the beach with my family I tried to sneak away from the busy activity of picnics and games and return to the listening exercises that I had attempted near Presque Isle Bay. Listening to the lake seemed more productive than listening to the bay, perhaps because it was a larger body of water – more like an ocean. If I closed my

eyes and listened intently, I could hear a steady rhythm. Was it really the Earth breathing? I'm not sure, but I still listened.

Another prophetic insight that my friend's dad shared was that people who grow up near large bodies of water become "haunted." Forever compelled to live and to be ... near water. "You will be doomed. Haunted by water sounds like me," he once proclaimed. "That is why I moved to Lake Erie when I left Portugal," he added.

Almost 70 years later, I am beginning to fully understand the power of that listening exercise as well as the mythology that lies at its roots. Slowing down to listen was and is a meditation and much of what I have learned since those early days has reinforced the amazing wisdom of the story that my friend passed along from his father years ago. During the 1970s I became involved in meditation, both as a practitioner and a researcher, and learned that many of the world's most-used meditating techniques involve breathing and the use of breath sounds as mantras.

I have also learned that the prophetic warning about water being a compelling and grounding force has informed my life. Water drove the genetic and family histories of both myself and my wife. Mary Ann's family lived on the coast of Italy for generations and when they immigrated to this country by steamship they settled on the lower east side, within sight of Presque Isle Bay. My ancestors lived on the shores of Loch Ness, Scotland, and traveled to this country generations ago via water. They traveled the Atlantic Ocean followed by a series of rivers and creeks that took them to the Warren and Frewsburg area. Interestingly, Mary Ann and I have observed that we must both be infected since every vacation that we have taken seems to revolve about a location that is adjacent to water.

After almost 60 years of marriage when we list our vacations and especially our favorites, we recognize that they have almost always been at water locations. We have found ourselves repeatedly going to places like the Florida Keys, Sicily, Port Dover, the 1000 Islands and Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Not to mention Niagara Falls. All places that feature water. We did not intentionally do this. We were simply planning one vacation at a time without realizing that each of them was at a water location. In hindsight it is apparent. We have both internalized a compulsion to be near water, and the closer the better.

Twenty years ago, when we began the process of withdrawing from full-time life as academics, we decided to hunt for a place that we would enjoy during the winters; a respite from Erie weather and sanctuary for reading, writing, and contemplating. Our search took three years and involved a systematic investigation of cities along the Atlantic Coast. We dismissed Southern Florida, thinking that a location in the Carolinas or Georgia might be best. The only thing that we knew was that wherever we decided to settle during the winters it would have to be on the ocean. After spending a week or more in a dozen cities over a

three-year period (Wilmington, Georgetown, Beaufort, Savanna, St. Mary's, St. Augustine, and others) we settled on a barrier island near Charleston, South Carolina.

The choice was driven by the discovery of an affordable compound of small condominiums on the ocean. The beach location has been problematic in the past since the place where we have stayed for a month or more each winter was once totally destroyed by a hurricane and is currently threatened by rising sea levels. But we continue. We come each year, walk the beaches, sit on our deck and listen to the ocean breathe. It is a spiritual meditation suggested by an elderly Portuguese man from my old Erie neighborhood.



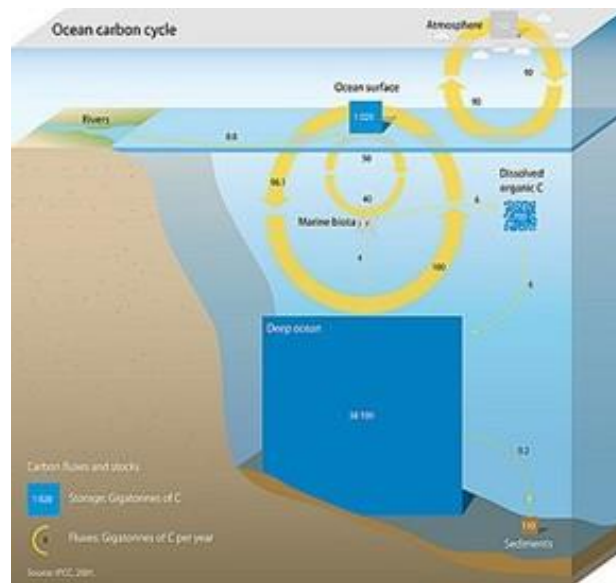
Images of Earth from space reveal the extent to which our planet is covered by water.

I know what you're probably thinking. All of this sitting and listening amounts to nothing more than hearing waves lapping on shore or breaking waves tumbling. What could it really have to do with a larger spiritual reality or something as elemental as the Earth breathing? Beginning with the breathing, many scientists are now referring to the oceans as the lungs of the Earth. An astonishing 70 percent of the surface of the planet is covered by oceans and as science has learned more about their role in the balance of nature it has become increasingly evident that they work almost precisely the same way that human lungs do.

Oceans energize the planet by manufacturing almost 80 percent of the oxygen needed for the world and all of its creatures, including us. Like those human lungs, oceans operate systematically with a regular cadence. As the oceans pulsate, their seaweed produces the precious oxygen needed for all life as they absorb carbon and filter impurities.

Oceans absorb carbon and change it to oxygen while simultaneously regulating the Earth's temperatures through powerful currents. This process is amazingly similar to the way that people breathe. Human lungs move oxygen into the bloodstream and exhale carbon while they filter impurities. For people, the process of breathing sends oxygenated blood through the body, creating a life force. The similarities are stunning. We breathe. The Earth breathes. And sometimes we breathe in unison with the Earth and its oceans.

My friend's father was way ahead of his time.



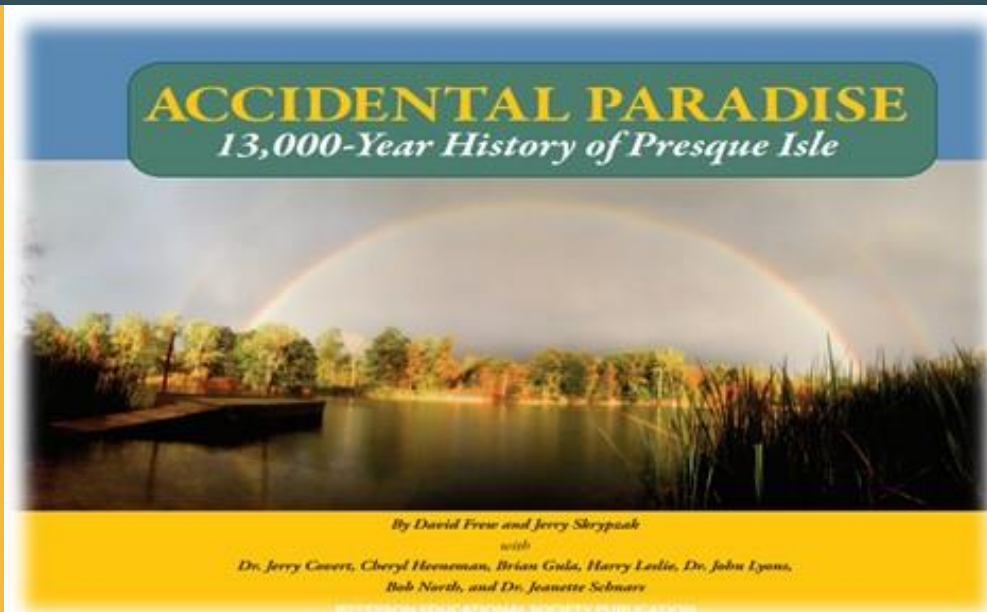
The ocean's carbon cycle

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Accidental Paradise Available at TREC!

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales **daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.**

For more information, send an email to aperino@TRECf.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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