

Seven Ravens

*Two summers in a
life by the sea*

by Lesley Choyce



Wolsak and Wynn

Introduction

This book is about a journey I took over a two-year period of my life, a journey from despair to happiness. It was prompted by a mid-life crisis of some sort but if I were to spell out the causes, I don't think you'd have much sympathy for my downfall. In retrospect, there was not that much wrong with my life, but nonetheless various unexpected and challenging changes had knocked me down several rungs on the wobbly ladder I was climbing. Suffice it to say I needed repair and, at first, I didn't have a clue about how to get the job done.

Friends and colleagues and even family weren't jumping up and down to help, probably because I didn't reveal that much of anything was wrong. I was a pro at appearing normal and even competent in most things I did. I'm a novelist, a university teacher, a publisher and a sometimes TV talk show host. In fact, I keep myself so busy from September to the end of April that I often don't have the luxury of indulging in one of my most important passions – writing. But from May to the end of August I give myself license to ponder, to meditate, to explore, to study myself and the natural world around me. And to write. And so this is the story of two summers of my life here at Lawrencetown Beach living on an old farm by the North Atlantic.

This is not the story of a young man's anxiety or an old man's grief. This is about a guy somewhere in the middle trying to pull himself back together, yet again trying to make sense out of the world.

I live on the edge of a ragged spruce forest, a stone's throw from the sea. Those summers I retreated to the forest; or to empty shorelines; or out onto the lakes, inlets and sea in canoe, kayak or on surfboard. I let nature work at my wounds. I was restored for a while and then lost ground. Like an old car, rusting away, I needed repair often.

In that dense spruce forest behind my house, a tangled, sometimes receptive chunk of forest, I purposefully wandered until I was lost because that's what I was feeling in other aspects of my life. And then I proceeded to find my way back home, taking plenty of wrong turns, stumbling at times, even clawing my way through undergrowth.

I was on a quest to reformulate my understanding of who I was and where I was going. I needed something to sustain me in spite of my recent bad luck and in spite of myself. I was certain that it was not a prescription for anti-depressants or a rigorous schedule with therapists that would help. Whatever "cure" was out there, I would have to find it on my own – or at least, I'd have to find it my way. And did.

I did not find God or the ultimate meaning of the universe. Instead I found rocks and trees and small, injured animals and some helpful books written centuries ago. I found truth – at least a satisfying version of something close to truth – while kayaking alone to islands in the Atlantic, while surfing in nearly impenetrable fog, while climbing down sheer rock face cliffs in search of amethyst and while travelling north and south, east and west.

More often than not, it was the natural things of this world that cushioned the blow to my ego now that I fully understood that I was mortal, damaged goods on a downhill slide to death. I don't know why the singing sparrow, the sway of sea oats, the sifting sand on a windswept beach and the beautiful eyes of a wild duck have such restorative powers, but they do.

There were people involved in my journey and there was adventure. In the end, there was a story, this story. The truth that was revealed to me had many faces, many facets, many particulars and no easy, single, quotable name. Yet it was there and, in the telling, I can provide all of the intimate details.

As is my nature, I was trying to write my way out of my despair along the way. I knew that things made sense once you wrote them down. Most importantly, I believed that it was my job to make connections between unlikely events and ideas. Sun Tzu accompanied me on my search for Lake No Good. Voltaire was my only ally when I found myself sitting out the fog on a slippery rock perch near the mouth of Halifax Harbour.

As a humble explorer in the twelve billion year old universe, I travelled light. But my safety net was made of many threads of learning and experience and belief. The notebook forced me to observe and connect and language provided the specific knots that allowed me to connect one thing to the next. In my knapsack, always, with the water bottle, the topographic map and the compass, were stories from my own past that could be spread out on a rocky boulder at low tide, or by the raging waterfall of Hell's Gate, or wherever I was.

Ever testing my ability to connect the most disparate subjects, I hit a few dead ends but more often I found the connection I was looking for. In the random universe, quantum physics instructs us that what seems logical may not necessarily be true and something that seems totally crazy may be the path to enlightenment – or at least to some small parcel of truth that can get you through a tough spot.

On the rocky shore near where I surf, I once saved a raven with a broken wing. He punished me well for saving him – tore open my arms with his talons, but I didn't hold a grudge. I had his wing set, named him Jack, and I kept him safe for the time it took for the wing to heal. I retrained him to fly after that and set him free. He stayed in the neighbourhood and greeted me each day for

several years until a hunter killed him during goose hunting season.

Wherever I travel, I see ravens. In the woods, by the shoreline or out along the highways, whether it's here in Nova Scotia, north in Labrador, on a remote beach near Tofino on Vancouver Island or in the highlands of Scotland. Ravens and their only slightly lesser cousins, the crows, are ubiquitous in my life.

I have a belief about ravens. I can believe a thing that is or is not true, as long as it serves me in a positive way. I believe that those ravens out there know that I saved Jack from certain death and that since I did this good deed for their species, from now on, it is their job to watch out for me. To make sure I am safe.

Hence the raven at the top of the splintered white pine waiting for me at the pinnacle above the rockfall at Devil's Bed. And of course the ravens that sit on the old swing set each morning waiting for me to walk out the back door. And the ravens lining the highway even on my drive to the airport. They are all watching out for me.

And sometimes those ravens can provide a code which might help me reaffirm my sanity, provide the road map leading from chaos to order. I want to believe that it's all about something, that it all adds up to something wonderful and vibrant.

So a simple test goes like this. I will hike north from the Number Seven Highway, into the great inland expanse of wilderness that is in the middle of this province. I'll follow an overgrown trail until the forest usurps it and then continue on over hills and across streams, stopping to write in my notebook each time I see a raven. I will assure myself that something significant, something vital, will happen at each point along the way until I am seven ravens from home. And at that point, I turn around and return, retracing my steps or theorizing an alternate path back to civilization.

Ravens can fool me easily, they look so much alike. Is the same raven following me that I see seven times or a different one

at each spotting? I don't know. All I know is that if I believe in the seven ravens theory, if I attune my senses to discovering what is around me and within me each time I stop, amazing things happen. Connections are made.

And if I spend enough time keeping up the search for the profound in the seemingly ordinary, the light comes back into the world and I find a cure for all of the darkness within me.