



THE BEACH AS LIFE

Very early in the morning on that final day of my beach holiday, I made the decision to collect some ocean water in a jar. Living so far inland, ocean water serves as my psychological insurance policy – low rates, high return – and this particular water with its high salinity, turquoise green color and sunny memories had the allure of a little bit of heaven stored safely in a recycled plastic bottle. So, shortly after five a.m., with a freshly washed Gatorade bottle in hand its Fruit Punch label stripped off, I took the five minute walk from my rented house to the beach to collect some holy water.

Regardless of latitude, I have always found early morning to be free from the busy and at times cacophonous noise of life. It's as if by the very nature of it this part of the day requires silent worship. There is something about the soft echo in a predawn silver sky that charms me. The melody of early rising Cardinals praising another day combined with the rustling whispers of the ornamental sea grasses that grace my neighbor's lawn become my mantra as I

walk down the street. My bare feet step silently, in tune with the vibrations of the earth, but the once whole fishing pole I use as a walking stick adds a syncopated chorus of clicks, fiberglass against asphalt.

The stride I use for pavement changes when I enter the sandy trail that leads over the dunes to the flat expanse of beach. My legs work harder. I need to dig in deeper and the swing of my free arm combined with the fishing pole walking stick thrust into the soft sand propels me forward. The meditative trance that accompanies me of the street is gone, replaced with an excited determination, the breathlessness of anticipation is like awaiting a lover's touch; a heartbeat quickens.

As was typical of this time of day, I find the beach empty, not a soul in sight. Just me and the beach. Exactly the way I like it. I am alone with the sand and the sea and all the deities that reside there, a circumstance which soothes my soul. I am tempted to strip naked and go for a last swim but I know that without the sun to grace it, the water will not be as warm as I require, and so I decide instead to placate my needs with the fading surf's touch on my ankles and eventually, as I make my way further into the mother ocean, allow it to caress my knees as well. As I fill my bottle I think of how the salty residue on my calves will itch later in the car on the drive home.

Once secured, I dry the bottle with the tail of my shirt pulled free from summer shorts. Looking around I notice that despite the clouds laying low on the horizon, the sun is still making its presence known in the way of daylight. In a matter of ten minutes, the time it took me to walk back up the dunes, the entire landscape has changed from night to day, from black to silver to white and then finally to yellow and blue. It was then that it came to me how the beach can be seen as a metaphor for life.

Gazing up the beach to the north and then looking south, it struck me that what I was seeing was both the future and the past, each equally long distances away from where I was standing and both full of promise and lessons

learned. The sand beneath my feet was alive, squeaking with each step, as a result of trapped air being compressed much like the air that escapes from between joints when cracking one's knuckles. It was the sounding of life in the present and it made me think about how the sand crabs must perceive the noise from inside the labyrinth of tunnels that are their homes. Same sound, different perspectives. Between nature's music and the mental image of Feynman's drums (a scientific banging straight from the heart) there emerged a softening of my melancholic heart, saddened by this necessary departure, and I found refuge dancing in the early morning light across the beach over to the dunes.

The tall sea oats enveloped me as I entered the trail, their gently swaying stalks lightly brushed against my legs, and even though I knew to watch for the prickly pear cactus, there in the bend of the path, I inadvertently stepped on a stray spine broken off the mother plant by nature itself or more likely than not, a careless human passerby. The long spike has dug in deep sending me into a dance of a different sort, hopping twice, maybe three times before I could catch myself to sit down and pull the blessed thing out. The first aid will delay me, but I see it as nothing more than an opportunity to find the silver lining of this dark cloud. And I did indeed find it.

There in the protected cover of sand and vegetation and with the music of the surf nearby, I am completely at ease. Slowly, through my surroundings, I am reminded of the very reason I come to the beach, of why I come to this particular beach – wild and isolated. I am reminded of what I hope to achieve in this respite from daily living – the inner peace available only through introspective reflection. I come for the dreams I believe will become my reality. I come for a glimpse into the future as I fashion it, in my own way under my own terms. This walking meditation has not only given me hope but it has also given me a reprieve from the demons that I sometimes allow to run amuck in my soul, demons whose names are fear and skepticism.

The idiosyncrasies of life, the ups and downs, the turmoils and treasures all serve to create a rich experience deserving not of scorn at our failures, but joy at the freedom to live life as if each moment will be our last. Completing one journey and embarking on another provides a truer sense of self, of accomplishment, of grandeur regardless of the original purpose of the journey. To continue to embrace the philosophy that all things happen for a reason and only when the time is right is the ultimate and most certainly the hardest lesson of life. This hope is what I felt that morning on a deserted beach and it's why I always collect a little ocean water in a bottle. My pangs of desire are forever colored with faith, hard work, and a consecrated blessing of ocean water.

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Note: this piece was written ten years ago when I made my home in New Hampshire. Its subject, Ocracoke Island, was dubbed "The pearl of the Outer Banks" and sits at the end of a chain of barrier islands that lie thirty miles off the North Carolina coast. Ocracoke Island remains one of my favorite places not just for its beauty, but for its healing properties. One need do nothing more than visit Ocracoke to become restored and rejuvenated.