

CHOICES, POWER AND CHANGE

By
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Stressed by harassment at work, I felt drained, trapped, unappreciated and depressed. It was time to take a vacation to sort out my feelings and find a new perspective.

At a quiet, small Florida efficiency motel on the Atlantic coast near Boca Raton, my first day was wasted in fruitless circular thinking. Getting nowhere except more frustrated, I changed my focus and concentrated on enjoying my stay and the ocean, not 200 feet from my door.

It had been over twenty years since I had been to the shore, barefoot in the ocean, with no responsibilities and no place to be. I was not prepared for its mesmerizing impact as I watched the tides, felt the spray from the lapping waves and tasted the salty water.

While not a living being, the ocean changes constantly, minute by minute, rhythmic and pulsating. It is both old and new at the same time. I was lost in its power – crashing, thundering waves and calmer tides, both beautiful and destructive; in its underwater communities of countless life forms; and in its shear, vastness, caressed by the endless sky and me.

I spent the first part of every morning walking the shore, listening to the sounds of water and wildlife. I watched as seagulls flew overhead, swooping in for a taste of French fries or other delicacy, and sandpipers, as they searched for food and left their foot prints in the sand. After lunch and a nap, I looked for shells with a concentration and dedication that surprised me.

The shore had been picked clean of prized shells by first light by “Professional” beachcombers. I would have to get mine directly from the ocean. Picking a spot where the last wave broke, just before the first shelf drop, I stood in the surf and listened, acclimating to my new environment. Closing my eyes, I was aware of the tide’s pressure, the sand swirling around my feet and suspended oceanic materials caressing my ankles and calves.

To locate incoming shells, I had to adjust my focus to a point midway between the sand and the water’s frothy surface. As I searched, I became conscious of wave patterns and water movement. Three strong incoming waves were murky with sand and, after depositing it, clearer on the outflow. The fourth and fifth waves of higher clarity and lesser intensity would wash the shore and, crystal clear, return to the sea.

Shelling requires the coordination of detection, rhythm and quick hands. Although, to my astonishment, if I was not fast enough, and if I was patient enough, a repeating combination of waves and undertow might bring the same shell by me several times. However, most of the time, one chance was all I got.

It was slow going at first, but the more focused I became, the more shells seemed to emerge from the depths. At the end of each day, my bags were full and ready for sorting. With great care, I decided what to keep and what to return to sea. It took hours because my criteria was so broad, almost every shell qualified. Did I have a matching specimen already? Was the color unusual?

Was the broken piece a work of art? Did the size matter? Each evening, exhausted, I slept deeply and peacefully.

As my vacation drew to a close, I began to think about the empty, soul-sucking life awaiting me at home -- opposite my free, grounded and calm life here. The contrast was stark, I cried in frustration. It was time to face my demons.

As with the ocean, life is a process. The ocean is not sentient. It is what it is, both defined by and defining its environment, above and below the water line. I, on the other hand, have life and a definite say about who I am and how I live. The insight was like a tidal wave: I had been so involved in reacting to everything that I overlooked my own power of choice.

The ocean's healing properties had done their job. The whole shelling experience -- walking, searching; standing, feeling, hearing, watching, keeping, tossing -- gave me the perspective I needed. I was able to expand my senses and trust my choices. I had surrendered to the ancient rhythms of nature and, in letting go, I discovered myself and my voice.

I realized it was up to me to accept whatever comes along (as with the shells rolling in the surf) and cling to well-known patterns -- which was not working for me -- or choose my own path. I had taken the first step, recognized the problem and made a decision to change. Whether it was preordained or not, my path would be wide enough for choices important to me.

Empowered and rejuvenated, I stood before the ocean in the sunset of my last night and vowed to remove from my life all that was not meaningful or supportive and cherish all that was; to set my priorities and live by them; and to find a way to be in the present, neither mourning the past or afraid of the future; and, to discover a way to feel as I do at this moment for the rest of my life.

The next morning, packed and ready to go, I paid my final homage to this special place. Witnessed by the rising sun, with sandy earth cushioning me while the tide washed my feet, I understood what power, real power, is all about.

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Author's Note: The shells from that vacation are sprinkled around my home, constant reminders of my awakening. It took several months to change jobs and refocus my energies, and, several more to learn to live in the present. Now, I'm on "vacation" all the time and I would not have it any other way. Carol