

How Judy Figured Out She Was Blessed--a Holiday Tale.

Roughly 15 years ago I was a wanderer in the desert. Literally. There I was, wandering around in Death Valley on a rare snowfall day on my birthday. I'd taken off on a small personal road trip from San Diego to prod the Universe into prodding ME into the next step. I was frustrated and felt stuck. I was living next to a cold ocean in a house on a dying coast, and although I was volunteering for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during the day, I was bartending at night and starting to worry that I would be like that Flo character in the old "Alice" TV sitcom—beehive hairdo and gum a-smacking, still slinging drinks and inviting people to "kiss my grits" long past the point where my real life should have started.

So, it was me and the spirits of Death Valley in the snow. I had a bottle of red wine, and a yellow lined notebook on which I intended to inscribe my goals, yearnings, fears and thinly veiled begging. I was overdue for change, my ocean was cold, my life contained too many foo-foo drink orders and not enough wildness, not enough outsidersness, not enough of that stuff that makes you grin because you can't believe how good it can be.

Either the ancient ears of Death Valley did hear my entreaties, or my intense hunger for meaning and beauty shifted something in my personal universe, but within 8 months I was hiking across a vast and shiny black pahoehoe lava field by the sea on the Big Island. On my back I had food for me, gear to measure hawksbill turtles, and a couple of good books and some spare clothes wrapped to stay dry in trash bags. I'd dropped everything in San Diego, easily, and come to volunteer for 3 months at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. I'd come to help support the Hawksbill Nesting Program, hoping it would help me as much as I was hoping to help it. My first hike out to turtle camp was 7 miles in a warm rain along the black cliff coastline, the even-warmer humidity of the surging dark blue sea blowing over me in gusty squally billows as I followed the line of cairns—piled stones—along a trail in some places so new that the glassy patina of freshly-cooled lava was not even cracked yet. The rain slid off of it like oil.

That was early September, as I recall. That month and the one following were a blur of hike in, stay up and wait for female turtles, check tags on turtles, sleep much of the day, hike out, lather/rinse/repeat. Soon the nests began hatching and we had the glee of watching the small wind-up toy swarms of infant sea turtles swim up out of their black sand nests and scamper like mad to a sea that called them unequivocally.

So I don't remember much about October or November, but I do remember Thanksgiving. I remember it, in particular, not because Thanksgiving per se, the American Sanitized Version, means much to someone who a. knows more of the actual history and b. hasn't eaten meat in 17 years. I remember it because it was the first Thanksgiving where I felt bone-deep thankful. See if you can picture it: I had hiked away from turtle camp that morning to another area up the coast about 3 miles away. Packed a peanut butter, apple banana and ohia lehua honey sandwich. Grabbed my bathing suit and a hat and water. Took off, blissful and relaxed, just for the fun of walking and knowing there was a swim waiting at the end of my walk if I wanted it. Wound my way up and over big black coils and mounds of new pahoehoe, cairn to cairn. Surging gigantic restless sea to my left, the mountain slope-- striped with alternate zones of green vegetation and black lava fields--to my right. Zeroed in on my target: an inlet, a mere dent on that huge

coast...pocked with tidepools. Tidepools of all sizes. Tidepools with purple, green and pink corals. Yellow and orange and blue corals. Tidepools and tidepools and tidepools and corals and me. I ate the sandwich and ditched the suit.

I floated around in those tidepools for hours or centuries, careful not to touch anything, watching cobalt waves crash on the broken backs of old stone out farther, in the surf line. I watched my toes prune up, I watched the sky. I watched the light change. It was late November and doubtlessly, somewhere, somebody was putting on another sweater, heaping a plate, maybe headed out to a bar for a celebratory foo-foo drink. Whatever. I was floating naked in planet Earth's own organic kaleidoscope, warm as the womb, wrinkly as a newborn, and so thankful I could barely breathe.

And I still am.

By Judy Edwards