

GREAT SALT LAKE ECOSYSTEM PROJECT

"All glory comes from daring to begin." Anon

November air laden with the hint of winter greeted my expectant face as I pedaled up the steep driveway leading to the Visitors Center. "Is this ever going to become any easier?" I called a few early morning gulls. They whirled away, and I was left with only their distant rough caws. With only minutes to spare before my volunteer docent meeting, I unpacked a box of donuts, ducked into my utility closet and replaced my black and cerulean, blue bicycling gear with my brown, and tan Utah state park attire.

When I navigated the last belt loop and was fastening my State of Utah Parks and Recreation bronze belt buckle into place the murmur of voices, and shuffling of tennis shoes, Teva's or cowboy boots echoed up the long hallway from the main entrance, through the gift shop and under the utility closet door. Most of the docents were retirees, self-employed or enjoyed 'homedom' in some capacity.

'Homedom' is an Antelope Island term for anyone who doesn't have to work for a specific employer. We exchanged smiles and I gestured to the dented pink box of donuts. When everyone was mostly settled, I passed around a sign-up sheet for the upcoming winter school programs and the Volunteer Docent Christmas Party.

Angus-Man handed me the sign up clipboard and pen before blurting, "I am tired of being treated like a Junior Ranger!"

Confusion and mouths filled with different pieces of masticated donuts looked from him and seemed to settle somewhere near my name tag. "I'm not sure what situations you are referring to? I replied unsure if it was the donut selection, past holiday trauma or the long list of needed volunteers for the education presentations that had been the trigger.

He continued on and I didn't interrupt him until he began a full-blown rant

against Command-Central-Man. The other volunteers gaze fixated back to me. I glanced down at my silver bison tie pin that I had worn today, rather than my Fairy-God-Mother wand that everyone believed was a shooting-star. Of course, their interpretation made the most sense as I was the park-naturalist. No one knew about my alter ego as the Great-Basin-Fairy God-Mother because no one had conceived or delivered a baby under my watch. I prayed for guidance on what say about his concerns.

“Well,” I slowly began. “What I hear you saying is that you think that Command-Central-Man believes that you are a Junior Ranger?”

He nodded vigorously.

“And perhaps you feel that none of the park staff appreciate you?” I reiterated.

“That is dang right,” he nodded two more times.

Another volunteer as old as my mother, but with long flaxen hair, intermixed with thin strands of grey raised her hand. “Yes,” I responded to Grace-Woman's raised hand.

“Well I think being any type of ranger is like being a rock star,” she commented with enthusiasm. “Perhaps he believes you are youthful. That's why he called you a Junior Ranger.” Her comment was met with a snort that sounded similar to a congested bison, or a chukkar mating call.

“He didn't call me a Junior Ranger! They treat us like we are Junior Rangers,” he stated.

“Thank you both for sharing,” I replied not knowing how to specifically address his concerns. “I will speak with him, and the other island personnel about this during our next staff meeting. And I am hopeful that he didn't mean anything negative, or demeaning.” Wrapping up the conversation as soon as possible, I continued with what I hoped was a sincere smile.

“You are all greatly appreciated! We could not run the island without all of your

efforts." I lifted the clipboard and laid it on the table. "Please let us know if you are bringing a guest to the Christmas Party." People faces turned to smiles as the clipboard invitation list framed with rows of pine-trees began to circulate around the table again.

"We aren't bringing Santa but we have invited a Scottish Great Highland piper and dancer. They will be the entertainment," I added enthusiastically.

"Really," asked a kind-faced gentleman who enjoyed leading scout troops on field trips.

"Yes really. It is my bagpipe teacher and his daughter. They are both nationally recognized. You will love them! Junior Ranger accusations were replaced by nostalgic contemplation of Christmas parties past.

"Next on the agenda," I announced, feeling like a deflated bagpipe bag as I passed out flow charts titled: The Great Salt Lake Ecosystem Project."

"There are several new interpretive projects for the upcoming school year. I'm mostly excited about the "This Eats That-Great Salt Lake Ecosystem Project!" Faces bent over the drawings. "It will be for adults and children," I explained.

"You won't catch me wearing any of these," stated Curmudgeon-Man.

"It sounds adorable!" countered another.

"Well, you aren't required to wear costumes when you are presenting of course," I said. "The visitors will be wearing them. It's Sesame Street meeting the Great Salt Lake! Kinesthetic Intelligence. Even adults will be able to understand the intricate interconnections in our ecosystem."

"A giant female and male brine shrimp?" asked another pointing to the diagram.

"Yes indeed!" I replied, pointing to brine shrimp anatomy. "Complete with claspers, ova-sacs, nauplii and cysts. All of the life stages will be included,"

"It sounds indecent." laughed Angus-Man, a retired farmer and rancher.

"It's biology," I exclaimed. " I clipped my charts to the white board. While pointing with my pencil I listed off and briefly described all the representatives in the

ecosystem: avian migratory representatives, algae, the sun, This-Eats-That energy arrows, Brine-shrimp boat, halophilic bacteria, surface-dwelling insects. And with a flourish I ended with the pooh costume.

“Poop costume?” asked Grace-Woman.

“Everything creates waste,” I replied. “Imagine their surprise when they are chosen to wear the pooh costume,”

“They’ll be surprised all right,” added Curmudgeon-Man.

“It will be tasteful and fun,” I added. “Suitable for K-12 and adults. My cheeks reddened slightly, and I cursed my fair skin that changed color like a chameleon that stood out, rather than blended into its environment.

“The costume project will be done for the upcoming school year. After they turned in their calendars of available volunteer times, I collected the sign-up sheets and wished everyone a happy Thanksgiving as our next meeting wasn't scheduled until after the New Year.

The remainder of the morning included leading a guided tour, paper work, emails and editing my education and conservation budget summary. As the excel spread sheet filled the screen of my computer as I calculated current and projected project cuts. Colorful images swirled in my mind as I contemplated the project I wanted to begin with my friend Textile Queen.

Costumes, made from colorful felt similar to Sesame Street meeting the Great Salt Lake ecosystem in a big creative boom. This will be great! Stupendous! Everyone will love this. I know it. An interpretive extravaganza. After a short and enthusiastic conversation with Textile-Queen, I entered the approximate costs. Examining our calendars, we set a date that for her must include a cup of fine roast somewhere.

“I’ll have to meet you on my own time,” I responded. “I don't think Boss-Man would be thrilled to know that my meeting was held at Cup-o-Java,” “Can I just make you a cup of coffee here at my office?”

She guffawed. "Do you have an espresso maker?" she asked.

I looked at the drip coffee maker collecting cobwebs next to the huge container of pretzels that was not collecting cobwebs. "No, I don't. We have pretzels. Inspiration-Woman keeps up fueled up with pretzels."

"No go. 9 am. Cup of Java next Wednesday! You need to get off that island and come into the city anyway." she laughed. "I can't wait to do this project! I am so excited that I'm twitching.

"Are you sure you aren't twitching from drinking too many espresso's?" I asked.

She laughed harder. "Oh no, that was last week,"

We said our goodbyes, punctuated with many 'Ciao Bella!' It is the only Italian that we both knew. We've had a dream for years of cycling across Italy in high heels. I wonder as I look at my rough drawings of my Great Salt Lake Ecosystem Project if she can actually function without coffee. I sigh when I think about cycling across Italy on my pink-Bianchi, and wonder if they make high healed clip-on cycling shoes.

I was reminded that though we are an island we are definitely connected to the remainder of our beautiful earth (add something more here).

CHRISTMAS EVE, PROPHETS & THE WALKING STICK

*"All winter long behind every thunder guess what we heard!
Behind every thunder the song of a bird a trumpeting bird..." Native American Song*

On Christmas Eve morning I made the girls scrambled eggs and prepared to drive to the island. State parks are open most days of the year, including some major holidays. Being mostly a democratic lot, the staff takes turns covering these dates, or we are assigned based upon seniority, or lack thereof. This holiday season I volunteered to cover the Visitors Center (VC) and its gift shop on Christmas Eve so that Intuition-Woman could celebrate with her family. It is actually quite enjoyable helping in the gift shop and directing guests to trails and other wildlife life sightings. Answering a variety of questions, starting the educational video's, discussing island geology resulting from the magnificent display of banded gneiss interpretive displays. And making suggestions for the perfect souvenir from the gift shoppe.

Entering the gate code, I passed the empty gate house. The white Nissan's heater pulsed heated air against the frost laden windshield. In the early morning light, a great dark shape perched upon a boulder along the cause way. Before I was abreast, it launched itself up into the air. Cold blue-grey light held a stripe of white against a dark wide band. The eagles had returned to the island. Leaning forward into my seat to better watch the length of wing that carried it across the salt heavy water. The island's magic had given me the most perfect gift. What a beautiful message to see on Christmas Eve, I mused. Eagles are sacred, and are considered to have great spiritual significance.

At the sites where they roost above the Fielding Garr Ranch on the southern end of the island. No one is allowed to collect feathers or any body part unless they are of North American native people's descent. Not even the Park personnel are allowed to collect any of the feathers. Unless there is a death event that needs to be investigated by

the island's wildlife biologists. Native people consider eagle feathers to have great spiritual significance. They are honored with great care and respect. Representing the most positive of human attributes: honesty, courage, strength, and power.

Continuing across the seven-mile causeway I considered stories of the eagle catchers of long ago, and the dedication to retrieving an eagle feather without causing any harm to the eagle. Many still carry this reverence. However, it seems that most do not. Protection of endangered species has many necessary dictates, I thought as my mental essay on eagles, spirituality monitored by the state and federal government, endangered species, and eagle catchers flowed like fast typed script across my mind until I reached the heavy double glass doors of the Visitors Center.

Noticing finger smudges, and aware of Intuition Woman's personal quest to have zero finger smudges on the glass, even though we had the highest visitation in the entire state park system. The supply cabinet was my first destination to retrieve the cart of cleaning materials. I really admired and liked Intuition Woman, however I was also a little scared of her smudge-less glass dictate. Smudge-less glass doesn't even happen at my own home. In front of my little triangle of bathroom mirror I gave myself a pep-talk. "You can do this beloved. Zero smudges."

After completing all the prerequisite opening duties, the first guests began to trickle in mostly in family groups, or couples. I had been told by some island guests, that my face flushed whenever I discussed how early earth's atmosphere was devoid of oxygen. I never knew if the visitors were as enraptured as I about 3.4-billion-year-old rock. It is the most extraordinary mind-bending event to know there is exposed rock on the island that ancient. What isn't exciting about that? Seriously, banded gneiss is hotter than Keanu Reeves.

During my enraptured accounts about the igneous rock cycle, guests would sometimes move slowly away, other times we chatted along for several minutes. I hoped that perhaps they were as secretly excited and giddy, as I.

"Imagine it! I exclaimed pointing out the trail head to Frary Peak. You will soon be hiking on 3.4-billion-year-old banded gneiss! I found that I always emphasized billion to ensure that the guests really thought about that number. However, most humans are limited to contemplating only the number one-hundred, as it the maximum length give or take a few years of a single human life, or ten the number of fingers on our hands.

The morning passed into the early afternoon. A whoosh of cold air, and a small bell chimed signaling another guests entrance. I glanced up to see a pagan version of Santa Claus glide into the VC. "Oh my, it's Santa Claus," I exclaimed straightening my hat. After another glance, I decided that he more resembled a prophet of old. A long, snow-white beard swept across his chest to his naval. In his right hand he held a beautiful staff. It was hand-carved. An owl was carved into the top and served as a clasp for his hand.

Below the owl a lizard seemed to climb up the staff, the remaining length to the bottom was an entwined snake. Feathers were attached with thin leather strips below the owls talons that actually seemed to curve into the wood it was carved from. Small ceramic and semi-precious stones dangled from the leather strips, and jangled against the polished wood.

He wore loose brown trousers, a cream shirt and long vest. A gaggle of children and adults clustered around him. I wanted to speak with him as I am sure that he had something wonderful to say. He smiled enigmatically as the children clamored about excited to watch the video about the island's history. The only question he asked was the distance to the ranch. I encouraged he and the children to look out for "Whisper."

"Who is Whisper?" one child asked

"Whisper is a bottle-fed orphan deer, and has no fear of humans. She is full-grown deer now. Be careful however as some individuals are allergic to her fur."

Though I doubted that neither man with his magnificent staff, nor his extended family

would be allergic to any type of animal fur.

Later in the afternoon, a couple from Ohio and I discussed the plethora of open space in the West. We stood near the back entrance that housed the artifact displays and admired the breadth of the lake stretching across towards the stark peaks in the west. The husband leaned one hip against the counter as his wife spoke.

"You know. When we go home, we become instantly depressed. All we see are houses. Yeah, in some areas farm fields. There are very few great stretches of open space." she paused for a moment before continuing. "When we drove to the island we saw that Utah is experiencing the same fate as our state." she quietly explained her head lowering. The pronunciation of her o's puffed her cheeks out slightly.

"Suburbanville forever," I observed, thinking about the endless stretch of development from the edge of the lake to the foothills of the Wasatch range.

"Yes. Suburbanville," the husband quietly added. It's a virus that lives off others resources."

"That is a great analogy," I observed. "Although I live in the suburbs, too. One small action I've done is to fill my yard with mostly native plants. I've attracted a lot of wildlife, mostly birds to my little square of habitat. And if everyone did what I've done we could easily create a habitat corridor across our neighborhoods to the mountains and the lakes shores.

"I guess we need to become more involved in land decisions," stated the wife.

"It seems that we have forgotten that local and federal government is our government, and we need to be involved in policy making," I observed. "I know that I could be more involved, and at least attend a county meeting occasionally." When they left my Christmas Eve shift was almost over.

Their comments left me with a sense of dread, and uneasiness. It seemed there was absolutely nothing that I could do to decrease the developments or to change building habits, or the overly extensive size of business parking lots that lined the road

for miles until it reached the changing shoreline of the Great Salt Lake.

Watching the sun sink into the sanguine stillness of the lake signaled the shortest day of the year nearing its close. I locked the building, and wished the wonderful volunteer docents a Merry Christmas. When I arrived darkness had settled both onto the land, and into my head. Sadness over too many things. The twinkly lights of our small Christmas tree nestled between the panes of curtains that framed the living room windows.

Loading the girls onto heavy blankets that lined the bed of the truck, we traveled from the ancient Bonneville lake bed flatlands of our Layton home onto the foothills for an evening hike. No moon guided our steps. Although it was a night of great spirituality, including many significant events and individuals I felt the heavy weight of fear and sadness continue to pulse through my brain.

"Giving thanks and a good walk helps doesn't it Ayla?" I asked. She turned her head and blessed me with her ever present Labrador-drooly smiles before resuming her 'search and sniff' through winter crusted grasses, and sage bent under a blanket of snow. Twisted stalks of scrub-oak dusted with orange lichen gleamed through a frozen-crust of snow, guided us to our favorite trail-head.

Magi, filled with more energy than a dozen cottontail rabbits bounded up and back, traversing the trail ten times to our one length. Soon we reached the evergreen line. In the darkness we looked down at the many lights. Though the swath of lights stretched the many miles from where we stood to the dark edge of the distant lake. Peace settled into my turbulent mind. The girls sat on either side of my standing form.

Kneeling into the hard, cold earth, I hugged them. "Hallelujah. Peace on earth. Good will to all. Let's go home and open our Christmas stockings," my breath formed a string of gauzy bell shapes that hung above their heads. Memories that consistently troubled me about my family, and my perceived lacks fell silent under the watchful gaze of the Christmas eve stars, as we slid and lopped back to the white Nissan.

On Christmas morning before traversing a brief length of the Wasatch range to celebrate with our human kin. The girls and I loaded up and traveled west to the island for a Christmas Day hike. A repeat of the previous morning occurred when in the muted early-dawn-light a dark shape flew in front of the Nissan. Ayla hit her nose on the dash when I braked. "Sorry beloved I'm supposed to protect not maim the wildlife."

Flying low, it's elongated and thin body was not shaped like an eagle, or hawk. Landing upon a low mound of rocks, it's silhouette of long slender legs, upheld its elliptical shaped torso. There are many burrows on the island, and amazingly enough they continue to roost within a slope framed on one side by the visitors center and main road that branches at the marina. "Girls this is the ultimate Christmas present!" I announced as I slowing down. "A burrowing owl. Where is Hogwarts? I queried. Magi looked up at me with a furrowed brow. "You're right dearest! I guess it would be awkward going to Hogwarts now, being as I am older than the entering freshman which is eleven years old!"

Choosing a trail that traversed the southern shore of Bridger Bay. Early sunlight illuminated tracks of the diminutive and larger creatures who visited after the storm. Their collective prints created a pattern that resembled swirls of lights entwined around a Christmas tree. Many of the tracts were easily identifiable. Their names flitted into my brain the moment I saw their shapes. Bison. Rabbit. Vole or mouse. Chukkar. Ayla and Magi roamed before me, their snouts skimming along the edge of snow, their eyebrows lifted in canine bliss to the scents left behind.

A perfect Christmas gift for my suburban girls. More delicious I am sure than the three dozen gingerbread men that Ayla devoured off a Christmas trees many years prior. After the sun climbed into the sky I observed, "All right babies, we need to hustle. Grandma needs some help with Christmas brunch."