

## **Zen and the Art of Surfing: OBX North Carolina\***

### **Being**

5:45 A.M Outer Banks, North Carolina. The sun is rising over the Atlantic Ocean. The sea is changing from blue grey to steel grey to aqua green under a sky painted first muted-pink, then vibrant orange and finally, brilliant blue. For the first time in what feels like forever, I don't have a "To Do" list. My shoulders and neck tense at this realization; I don't remember how to just "be." The desire to create a schedule feels as compelling as an itching mosquito bite. I make myself focus on my breath to dissipate the urge to scratch. Before the itch can reassert itself, I catch sight of a sea gull fussing with breakfast on the edge of the surf. This pulls me back into the present moment. When the sea gull moves on, I jog barefoot on the beach, sloshing through the waves as they lick the shore, stopping occasionally to watch crabs zip across the sand and dogs chase the waves.

On a practical level, I'm here to learn to surf. At a deeper level, I'm on a pilgrimage to find myself. I lost my inner compass along with my cats, my couch, and my dreams of happily ever in a break-up a few years back and have gone through the motions, faking it 'till I make it ever since. A few months ago, in the midst of a fever-pitched dream, I saw salvation on a surfboard and have obsessed about learning to surf ever since. This may seem like just another Robitussin DM induced hallucination to you, but cough syrup tends to make me wonky, so I avoid it. I've fantasized about surfing since I bought my first skateboard when I was 11. So here I am, on the Outer Banks, home to some of the best surfing waves on the Atlantic Coast, following my dreams.

### **Dreaming**

In this moment, after an hour or so jog up the beach, I'm content to sip my tea and read the tourist magazines. As a child, I read almost every biography in the school library. Now, reading non-work related material feels decadent. I flip to the history section first and am particularly excited to read that Blackbeard, the notorious 18th century pirate, loved to prey upon ships along North Carolina's shoreline. I've always had a soft spot for the pirates and bank robbers of yesteryear because they, unlike the folks who bilked my retirement fund dry, are honest about their thievery. It probably helps that they are dead now and did not actually steal from me or kill someone I loved. I imagine

myself in pirate drag, sword in hand, fencing at Blackbeard's side, like a Gina Davis (in Cutthroat Island) on steroids. The fine citizens of North Carolina were not quite as enthralled with him and petitioned the governor to put an end to his reign of terror. Their wishes came true when Royal Navy sailors attacked Blackbeard's ship and slashed off his head in a gruesome battle. Gives credence to the expression, "Live by the sword. Die by the sword."

Blackbeard wasn't the only adventurer to stake his fortune to the Outer Banks. A few miles northeast of where I sit, the Wright Brothers went airborne. The Wright Brothers National Monument in Kill Devil Hills pays homage to their first attempts at flight. I love the fact that tinkering in their bicycle shop fueled their vision to fly. Unfortunately, the monument, sort of a short, stubby version of the Washington Monument, does not capture the wonder of their imagination. I'm not really into Freud, but it's hard not to think that someone was being a little petty. Anyone can lead a rag tag bunch of soldiers who are indignant about having to pay tax for their tea. You try getting on a bike and see if you can figure out how to fly.

A few miles southwest of where I sit, Roanoke Island bears the legacy of England's first failed attempts to settle the new world. In 1585, the first group of colonists gave up and those that survived returned to England. Reading this, I imagine the excitement the early settlers must have felt about the chance to reinvent themselves, to start over, to do something totally different, away from dreary, drab, ancient England and the despair they must have felt over their failure. The second group of colonists were even less fortunate. The 117 men, women and children who settled here in 1587 disappeared without a trace. The Fort Raleigh National Historic Site preserves portions of this early settlement. Visitors can see what might have happened to those early settlers by watching The Lost Colony, an outdoor dramatization of the settlers' disappearance produced by Waterside Theatre. Also on site, the beautiful flowers, Renaissance statues and Elizabethan-style buildings of the Elizabethan Gardens pay tribute to the early Roanoke colonists.

## **Thinking**

To catch a sunset, I trudge up a sand dune at Jockey's Ridge State Park, the home of the tallest natural sand dune system in the Eastern United States. The brochure says that the dune I climb is a "living" sand dune that shifts between 90 and 100 feet above sea level. From here, I can see Atlantic Ocean waves crash against the beach to the

east and see the dunes slope down to the Roanoke Sound shoreline on the west. I feel myself soaring with the novice hang gliders as they try their luck catching wind from the edge of the dune in front of me.

My sense of peace shatters when I hear what I assume to be a pastor herding his flock to the great big Baptist church bus in the parking lot. I scan the park for a comrade but no one sets off my gay-dar. I fear that one of the "bus people" will notice the huge pink neon Q glowing on my forehead and tell me that I'm going to hell. Worse, I feel not only unwelcome in what I've come to define as paradise, but hated. Tuning into my breath as I watch the sun set over Roanoke Sound helps bring me back to the present moment, but I still feel a lingering sense of unease.

The wonderful thing about the stories that run through our heads is that if we see them as stories, we can test them. So I do. A few phone calls later, I'm talking to Jeannie Maynard. The company she works for manages two of the three places on the Outer Banks that specifically welcomes GLBT guests. Talking to her helps me put things in perspective. She's adamant that folks on the Outer Banks are very accepting of all sorts of alternative lifestyles. When asked about the vibe towards folks like me, she assures me, "It doesn't matter if you are a millionaire or came here to drop out; it's a very laid back place.... Sexual preference? Who cares! It's just not a big deal." It's true. No one I've talked to has given my mention of my girlfriend or the fact that I write for a gay newspaper a second thought. This is, she says, a family beach, whatever kind of family you are. I can hear the chorus to "Home Is Where the Heart Is," Sally Fingerett's song about GLBT families, streaming through my head: Home is where the heart is/ No matter how the heart lives/ Inside your heart where love is/ That's where you've got to make yourself at home. The key here is family. This is not the place you go for a wild and crazy nightlife. This is the place to come to chill out and enjoy nature. This may be one of the ultimate beach vacation spot for GLBT families and folks who just want to get away from it all.

## **Shopping**

I know. I know. There was no section on shopping in "Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance." Eckhart Tolle seems to have skipped this topic as well. But sometimes a girl needs to shop. Besides, even with Coppertone SPF 50, my nose is starting to glow like Rudolph's so I need an indoor activity. Lucky for me, there are well over 40 art galleries on the Outer Banks. The KDH Cooperative Gallery and

Studios in Kill Devil Hills is my favorite. It's truly a cooperative. Local artists work cooperatively to sell their mosaics, pottery, paintings, photography, batiks, jewelry, sculpture, candles, and collages here.

The collection of galleries at Gallery Row in Nags Head is my second choice. I spent an hour at the Ghost Fleet Gallery of Fine Art. Owner Glenn Eure reminded me of my father in his best moments, captivating me with tales of his past, torturing me with bad puns, and drawing pictures for me. Across the street at The Morales Art Gallery I found a couple of water color paintings of the shoreline that I loved. Here's where Zen comes in.... I looked, noticed my attachment, came back to the wonder of the present moment, and moved on.

My mindfulness takes me in a different direction at the Lone Wolff Trading Company. They specialize in custom made silver jewelry. Here, I radically accept my attraction to a pair of silver and onyx fish earrings and feel very much in the present moment as I sign the credit card receipt for them. Next, I pop in to Jewelry by Gail. Jewelry items here are truly works of art. I'm not a big ring person, but these rings move me. I have to leave before I buy a custom designed Palladium White Gold ring sporting a gorgeously cut .92 count Blue Sapphire. The price tag helps me observe my desire for this ring. It also helps me see my ego working overtime, urging me to buy the ring in order to please the very helpful salesperson and demonstrate to her and the rest of the world that I am a person of means who can afford this sort of ring. I politely accept the salesperson's business card with the price quote and walk my ego out the door.

### **Meditation in Motion – OBX style**

All those months ago when I was obsessing about learning to surf, I happened upon a Kitty Hawk Kayaks and Surf School website ad for 3-day surf camps. I reserved a spot for myself and here I am on day three: on my surfboard waiting for a wave.

Stephen, my instructor, is adorable. His lips seem permanently curved into a smile and his blue eyes dance beneath his surfing cap and curly blond hair. Tall and lanky, he actually looks good in his wet suit. (Let's just say there will be no pictures of me in a wet suit, ever.) More importantly, he's sweet, enthusiastic, supportive and a great teacher. If I were 18, I'd probably have a crush on him. As it is, I find myself feeling protectively maternal towards him. On Day One and Day Two, Stephen showed us how to pop up on the board and how to

maneuver our boards into position to catch waves. Today, he tries to teach us how to watch for waves and get the timing down.

Since this is the advanced day, Stephen is out on his board and shows us how to catch the wave and ride in the wave's trough. Languid and agile as a cat, it's as if he and his board become part of the wave. Now is not the ideal time to learn to surf because the waves are really big -- Stephen calls them "grande'." I don't even try for one of these waves because I'm afraid I'll wipe out and break my neck. I probably couldn't catch one anyway. Even the thigh and waist high waves are challenging to catch. By the time I get my board maneuvered into position, most have already passed me by. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Stephen soothes my ego by reassuring me that it takes awhile to get the timing down and tells me when to start paddling for the waves in time to catch them. I actually catch a few and the rush I feel as I pop up and drop into the trough is better than any drug I can imagine. I feel like I'm at one with the universe and totally connected to this moment in time. Nothing, not the laundry, not my checking account, not my stack of paperwork or the coffee pot I might have forgotten to turn off has my attention. It's just me, my board and the wave.

The Outer Banks not only have great waves, they also sport miles and miles of calm bay waters, making them a kayaker's paradise. Exhausted and sore after 3 days of surf camp, kayaking sounds like heaven. I book a sunset tour of the Pea Island Wildlife Refuge with Kitty Hawk Kites.

After Heidi gives us a brief lesson on proper paddling, we slip our boats into the water. Heidi leads us through what feels a bit like a watery maze to an abandoned bridge where an Osprey pair have built a nest. Even at a distance, it looks massive. When we circle around the nest, an Osprey with fish in its beak flies into the nest to feed its babies. An awesome sight.

We glide across the bay in silence for a while and I drop into a state of peace. The chatter in my mind quiets and I am focused on the feel of the sun on my skin, the sound of the waves as they bump against the side of the kayak, the salty smell in the air, and the sight of sun diamonds sparkling on the water. In other words, I am here now. Ahead of us pelicans skim across the surface of the water, occasionally diving to catch fish. Snowy egrets and a blue heron wade in the shallow waters searching for food. As the sun drops on the horizon, we stop paddling, face west and watch the sunset paint the sky. The

peace I feel in this moment is far better than anything I've ever achieved in seated meditation.

## **Awareness**

5:30 AM - my last morning here. I'm sitting on the beach, watching the sun rise. I came here to learn to surf and find my inner compass. I won't say that I've achieved enlightenment, but this morning I don't even want to make a "To Do" list; I'm content to just "be." I also realize that as long as I stay in the present moment my inner compass will guide me where ever I need to go.

\*OBX is the local's shorthand for the Outer Banks

### Information and Resources:

For more information about First Colony Inn and The Castle at Silver Lake, the GLBT friendly establishments on the Outer Banks, check out [www.PurpleRoofs.com](http://www.PurpleRoofs.com) .

For more information about OBX art galleries, check out: [www.ourterbanks.org/visiter\\_services/area\\_services/art\\_stores\\_galleries.asp](http://www.ourterbanks.org/visiter_services/area_services/art_stores_galleries.asp)

For more information about surfing lessons and 3 day surf camps with Kitty Hawk Kayaks and Surf School, check out: [www.khksss.com](http://www.khksss.com)

For information about hang gliding and a wide variety of water sports including kayaking, check out: [www.kittyhawk.com](http://www.kittyhawk.com) . They are listed in the National Geographic Adventure Magazine as one of the "Best Outfitters on Earth."

*Originally appeared in Outlook: Everything is Political*