

Saltwater Reverie

Green, blue,
Soothing hues.



COLORS IN THE BAHAMAS ARE truly spectacular, ranging from the azure blue of the open ocean where it presses close alongside the Great Bahama Bank, to an incredible luminescent emerald green over the sand bars, where the sun reflects off the white sandy bottom, infusing the water with light. Anchored off the verdant cays, or small islands, I would sit in the morning in the cockpit, sipping my tea and marveling at the thousands of different shades of green in the softly waving foliage along the shoreline, from the ethereal light-yellow translucent leaves of the sea grape, backlit by the sun, to the rich, dark green tangled shadows of the mangroves. The colors had sound: the soft rustling of the viridescent Silver Top Palms, the gentle lapping of the turquoise water against the hull. And the sky: so blue, so vast, so all-encompassing, dotted here and there with towering white cauliflower heads of cumulous clouds rising off the Bahama banks as the sun warmed the shallow waters.

Even seven years after the accident, even with a regimen of meditation, yoga, biofeedback and anti-anxiety medication, I still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. I am like the proverbial canary in a coal mine: even the smallest stressor can trigger an anxiety reaction where I feel the muscles in my neck, shoulders and chest contract, my skin crawl, and my brain go fuzzy as the stress chemicals, especially cortisol, begin to kick in. Driving, crowds, loud noises, violent movies, television, nasty ex-wives, screaming children—all can start the stress hormones flowing. I am hypersensitive to any environmental factor that causes what the medical profession calls the “fight or flight response,” a vestigial inherent part of the human animal left over from the days when we roamed the African veldt, needing to either stand and fight or run like hell when a big beast or a human from a rival tribe crossed our path.

The flip side is that I am also profoundly aware of the palliative impact the natural world has on our bodies and minds. In a way we all know this, or at least sense it, some of us more consciously than others. Thus the human urge to vacation at the beach, or ski in the mountains or walk in the park. The great Zen masters have always known this; the Zen literature and arts are filled with references to nature, from cherry blossoms to nightingales to snow-capped mountains. The masters are certainly not alone; many great thinkers have contemplated the enlightening effects of the natural world, especially some of our most cherished American minds like Thoreau and Whitman. But we tend to forget the importance of the natural world to our well-being, as we increasingly spend our days in office buildings and cars and malls and houses with the doors and windows shut tight so the air conditioning or heating systems can keep our climate carefully controlled.

Day after day on Nirvana in the Bahamas I would feel the stress slowly, inexorably, drain out of me, until I reached a state of centered harmony, a sense of being one with all existence that was almost impossible to achieve back in the “real” world, surrounded by speeding cars and ringing phones and blaring televisions. I would achieve a state of quiet joy, a reverie of appreciation for the beauty of life. There were moments that were so true, so right, so absolutely without falsehood that tears would come to my eyes. I realized then how much I believe in the truth of beauty, and the beauty of truth, embodied by the simple colors of white, green and blue.