

NOTICE TO MARINERS:
[Notes] On Navigating A Shore
by
Julie Clark Boak

Reading
Plenary Session
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OPENING

(adjust as needed)

Thank you Kristen Grant, Steve Miller and the dozens of people who created this year's open-hearted and deeply-informed Beaches Conference. I feel privileged to be here.

I am going to read excerpts from my work-in-progress, **NOTICE TO MARINERS, [Notes] on Navigating A Shore**, an unconventional book my journey into the realities of sea level rise.

This I how it began...

The Shore

Marsh... Rock... Mud...

I set out, as a kid, spring, summer and fall, slipping my toes deep into soft ooze, attempting always to make my way alone around a generous, deep-water Massachusetts cove. Sometimes I rowed to church (I *rinsed* my feet) and often knew the mess of a toe sliced open on a shell. With my boat, I owned a world, and could stand, at ten, a conqueror-queen, gazing from atop the granite ledge just off our seawall, at the commuter trains rolling by.

(beat)

According to Bruce Chatwin's book, *Songlines*, in older times the coast of the Pacific Northwest was navigated by song. Priestesses sang their people northwards through the hard tides of those bountiful waters. Each verse, each line, sang out a course, recognized a headland, or invoked a wind. To head home, the southeasterly way, she had only to sing her song backwards.

Such songs from the heart of a place are now entwined as a persistent drumbeat below the heated and touchy conversation about sea level and sea level rise.

I began writing to find the verses of my own song, as one woman, in one house, on one bay.

(beat)

The Question

My late friend Ralph, from my local city projects, often said, "If you ask the wrong questions, you'll get the wrong answers."

I can name the day that I began to sweat it. I curled into a ball of comatose resistance to shut out *An Inconvenient Truth* at my local movie theater.

I hate being scared. I loathe being scolded and that movie did both.

It wasn't until a year later I calmed down enough to say, 'Grow up. Just look. Collect information.'

I went to the film's website to look for references. But 'Yo!' Nothing else was there. This was advocacy! Ok. OK! But where was the *data*?

Twenty Feet! Two millimeters!! How was it possible to measure in millimeters an ocean that never stands still and which, barring annoying landmasses, encircles the earth, a circumference of 24,901 miles. Two millimeters – just over a twelfth of an inch – amounts to a *thin slice of cheese*.

I got mad. First you scare me, *then* you ask me to take what you say on faith? Expect me to act to prevent this catastrophe and don't offer any references?

Not. In. My. World.

Still.

Maybe I was the only one who didn't understand. (That's often true.)

I raised the question with three smart men I know, all actively concerned with the state of the world, "Do you know what 'sea level' is?"

The answer from this well-heeled, highly-educated posse gathered around my Thanksgiving table, "No."

One is a lifelong conservationist and sailor; another a prominent Broadway actor. The third, a man of long-standing experience on the frontiers of the NGO world. All Harvard men, yes, yes, yes.

They hadn't a clue.

Given that Mr. Gore, (*Hahv'rd '69*), had recently taken home a Nobel Peace Prize, it seemed a singular gap in our basic understanding. We didn't even know what the words "sea level" meant.

Now I am stunned. I started with the dictionary – online. Go. Look. Two definitions popped up. One: "mean sea level". The other, something very intense having to do with a "geoid." And an "equipotential surface."

Neither of those terms meant anything to me at all then. And I had been waterborne all my life. If I couldn't grasp this vital something – this 'sea level' place -- I couldn't see how I would be able to talk about it at all.

(pause)

The House

In 1998, I bought a small, raggedy-ass house on Long Island's East End. Hip roof. One story. 1100 square feet. Kingfisher-blue asbestos shingle. Weedy 'lawn.' Cedar stumps scattered like a crowd of reckless dwarfs. Dead trees. A four-foot chain-link fence. She also stank. The tar of about a billion cigarettes greased her walls and a 20' bar in the basement was still rank with the smell of stale beer.

But... but... but... she was a mere 168 feet, a gull's cry, from the edge of a ravishing, shoal-draft harbor, where humans and marshland have met for centuries. Baymen still rake for clams. Kayakers and skimmers cut thin wakes towards sunset. Jackson Pollack reveled in this light.

I had long dreamed of my own writer's haven. I could just afford this spot. After a good scrub and white paint slathered on the paneling, I moved in.

Because for me it was impossible not to, the following spring I fell in love with and bought a bright, 12-foot, wooden Beetle Cat. With her moored down the lane, my place was complete: I had a boat, a desk, a bed; wind, sun and fog; tides and a heaven.

* * *

The day I closed I learned – officially -- I didn't need flood insurance. I had no idea why. In my childhood's snazzy internal photo album, I could still see the mangled hull of an elegant cruising sloop stranded high on the gnarly granite shore of our home harbor – a monster testament a hurricane's power.

So 'no flood insurance' surprised me. But, of course, it was an expense I was happy to ignore.... Until I renovated my house in early 2005: A gut overhaul on the same footprint, with the same height.

My insurance agent said, "No, you are not in a flood zone, but rain counts". I signed up.

With more of my heart and money on the table, I wanted to 'Know Where I Was.' 'Am I actually immune?' 'If so, why?'

I took my first look at a FEMA map. There rolled a thick black line, curving like melting ice cream, marking the thrumming edge of a flood that might pound into my neighbors' yards. Yet my little house stood silently and safely back -- some 20? 60? - feet beyond that threat, on higher ground.

At the same time, Suffolk County issued a daunting flyer with rusty bands – as if of bloodied water – pushing high into the bays of Long Island, widening streams and estuaries and warning of danger. Someone else sent a handout tracing the bullet paths of the historic storms that have torn across Long Island.

A clamour had begun. “We are due.” “We are in danger.” “Get ready!!”

All this because a hurricane named *Katrina* had blown New Orleans apart.

And I began my journey -- my delicious, dead serious, ‘OMG!’ sometimes laugh-out-loud journey into the realities of sea level rise.

As I said at the beginning: There is a world out there. It’s called Science and I am not a native.

Here was FEMA, saying ‘safe’, and there was my Suffolk County saying ‘not’. And someone else warning: ‘Here are our historic storms! Watch out!’ What was going on?! ‘

I visited my local Town Office to ask. When I got home, I wrote a very short play.

The result is the next session, right here in the auditorium, which is The Beaches Conference’ first venture into using theater as a channel to explore our many responses to sea level rise. The session, *On Navigating A Shore: Drama & Improv*, uses theater to better understand the thoughts and feelings of people who face threats to places they love.

We will read the play, more than once, and improvise from it to create new scenes with your voices and from your experience. I invite you to join us. We are limited to 20 people. We begin here at 230. Do come; we will have serious fun.

Thank you.