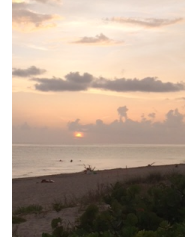


July 11, 2015

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am thinking a lot about discipline. Not corporal punishment discipline (though there might be some overlap not to be ignored), but practice and dedication discipline.

I am on The Island of Beautiful Women right now. That is a dream whose coinage I have borrowed from a former student and dear friend of mine. She was my Teaching Assistant for a summer course in North Carolina. On the weekends, we would drive out to Topsail Island and relax, away from the high school kids we enriched all week. Sometimes we'd rent a house, and sometimes all the people in the house would be women. Vanessa joked about how her dream would be to one day own a beach house on an island to which she would exclusively invite smart, talented women. We would work on our projects, and talk about our ideas, but we would also take long walks on the beach, and read, and drink wine, and sometimes share meals. All those years ago, this sounded like a dream one concocts in or immediately following graduate school that has no bearing on a reality you might one day live. It sounded that way because that's exactly what it was. But, a few nights ago, I texted Vanessa to tell her I was, in fact, living—for two weeks—on The Island of Beautiful Women.



I am at an artists' retreat in Florida. One I did not know even existed until I received an invitation. Which was also the case for the two other women here with me now. None of us knew such a dream could really also be a truth. There should be more people here, but for whatever reasons they left early or didn't come at all. (It might be funny—in a dark-humour, cultural-commentary sort of way—to say they were frightened of the three of us and ran screaming, but one of the other people who was supposed to be here is also a black woman, and the other was only scheduled to come for one week all along.) The result is that, by the sheer chance of when the three of us were able to schedule our two-week stays, this artists' retreat, on a barrier island between the Gulf of Mexico and the Intercostal Waterway, has become, for me, The Island of Beautiful Women.

Busy in their studios are the fiction writer Chinelo Okparanta and the playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury. Here in my studio, overlooking the Gulf and writing this letter to you, am I.

In some ways that story has nothing to do with the question of discipline. Though it also has everything to do with discipline, I think. There was that dream I was

part of, to have a life that could get me to The Island of Beautiful Women, and I would be insincere if I tried to tell you that some part of what drives the ambition part of my life doesn't have to do with making that dream a reality. I thought I had to make a slew of money to make such a thing happen. What U.S. poet do you know who can afford beachfront real estate who isn't the heir to the Merrill fortune or something along those lines? I limit the category to the U.S. because there are places in the world where it is possible that beachfront real estate is still a 1st-generation reality within reach. But I don't live in those places.

Ugh. Somehow I started talking about money again. It is such a tedious thing, the way money sneaks into so many of my reveries. I want to know when my reveries went from being pure reverie to the kind they are now. My head seems to be a place where an accountant and a poet cohabitate. (It is a turbulent union, that one.) All I was trying to say is that I thought I'd have to BUY my way onto The Island of Beautiful Woman. And it is such a wonderful wonderful thing that I seem to have written my way onto it instead. This is, of course, a much more mysterious and unlikely approach. Like how the entrance to the San Francisco Bay was a mystery to sailors for so many years. Some suspected something was there, but fog often blocked the small mouth to the world's 8th largest bay, so it took a really long time for people to figure out how to access the bay from the Pacific. And even once it was found one time, it was a while before the approach could be reliably repeated.

And STILL it seems like I'm not talking about discipline. But also I am. The other woman who plays a key role in my appreciation of life here on The Island of Beautiful Women is the turtle patrol volunteer on this particular stretch of beach. Her name is Maggie. She's got a zone that's a little over a mile, and yesterday she planted her 155th, 156th and 157th stakes.

Meaning, there are 157 turtle nests on this beach. Mostly leatherbacks. There are some zones, and I was with Maggie yesterday when she marked off the nest of a hybrid. And this is where my dedication come in full force. Since mid-March, Maggie will walk her zone every



small patch of beach. greens in the adjacent zone when she marked off thoughts about March, and until the that was November 7), morning. She looks for

new nests and marks them with a stake. If the nest is in a place where beach goers are likely to be less aware or mindful, she makes a little triangle of tape to protect it. Sometimes even with a sign to let you know what the stakes and the tape are all about. She looks for false crawls—when a turtle comes ashore but then, for whatever reason, a

coyote, bad conditions, too many lights, she doesn't build a nest. She looks for hatches and marks the hatch sites with shells (see the photo above)—if it hasn't rained too much to wash them away, the little baby feet making their way to the water make the most adorable impressions in the sand!



She looks for compromised nests—coyotes and crabs, sometimes raccoons, the occasional dog allowed off leash to dig. I've been waking up early enough to walk with her for several mornings, and the thrill of her dedication is contagious. Every day she is out there—unless there is lightning—and every day there is something different to see. Today she helped one straggler into the water. She'd helped three others before I got to her stretch of the beach.

Here's what I am thinking about discipline: What is the point of all that walking for Maggie? Of course it must be amazing to be part of something large like that. These turtles are older than much that is alive on this earth, and they are tremendously threatened. To be part of a conservation effort that keeps the nests marked and safe, that helps beach goers to live in a community that respects the needs of the turtles and the hatchlings, and that maintains a count of how many turtles dig nests and then how many hatch from those nests, that seems like it would be really exciting. But would you do it every morning from March to November? Rain or shine—barring lightning? Where would your dedication to something larger than the self end? I met Maggie every day this week, but I never once walked the entire path with her, and back home again. There was a lot even about her really exciting volunteer work that was tediously boring. Even here, on this spectacular island where walking we would sometimes see dolphins and fish, ibis and blue heron, and where she'd seen a manatee earlier on a morning when I caught her halfway through her zone. Even in all that wonder, some parts of the work were just boring.



(A blue heron fishing on the Gulf. You can see one of Maggie's stakes behind it.)

The turtles will hatch and head out, over the sand and people's footprints—I was lucky enough to see a hatch, and watching 30 little turtles trying to crawl over human foot prints made me want to ban all human traffic from the beach—past the crabs, into the water, past the big fish, past the terns and gulls. Hopefully. They are smaller than the cup of my palm, but they will swim toward the Gulf Stream and circle the equator for 25-30 years. The males will never come back, but the females, 25-30 years from now, will mate then make their way home. Within yards of their original nests, whatever females survive—and the odds of survival are quite low for turtles—will build their own nests. They will continue to do that their whole lives—which could be another 30-50 years.

There is a lot I love about all of this turtle stuff. But I am supposed to be talking about discipline. What I'm thinking about right now is that Maggie might be in her 70s—she just got a turtle tattoo, which I think is absolutely awesome. She is obviously fit, given that her job involves about a 2.5/3 mile daily walk plus upper body work and kneeling and carrying stakes and also trash which is sometimes quite heavy—but very occasionally, as with the little elephant I found today, completely rad.

Let me grant Maggie longevity. She deserves it. Even still, given the late sexual maturity of the turtle, she won't see many of her hatchlings return. And, as she says, "And anyway, how would I know?" For Maggie it's not about individual turtles—though she was thrilled to help that little guy get into the water this morning. For Maggie it is about the big picture. The species over the individual. Another species at that.



I don't know if I'm making any sense here. That's part of the beauty of letters. They get to ramble. You get to be with me inside my mind as I think things through and gesture toward articulation. If I wanted to tell you something directly and succinctly, I'd pick up the phone. Or I'd write an essay. I could write a poem, too, I suppose. But poems are often, for me, more like letters. They give a sense of the atmosphere around at the time of their composition.

The atmosphere here is magical. The water is nearly 90°, so that if I am in the water in the evening or morning I might be cold for a few moments when I get out despite the fact that it is July in Florida. The water is clear most of the time. When I get out up to my chest I can still usually see all the way down to my feet. Right now, watching the water from my studio, I can see the differences the clouds make. Where there are clouds, the water is a darker blue—kind of greyish. Where there are no clouds, the water is a brighter blue—almost like turquoise, hard to describe. Those shifting colors will move around, with a few other color varieties like a tannish and a greenish. Sometimes that bright blue will come rolling in like it's a wave. It seems like there are

different colors of water running right alongside each other, like a multicolor lava lamp. I don't think it's indicative of depth, because these color patterns are constantly shifting. I was talking on the phone with the poet James Hoch when that was happening a lot one day. I asked him how such a thing could be possible, and he explained that totally practical cloud theory I just described—that the Gulf was reflecting the sky above it. "Do you understand what I mean?" he asked. "I am hearing what you are saying," I told him, "and I am willing to accept that this is the practical explanation for what is happening. But, also, I choose to see believe it is a miracle." Sometimes it is nice to embrace the fact that there is beauty in the world that can be miraculously astounding. I guess that's the poet in me talking. I always need to leave some space in my vision for miracles and wonder.

What I love about being here is that these things are bumping against each other all the time. I am here to work, and I have worked a considerable amount. I am excited about the projects I have completed and the ones that I've begun. I am also meeting these wonderful and beautiful and talented women, these miraculous women. And I got to see 30 freshly-hatched leatherback turtles boil out of the sand and work their way into the Gulf. That was astounding.

Miraculously so. But also, that was the result of an incredible amount of discipline. On the part of mama turtle. On the part of Maggie and the Maggies of this coast and this world. On the part of the good people of this island who keep their lights low lest they disorient the turtles. Who, for the most part, clean up their trash. Discipline discipline discipline. Without it, would there be nearly as much magic in our world?



I think I need to remember this as I head off The Island of Beautiful Women and back to my normal life. It is going to feel tedious and wholly unmagical out there. I have a long plane flight ahead of me tomorrow and, before that, a long wait at the airport for that long flight. Then, home, there is the real world to contend with. Already my husband wants a grocery list—which is sweet because it means he's trying to ease my re-entry by already having our kitchen stocked. Already I know there are bills due in 4 days, which I have yet to pay. My out-of-office message expires at the end of the weekend. But, listen to this, I was about to sign off and go for another walk—I haven't even described to you how cool it is to walk along the beach in the morning and see the tracks of 300 pound turtle makes as she crawls out of the Gulf and up the shore to build her nest. But, now there is a tremendous rainstorm—with lightning. Sent, I suppose, as a metaphor.



Trust me, I understand that I am the one reading all this human intention onto the natural world. (Look at that turtle track, over and underlaid by human footprints). It is not that I don't think animals have intentions or emotions. I am well aware that humans are animals, and so what we experience may not be so far from what others who are also animals experience. Still, I CANNOT think that the turtles are sent here to speak *to me*. I don't that this rainstorm is sent to remind *me* that even in paradise there are bad days. (Though there are these reminders. Here, in paradise. If you don't do the dishes here, you wouldn't believe the bugs!) What am I saying? (This is the vulnerable thing about letter writing in this particular style, I could go off the rails in such a public manner!) I think I was trying to say that I am excited by the occasional dullness of Maggie's work. I am excited by the fact that even on The Island of Beautiful Women my plans just got foiled by something as dreary as afternoon rain. I am not exactly excited by the precarious survival rate of the turtle, but I take it in as yet another example of how hard it can be—how fundamentally unlikely it is—to achieve our ultimate goals.

I can see the water changing colors, by the way, even through the rain. I think it must not be all about the clouds, though it is partly about the clouds. Nothing is simple in this world. Which is another thing about this world that I love.

May you find some things you care about enough to walk a mile for them every day—  
except on days with lightning,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Camille D. Dungey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'C' and 'D'.

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