

J.O. HASELHOEF

MANTRAS AND CUKES

At the beginning of the New Year, I adopted a mantra: “Life begins compassionately at the end of my comfort zone.” I’d little chance to put it into action when we arrived in Florida mid-January. I spent the first hour of every day stretching and then walking the beach of Panama City — white sugar sand, solid-packed, disappearing into the distant horizon.

On the fifth day of my beach stroll, I saw a sea cucumber:

- Deposited mid-beach by the waves;
- Brown with white spots — plumpy and soft;
- No obnoxious smell;
- It moved slightly in response to a stick poked at it. Still alive; and
- It looked like a slug, but without the antennae — an echinoderm.

Echinoderm or not, I’m no lover of slug-like creatures — whether from land or sea. When I lived in Seattle, I loathed them. Five-inch black slugs appeared on top of the grass after I mowed my lawn. Ten-inch banana slugs suckered up the outside of my tent when I camped. And neon-colored slugs, the size of eighteen-wheeler trucks, populated my nightmares, honking at my little brown sedan on US Highway 5. By the time I left Seattle, I was a mess. ^[1]_{SEP}

I knew the sea cucumber would die if left on the sand just beyond the reach of the outgoing tide. Perhaps here on Panama City Beach, I could marry my mantra to my actions from which both cucumbers and I would benefit. It would be an empathetic action that saved the lives of the cucumbers and defined the boundary between my

ease and discomfort. Each day, I would pick up any sea cucumber I came across and return it to the water. [SEP] [SEP]

On my first walk of empathy, I found a total of three of these brown marine creatures. The next day and for most of the days during the next two weeks, a max of five washed in. In the cases where the cuke looked alive (not dried out or shriveled), I grabbed the echinoderm's mid-section with my thumb and forefinger and then, with a wide-arc-movement, tossed it back into the water. [SEP] [SEP] My partner said I might be hurting them as they hit the ocean. I ignored him. [SEP]

On day thirteen, it was bad for cucumbers. A storm must have churned up the deep sea floor where they crossed on little tube feet, filtering food. Every ten steps along the white-sand beach, there was another one, which I felt obliged to stoop and pick up. It made my walk longer and more tiring than I expected. During the process, I talked to these sluggish animals, "You're a fat one!" or "Back to Mom you go!" or "Brainless, but beautiful!" [SEP]

Further along the beach, I could see a cluster of seven awaiting my help. I worked to convince myself I could manage the toss of so many at one time without panic. I tried to divert my mind to my words and away from my actions. I said aloud to the first two, "It's just seven from heaven," and to the next four, "Easy peasy, I'm not queasy." Eventually, I lost all composure and screamed as I tossed the last of the seven into the water. [SEP] [SEP]

Abandoning my mission came to mind. More than twelve hundred species of sea cucumber exist worldwide. They are not endangered. The Japanese eat them. [SEP] [SEP] Yet they form a small link in the chain of life, offering internal spaces within their bodies to varieties of crabs and worms. They aren't territorial. They communicate to one another by releasing hormones into the water with the intentions of reproducing. And a few medical researchers are looking to sea cucumbers to help with tissue repair, brain scarring, and colon cancer. [SEP]

I needed a coping mechanism. I wanted a way that I could stick to my mantra without the emotional discomfort. I sat on the beach near to a sea cucumber and considered the situation. I wondered if I stuck my

hand into the sand a couple of inches away from its body and scooped the handful up carefully, could I pick up each sea creature on a bed of sand without touching any part of it? I tried. It worked. I solved my problem with sea cucumber sushi.

Re-engaged with my objective, my mantra slid off my tongue easily, "Life begins compassionately at the end of my comfort zone." And as I stooped, scooped, and threw, I repeated, "Life begins compassionately at the end of my comfort zone." I saved 127 sea cucumbers that day.

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