

Hatching
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A young woman with a green shirt is lying on the beach. She puts a stethoscope to the sand. She hears movement. She and two others gently remove a wire mesh previously placed over a Loggerhead sea turtle nest to protect it from coyotes and raccoons.

It is dusk, Orange Beach, Alabama, August 2010. The oilrig that exploded on April 20th and killed eleven workers and violated the gulf with 185 million gallons of oil has finally been capped. Shiny green John Deere tractors pulling covered trailers transporting cleanup workers still patrol up and down the beach. We have talked to locals who report their businesses falling off 30 to 60%. The worst hit are the charter fishermen and shrimpers. They have completely lost their livelihood. Yesterday from the window of our favorite restaurant by a marina we watched local fishermen hosing down their boats like boys on a Saturday afternoon washing their cars in expectation for a Saturday night date. For the fishermen the date does not materialize. Members of our family grieve especially for one charter boat captain who frequently took them out to fish. He has committed suicide.

Tonight I sit on the balcony of the condo that has been our family vacation home for twenty-five years. I desperately look out for signs of resurrection. My husband and a half dozen children gather around the roped off area where the three people with lime green shirts are removing the mesh in the sand about fifty feet from the condominium. These workers have a shovel, a bucket, a stethoscope and surgical gloves. The "green" team demands that all be perfectly still. Perfectly still.

They gently dig into the sand with their surgical gloves, careful not to rotate and move the remaining eggs in the nest and find six newly hatched baby loggerhead turtles that have just absorbed their yolk sac. Demeter herself could not have been more motherly lifting the two and one half inch turtles to the bucket and transporting them to the shoreline. The leader in the green shirt makes a trough in the sand to the surf. The sea turtles are placed in the trench and the children cheer as the turtles ceremoniously parade awkwardly to the sea. Loggerhead turtles have been nesting on beaches all over the world for over 150 million years. It takes 25 to 30 years for loggerheads to reach sexual maturity. Only one in 1000 to one in 10,000 loggerhead eggs reach adulthood.

I think back to earlier that day, when the bewitching hour of five o'clock approached and nine cars pulled off on the highway shoulder by our condo.

Twenty people dressed in black emerged from the cars and walk to the beach. There is an apparent leader, a photographer. The dress code for beach portraits must have changed from white to black. We watch for almost two hours as the family gathers in various groups for candid shots. The sandbar in front of our condo has washed away and consequently we have lost much beach. The crashing waves have carved out a shelf near the water's edge with a three feet drop off. The photographer uses the shelf for the family to sit on in various groupings. The shelf has made it more difficult to walk to the surf, but how marvelous that the photographer finds a use for it.

Farther down the beach near sunset we saw a trellis covered with flowers. Four bridesmaids in red dresses arrived with the bride and groom barefoot under their white wedding garments. An ancient liturgy has returned to the beach.

It's dark now, and the only light I see is that of my husband's flashlight as he makes his way back up the beach to the condo. The voices of the children fade as they make their way back down the beach. I can just imagine those baby loggerheads swimming with all their might in the warm, Gulf water. Will these six by some miracle be some of the lucky ones?

I hear my husband behind me as he steps out onto the balcony and sits in a deck chair. The rhythm of the waves lulls me and reminds me that the rhythm of life goes on, no matter how many endings, how many new beginnings. I look out into the darkness and say a silent prayer for those baby turtles as they swim into the unknown, as their ancestors did before them.