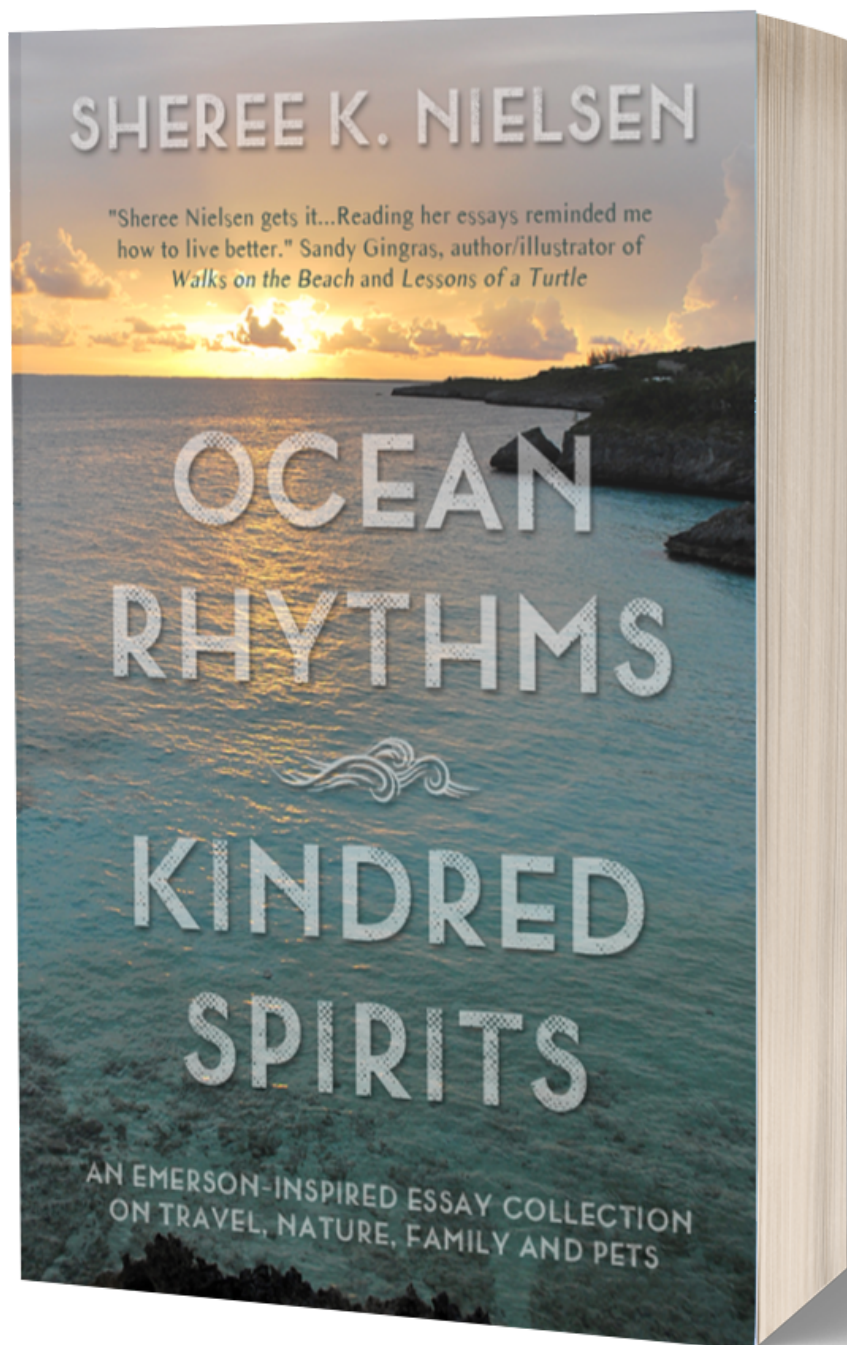




Media Kit

For more information contact Ocean Spirit, LLC at 314-954-3845
OceanSpiritPublishing@gmail.com

Sell Sheet | News Release | Author Q&A | Endorsements | Excerpts



Ocean Rhythms Kindred Spirits is a reminder to be present in the moment, live life with abandon, invariably respecting nature, animals and people.

Join Sheree on a journey as she awakens the wanderlust in her soul, defines moments of clarity while walking on the beach, finds solitude diving with sharks and dolphins, and befriends sea-loving dogs. She'll reveal her strong connection to family and beloved pets, the beauty in a mimosa tree, and the kindred spirit that lives in all of us. A unique essay collection of all things warm and good inspired by the author's love for Emerson.

Title: *Ocean Rhythms Kindred Spirits: An Emerson-Inspired Essay Collection on Travel, Nature, Family and Pets*

Author: Sheree K. Nielsen

Publisher: Ocean Spirit Photography, a division of Ocean Spirit, LLC

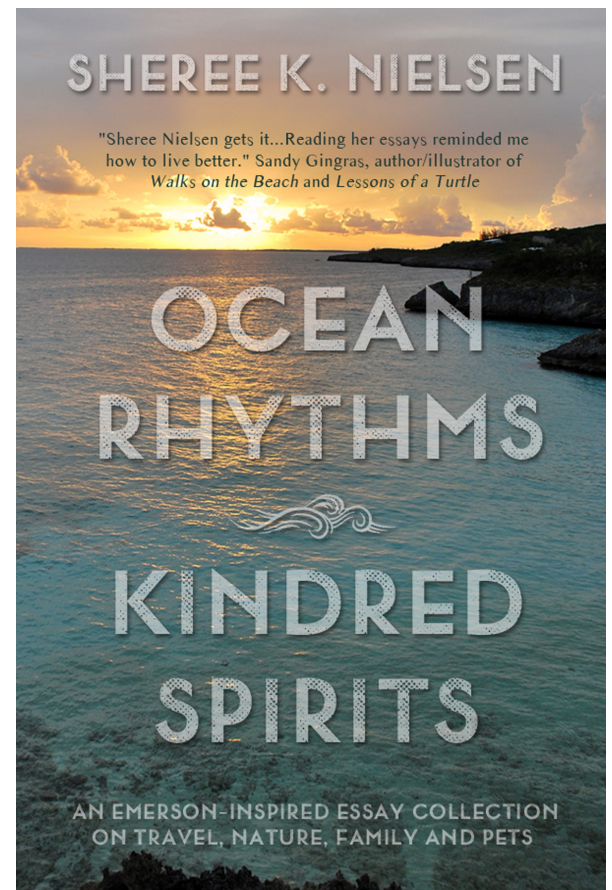
Pub Date: Now Available

Distributor: Ingram

Trim Size: 5x8, 196 pages

Paperback ISBN: 978-692-14307-0 | \$19.99 | Ebook \$8.99

Ordering Inquiries: OceanSpiritPublishing@gmail.com
314.954.3845



Sheree Nielsen is...a gatherer of details and lovely moments, of beachy beauty, of good people and their kind words, of gentle animals. Reading her essays reminded me how to live better. Sandy Gingras, author/illustrator of *Walks on the Beach*, *Lessons of a Turtle* & other gift books

With extraordinary reverence for the natural world...Nielsen asks us to pay respects to the world we inhabit, and to exude gratitude for the privilege in simply being here. Kelli Allen, Pulitzer nominated author of *Otherwise Soft White Ash*



Sheree K. Nielsen is the author/photographer of the 2015 Da Vinci Eye Award Winner, *Folly Beach Dances*, a "healing" coffee table book inspired by the rhythm of the sea and her lymphoma journey; and coauthor of *Midnight*, *The One-Eyed Cat*, a picture book about overcoming handicaps and building confidence. An award-winning author, poet and photographer, publications include *Long Weekends*, *Southern Writers Magazine*, *AAA Southern Traveler*, *AAA Midwest Traveler*, *Missouri Life*, magazines, anthologies, newspapers, and websites across the nation and Caribbean. When not writing, Sheree's usually discovering new beaches and coffeehouses, or checking items off her bucket list with her hubby, Russell, and two goofy canine kids. Four content cats round out her family on three acres in Missouri. She has an uncontrollable dependency on dark chocolate.



Press Release

For more information contact Ocean Spirit, LLC at 314-954-3845
OceanSpiritPublishing@gmail.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wentzville, MO -- Ocean Spirit Photography, a division of Ocean Spirit, LLC, announces the release of award-winning author and photographer Sheree K. Nielsen's newest book, *Ocean Rhythms, Kindred Spirits: An Emerson-Inspired Essay Collection on Travel, Nature Family and Pets*, which is now available in print for \$19.99. The ebook, an Amazon Kindle #1 Hot New Release, is \$8.99.

Ocean Rhythms, Kindred Spirits is a reminder to be present in the moment, live life with abandon, invariably respecting nature, animals and people. Join Sheree on a journey as she awakens the wanderlust in her soul, defines moments of clarity while walking on the beach, finds solitude diving with sharks and dolphins, and befriends sea-loving dogs. She'll reveal her strong connection to family and beloved pets, the beauty in a mimosa tree, and the kindred spirit that lives in all of us. A unique essay collection of all things warm and good inspired by the author's love for Emerson.

"Sheree Nielsen gets it. She's a gatherer of details and lovely moments—of beachy beauty, of good people and their kind words, of gentle animals. She loves what should be loved in life. She honors what should be honored. She seems to live the way we all should live. Reading her essays reminded me how to live better." Sandy Gingras, author/illustrator of *Walks on the Beach, Lessons of a Turtle* & other gift books

"With extraordinary reverence for the natural world, and the creatures who inhabit it, Sheree K. Nielsen has crafted a collection of wonder and meditation on wanderlust. This is a...call to action to be more present in the spaces that capture our imagination. Nielsen is asking us each to pay respects to the world we inhabit, and to exude gratitude for the privilege in simply being here." Kelli Allen, Pulitzer nominated author of *Otherwise Soft White Ash*

Sheree K. Nielsen is the 2015 Da Vinci Eye Award recipient for *Folly Beach Dances*. An award-winning author and photographer, her work is displayed in books, magazines, anthologies, newspapers and websites across the nation. When not writing, she's usually discovering new beaches and coffeehouses with her goofy dogs and patient husband. Find out more about her at ShereeNielsen.wordpress.com. For more information contact Ocean Spirit Photography at OceanSpiritPublishing@gmail.com.



Questions & Answers

Sheree K. Nielsen

For more information contact Ocean Spirit, LLC at 314-954-3845
OceanSpiritPublishing@gmail.com

What inspired you to write *Ocean Rhythms Kindred Spirits*?

I've had such vivid memories of traveling as child, I just felt they needed to be documented. Every May, my family would head to the Florida Keys, and sometimes the Carolinas. Then in August, we'd head north to the Great Lakes region. Countless memories of being in, on, or near the water carried onto into adulthood with abiding love for the ocean and lakes. Later in life, my heart ached to become a scuba diver discovering the deep blue sea, and countless adventures with wild marine life. Along my journey, I've met wonderful individuals—they've interwoven into bits of my life as permanent, lasting reminders of how lucky I've been to experience this wonderful place called Earth. In addition, I wished to share my connection to family and my great love for pets, nature, and animals. If readers can envision themselves in the essay, then I've accomplished what I've set out to do—experiencing joy or happiness, laughter, or even a good cry—hoping to stir memories of their past.

What is the meaning of the title?

Ocean Rhythms seeks to uncover the wanderlust in my soul, defining moments of clarity in my life, and when I experience nature's majesty whether extreme or blissful through beach and scuba diving adventures, and lyrical dances with creatures – dolphins, sharks, and sea-loving dogs.

Kindred Spirits reveals my strong connection to family, heritage, sweet childhood memories, beloved pets, and pleasant coincidences.

What do you want readers to take away from *Ocean Rhythms Kindred Spirits*?

I want them to take away the message of universal beauty, that we're all connected to every living thing on Earth and each other. The allure of this place we live is so vast and grand! I want them to smile, laugh, or cry – placing themselves in the moment, in that particular essay.

***Ocean Rhythms Kindred Spirits* is not only a collection of essays but a collection of photographs as well. How is expressing yourself through writing similar to expressing yourself through photography?**

I think photography goes hand-in-hand with writing. I've been taking photographs since I was a small child. Every picture tells a story. Pictures help recreate little details of a story or essay or poem you may have forgotten – like the color of a silk scarf, the texture of the pink azure sponges along Bloody Bay Wall, or the feel of a wild dolphin's sleek body. Pictures connect the dots. I love how in Anne Lamott's book, *Bird By Bird*, she talks about the "big picture" in her chapter titled, "Polaroids." She mentions that things are happening inside the picture frame, but many details, actions, things pertinent to the picture frame, are also happening outside the picture.

Which photograph holds the most meaning for you in this book?

The photo I snapped of my husband, Russell, at the Kindred Spirit Bench, while penning a letter to our friend Wil Wallace, who had passed away suddenly, holds the most spiritual meaning for me. The feeling of the photo -- the clouds, the flag in the background, the dunes, the position of my husband's body, the mailbox, the bench -- is a very emotional photo for me. I snapped that photo on a whim, and was pleasantly surprised by the outcome. It won the 2013 Missouri Humanities Council for First Place for Photography in conjunction with the Warrior Arts Alliance. The Kindred Spirit Bench, is my favorite inspirational place, by far. Thousands of people make the trek each year to visit this place of solitude and respite near Bird Island, South Carolina. The bench and mailbox were constructed over 40 years ago by young lovers, and is still maintained by the Kindred Spirit "keepers" to this day. When the journal pages are full of stories, dedications, and poems, the "keepers" take the journals to the UNC for safekeeping, and replace new journals for all future visitors.

Which essay holds the most meaning for you?

Boy, that is a hard one. I have so many favorites. I believe my favorite might be “The Fix-It Man.” It’s about how my Dad – how he was so selfless, and always thought of others first, and his ability to make anyone laugh.

You are inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson—in what ways?

In his ninth essay, the Oversoul, he outlines his belief in a God who resides in each of us, and who we can communicate. To quote Emerson, “Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE.” How beautiful is that statement? Emerson speaks about the connection we all have to each other, which I believe to be true. Every action you take affects every living being that surrounds you. His works inspire me to respect nature, people and animals. Be kind to one another. Respect our oceans, lakes, and streams and all life that reside in these waters. If Emerson were alive now, I think I would have tagged along on his coat strings.

Where can readers find out more about you and your work?

Readers can check out blog posts or my publications page at ShereeNielsen.wordpress.com. I love writing about travel, gardening, architecture, inspiring people, animals and nature. Readers can also connect with me at upcoming events in the region. My other social media sites are:

Twitter: [@ShereeKNielsen](https://twitter.com/ShereeKNielsen)

Facebook: [Facebook.com/ShereeNielsenAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/ShereeNielsenAuthor)

Instagram: [ShereeNielsen](https://www.instagram.com/ShereeNielsen)

Amazon Author Central: [Sheree K. Nielsen](https://www.amazon.com/Sheree-K-Nielsen)



Endorsements

For more information contact Ocean Spirit, LLC at 314-954-3845
OceanSpiritPublishing@gmail.com

"Sheree Nielsen gets it. She's a gatherer of details and lovely moments—of beachy beauty, of good people and their kind words, of gentle animals. She loves what should be loved in life. She honors what should be honored. She seems to live the way we all should live. Reading her essays reminded me how to live better." –**Sandy Gingras, author/illustrator of many gift books including *Walks on the Beach* and *Lessons of a Turtle***

“With extraordinary reverence for the natural world, and the creatures who inhabit it, Sheree K. Nielsen has crafted a collection of wonder and meditation on wanderlust. Nielsen’s attentions frequently focus on the unknowable ocean and the beaches that welcome water to shore. She travels from present to past to give voice to her father, her many animal companions, and her beloved husband. From larkspur to sand dollars, and dragonfly wing to canine fur, these essays rely upon a sort of tenderness that feels distinctly Midwest in the best possible way—warm, open, and deeply curious about whom and what borders state and sea. This is a collection of praise and grief, yes, but more so a call to action to be more present in the spaces that capture our imagination. Nielsen is asking us each to pay respects to the world we inhabit, and to exude gratitude for the privilege in simply being here.” –**Kelli Allen, Pulitzer nominated author of *Otherwise Soft White Ash***

“Surrender to nature and the pull of the sea and immerse yourself in Ocean Rhythms, Kindred Spirits. Let Nielsen’s reflections, insights, and adventures spirit you away to a world of sea, sunlight, salt air, and self-discovery.” –**Tom Poland, a Southern Writer, author of *South Carolina Country Roads***

“Sheree Nielsen has penned another fantastic read with *Ocean Rhythms, Kindred Spirits*, capturing one of our family’s favorite things—traveling to the beach with our pups! Stories involving a beloved sand-loving golden retriever and a cat who expresses love by waking the author with a “gift,” prompted memory-filled smiles. In *Ocean Rhythms, Kindred Spirits*, Sheree’s love of family, travel and pets is a most enjoyable read—whether you’re on a sofa, hammock, or the beach! –**Kent Whitaker, barbeque guru/culinary author of *Great American Grilling***

“*Ocean Rhythms, Kindred Spirits* is a charming collection of moments and memories reminding us to value life’s small blessings.” --**Pat Wahler, author of *I am Mrs. Jesse James***

"A journey through sea and land, this book inspires self-reflection and universal connection. A refreshing collection of personal essays!" –**Trina Sotira, co-editor of *Shifts: An Anthology of Women's Growth Through Change*, 2015 USA Best Book Award finalist, and 2016 Next Generation Indie Book Awards finalist**

Uncorrected Advance Reading Copy

Ocean Rhythms



Kindred Spirits

AN EMERSON-INSPIRED
ESSAY COLLECTION ON
TRAVEL, NATURE, FAMILY AND PETS

TO SOME OF THE PLACES I'VE LOVED

(Appearing in order)

Chesterfield, MO

Florida Keys

Jacksonville Beach, FL

Camp Whipolt, MN

Southport, NC

Kindred Spirit Bench, SC

Great Guana Cay, Abaco, Bahamas

Folly Beach, SC

Cotton Bay, Eleuthera

Sunset Beach, NC

Bimini, Bahamas

Sandy Cay, BVI's

Cayman Brac, Cayman Islands

Santa Rosa Beach, FL

Bloody Bay Wall, Cayman Islands

Millstadt, IL

St. Louis, MO

Sunset Beach, Eleuthera

O'Fallon, MO

Valmeyer, IL

Mississippi

Alabama I-65

Wentzville, MO

Middle Caicos, Turks & Caicos Islands

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

999

<i>Wednesday Awakenings</i>	999
-----------------------------------	-----

OCEAN RHYTHMS

999

<i>In Search of My Kindred Spirit</i>	999
<i>The Edge</i>	999
<i>The Perfect Day</i>	999
<i>Risky Business</i>	999
<i>A Bronze Star</i>	999
<i>The Forecast Called for Rain</i>	999
<i>Haven't I Seen You Somewhere</i>	999
<i>The Dolphin's Dance</i>	999
<i>The Pillars of Hercules</i>	999
<i>Return to Folly Beach</i>	999
<i>Craig's Flag</i>	999
<i>Sweet Soles</i>	999
<i>Beach Dances</i>	999
<i>Life on the Wall</i>	999

KINDRED SPIRITS

999

<i>Uncle Willie's Farm</i>	999
<i>Christmas Eve with the Cousins</i>	999
<i>Island Girl</i>	999
<i>The Fix-It Man</i>	999
<i>The Okeechobee Valmeyer Fish Fry</i>	999
<i>The Mimosa Tree</i>	999
<i>Breakfast with the Queen</i>	999
<i>Rooftop to the Basement</i>	999
<i>My Morning Delight</i>	999
<i>The Right Choice</i>	999
<i>The Dragonfly</i>	999
<i>Beautiful By Nature</i>	999
<i>Rhapsody in Chain Link</i>	999

AFTERWORD

999

“Every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

INTRODUCTION

Wednesday Awakenings

Wednesday, January 14, 2015, was a bitterly cold day in Missouri. With a dead car battery, my local automotive repair tech stopped by the house to jump start my Chevy Equinox. The technician suggested I drive the car at least forty minutes to avoid having the same problem again. I'd only been gone a couple hours running errands with my friend Peggy, when I returned home.

As I stepped inside the kitchen door, my two dogs and black cat greeted me with excitement. But an uneasy feeling filled my heart, as I spotted my sweet tuxedo kitty, Tripoli, lying on the wool rug in our dining room in the same spot where I rest my feet when seated at the table. I approached him slowly. There was no reaction when I called his name; no heave and ho of his breathing. Tripoli's silky black and white fur was still warm to the touch, but his lemon-colored eyes exhibited a fixed stare. I stroked his fur and began to cry uncontrollably. He was gone.

Grief gives no rhyme or reason—no warning. Crying outbursts know no sense of time, location or circumstance. Devastated by the loss of my friend, my unpredictable sobbing continued for days. The following Wednesday, on the one-week anniversary of his death, I cried off and on.

Wednesday, February 4 was different, though. In the quiet of the morning, as I lay in bed, I was startled by a loud male voice calling my name.

I wasn't sure if I was in the transition period between dreams and consciousness, but immediately, I sprang up, eyes wide open.

The ethereal voice sounded like...God's? Although I have no clue what God's voice sounds like, I thought it must be Him. The strong sublime voice was urging me, 'Wake up!'

Wake up now?

Wake up to my surroundings?

Wake up to life?

What was he saying?

I arose from our king-size bed, slipped on my white crew socks and worn cotton robe, and stumbled down the hallway to the kitchen. Two pooches and one cat followed close behind.

As I pushed open the sheer dining room curtains, the most magnificent yellow-orange sunrise radiated across the sky. I smiled. Peacefulness filled my heart.

Sauntering to the kitchen to prepare my routine breakfast of oatmeal and fresh raspberries, I eyed the resident gray squirrel, Bandit (named by me for the dark stripe under his eyes), on the porch. Inching his way down the wooden deck rail, he separated sunflower seeds from their hulls, munching on the meaty treat inside.

Seated at the kitchen table with my oatmeal, rye toast, and cup of English Breakfast tea, I noticed a pair of cardinals hopping across the deck outside our French doors.

I felt like God was telling me to ‘wake up’ and embrace the beauty around me.

The visuals of nature helped me forge through the rest of the week. I cried a little but remembered the beauty I’d discovered on that Wednesday morning.

Then on February 11, something happened in the wee hours of the morning—a strange dream.

In the dream, I awoke from slumber. The back door to our vacation home was open, and welcoming sunlight poured in. The hardwood floors of the hallway were cool to my bare feet as I shuffled into the living room, where my husband relaxed on a plush beige sofa.

I didn’t notice our Australian shepherd, Sabrina, at first, but when she emerged from behind another sofa, a cat was riding her piggyback.

As I approached my smiling canine, I studied the cat’s fur and color. His body, mainly white, sported light grey spots. The reddish-brown color of his head and face were separated by a white streak traveling from his crown to his nose.

Waking from the dream, I thought the cat reminded me of a parrot. The corners of my mouth upturned into a grin.

After breakfast, I scuffled down the hallway to the bathroom. Squeezing the Crest toothpaste tube, a tiny bubble formed, and floated upward. The small masterpiece remained airborne for what seemed like five minutes. I watched the bubble travel about the bathroom much like a hot air balloon adjusts to altitude. First up, then down, then sideways, toward the window, over the tub, and back towards me like an astronaut weightless in a space capsule. I stepped into the bedroom to grab my camera to capture a shot of the bubble, but when I returned it had disappeared.

Later in the afternoon, my young friend Rileigh and I ordered lunch at a local coffee house. When the server delivered my lunch salad, it



Tripoli in window

was drenched in dressing, rather than on the side, as I had requested. The server politely offered to prepare a second one. Upon his return, he handed me two wooden coin tokens for any coffee beverage and apologized for the inconvenience.

After lunch, we visited the Sophie Sachs Butterfly House, and observed more than twenty varieties of butterflies in a humid glass-encased botanical garden. The fragrance, the flowers, and temperature of the habitat brought back memories of my visits to the Caribbean.

Blue Morphos floated past us, just like the toothpaste bubble. Rileigh and I rested on the welcoming wood benches and observed the airy creatures in flight. My heart rate slowed as calmness filled my body.

We concluded the afternoon with a trip to a local bakery, The Cup, to stuff our faces with sweet delights like homemade chocolate cupcakes drenched in peanut butter cream icing.

Although the events of a particular Wednesday left a somber and melancholy feeling in my heart, I believe God's loving arms helped me realize Wednesdays are to be celebrated—whether through death, or a new life, or a change.

I believe that my precious three-legged fur baby, Tripoli, running free on Rainbow Bridge, would want me to savor all the good and positive moments that Wednesdays bring.

I decided that Wednesdays are 'get out of jail free' days—a break from the crazy world of stress.

I look forward to more unexplained sweet 'awakenings' in my life, and know that God always plays a part.

There's always an animal child that seems to connect with you, seeing right through to your soul, more than others. Tripoli was my 'heart' cat, and I'll always have the fondest memories of him.



How to read the book...

Ocean Rhythms uncovers the wanderlust in my soul, defining moments of clarity in my life, and when I experience nature's majesty whether blissful or extreme through beach and scuba diving adventures, and lyrical dances with creatures—dolphins, sharks, and sea-loving dogs.

Kindred Spirits reveals my strong connection to family, heritage, sweet childhood memories, beloved pets, and pleasant coincidences.

In these life journeys, I've found my own awakening—a universal beauty connecting every living thing on Earth to each other, as mentioned by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his ninth essay, "The Oversoul", and triggered by my lymphoma diagnosis in June 2012.

Since then, these essays and connections have taken on greater meaning—a higher purpose.

Life is constantly changing, and so are you. Use these essays as a foundation to link the universal beauty around you to your own experiences—every leaf, every drop, every creature, and with every being.

I hope you find yourself, and awaken the majesty of the Earth inside your soul.

IN SEARCH OF MY KINDRED SPIRIT

Growing up in the Midwest, I learned quickly that my dad, a World War II naval veteran, longed to be near big bodies of water. Dad made sure Mom and I visited lakes or coastal regions in our travels, even if it meant taking several vacations a year.

May was spent lazing in the Florida Keys. Some days we'd swim at the hotel. Others, we'd fish off the old (now defunct) Seven Mile Bridge. Casting our lines, Dad and I donned colorful straw hats—mine, wide-brimmed with peach-colored ribbons, his, cool like Frank's Sinatra's. We even toiled around the crystal clear Atlantic Ocean on our rental boat fishing for snapper and pompano.

After a visit to Key West, the three of us pointed our compass in the direction of Jacksonville Beach, for a stay at Aunt Mary's. Days were spent splashing in the surf, beachcombing for shells, and catching crabs for the nightly boils.

In August, we headed north to visit friends, Bud and Mary, owners of Camp Whipolt Resort near Walker, Minnesota. Perched high atop a cliff, rows of cabins with vistas of Leech Lake offered a timeless view, and the water beckoned.

My best friend for the week was the couple's one-eyed golden retriever, Toby, who lost his eye in a dog fight. Most mornings, Toby would show up at our cabin, lifting his paw to scratch the screen door—his call for breakfast. Dad fed him savory bits—crispy fried bacon, hamburger, or even tater tots. Toby accepted the treats with a gulp, and a smile.

The two of us, young girl and dog, were inseparable. With boundless energy, we'd sprint down the two flights of rickety wooden steps from cabin to shoreline, and spend endless afternoons jumping over the rocks and playing in the water. I'd skip stones across the inlet, and wave at Dad fishing with his buddies offshore. Toby, would survey the shallow crystal water, and with back arched, launch himself airborne, like he

was jumping on a trampoline, dive-bombing the water. With his mouth open, and his one eye keenly trained on a prize, sometimes he'd snag a minnow or bluegill. Toby repeated this process, again and again, with precision. Holding my stomach, it was difficult to hold back the laughter.

Hours later, the low hum of a boat motor nearing the dock signaled the return of Dad. With a red cooler full of freshly caught crappie and walleye in hand, Dad and his fellow anglers carried the 'catch of the day' to the fish-cleaning house. Curious, I'd position myself on an upturned minnow bucket inside the hut. The art of the filet commenced with Rapala knives, and fish scales flew like birds in flight. The filets, hosed off in long skinny sinks equipped with drains, were bathed in cool water, secured in Ziploc bags, and finally placed in a big deep freeze at Bud and Mary's cabin. Of course, we'd save a dozen or so fish for a cookout that evening.

While I felt at home returning each summer to these beloved getaways, I longed to discover my own 'old, yet familiar' place.

On a recent visit to my cousin Bob and Annie's in Southport, North Carolina, my husband, Russell and I found ourselves exploring nearby towns on days the couple had prior commitments. One morning, we set our course to check out nearby beaches. During our drive, a torrential downpour ensued, and we veered our Chevy Equinox into a parking lot with a wood gazebo at Sunset Beach. Grabbing our umbrella from the car for shelter, we walked the boardwalk to the soft wet sand. The waves were tempestuous, and the wind was wild. And I was drawn to this place.

We vowed to return to Sunset Beach in a few days, when the forecast was sunny.

As our visit with my cousins drew to a close, with a few hours before our flight, we mapped a course past Sunset Beach on the way to the airport. Steering our car into a parking space, we stopped at the same lot with the cute gazebo. Hand in hand we strolled the zig-zaggy boardwalk to the beach.

Minutes after stepping foot on the soothing sand, a young boy dressed in blue t-shirt and white board shorts surprised me by drenching me with a bucket of water. I felt like scolding him, but all I could do was chuckle.

The boy motioned for us to follow him. He led us under the weathered pier, where a thirty-something woman relaxed in a red webbed chair, with legs crossed, enjoying the shade.

"That's my boy!"

"He sure has a good arm," I said.

The brown-haired woman laughed.

"Where you from?"

"Missouri."

"You been to the Kindred Spirit Bench?"

“Nope,” I answered, shaking my head from side to side.

The woman explained the Kindred Spirit Bench sat high atop dunes on Bird Island. It was a 35-minute walk due west from the last beach access at 40th Street along the shoreline—but well worth it. About thirty years ago, someone who wished to remain anonymous, built the Kindred Spirit Bench. Adjacent to the bench, stood a mailbox filled with journals... notes and letters from visitors all over the world. The journals, collected each week by ‘helpers’, ensured the penned thoughts made their way back to the secret originator.

“Sitting on the bench,” she said, “is the best view of Bird Island.”

A salty tear trickled down my cheek.

“What’s wrong, hon?”

“I’m a writer, and what you said just touched my heart.”

“Well, then, you’ve just got to see it!”

On the flight back, thoughts about my conversation with the woman on the beach resurfaced. After returning home, I cancelled our next vacation, and rebooked a quaint beach house on Sunset Beach, North Carolina. One month later, my blue-eyed Australian shepherd, my silver-haired handsome hubby, and I drove fifteen hours to our southern destination on a mission of self-discovery.

The Wednesday after our arrival, I connected with the Kindred Spirit helpers—a local author, Jacqueline, and her friend, Sandy. Jack, as her friends like to call her, supplied me with a bike for our trek to Bird Island and the Kindred Spirit Bench. After walking our bikes to the Third Street Beach Access, we hopped on for a leisurely ride. As we peddled, we talked. About twenty minutes into our trip, we sighted a black mailbox adjacent to a bench inscribed with the words “Kindred Spirit.” We parked our bikes on the shoreline, using large scallop shells to house the kickstands, and hiked up the dunes to the bench.

I settled in on the weathered bench to rest from the ride. After a few minutes, I carefully opened the mailbox filled with journals. As I flipped the pages of the tattered notebooks, I found an entry from a young pregnant woman. Her baby was stillborn. Tape remained from an ultrasound photo, now removed. Another entry was from a young girl, and yet another from a grandmother...

I lifted my pen and scribbled in the journal,

“Dear Kindred Spirit,

I’m here with new friends Jacqueline and Sandy. Today, I watch as they carefully unfurl and hoist a flag for Memorial Day, in honor of all the veterans we’ve lost over the years. I call them the Kindred Spirit angels.

There are so many people, here, now, sharing the spirit. Everyone is connected to each other.

I pray my lymphoma never gets any worse than it is, my marriage grows stronger, and God watches over my animal children, family and friends.”

A warm feeling embraced me. I now understood why this hallowed ground, frequented by residents and visitors alike, was so revered. Overcome with joy, I couldn't wait to share my experience with my husband.

Two days later, on a radiant Carolina morning, with canteens and cameras in-tow, hubby, the dog and I, made our journey down the beach to the Kindred Spirit Bench from the 40th Street beach access. Along the way, we took time to soak in the sights and sounds—seagulls soaring overhead, driftwood washed ashore, and children building sandcastles.

Arriving at our destination, my carefree animal child with the ice-blue eyes hopped up on one of the two weathered benches aside her Earth Mother. We cast a gaze onto the flat hard sand watching passersby carefully select seashells from the shallow tide pools. I turned my head to recognize a familiar symbol of bravery—the American flag—flying about ten yards behind the Kindred Spirit Bench. Set amidst a powder blue sky, nestled in the dunes, Old Glory was a sight to see today. Directly to my left, areas were roped off for sea turtle nesting and preservation. To my right, lay the jagged rocks of the jetty connecting the unpredictable ocean to the calm Intracoastal Waterway.

After slipping off his leather sandals, Russell opened the mailbox, and selected one of many notebooks housed inside. Reposed on the bench next to me, my veteran husband studied the American flag for several minutes, and then penned his thoughts in the journal. Finished, he returned the notebook to the mailbox, and gazed off into the distance.

“What did you write about, sweetie?”

“I wrote a letter to Wil. He would have loved this spot.”

I felt a lump in my throat, as I held back tears.

Wil, my husband's friend, had a massive heart attack at age 34, leaving a wife, and four children behind.

In reverence, I bowed my head. I heard my dog panting next to me, and the sounds of waves crashing. Lifting my head, my eyes caressed the offing. Taking a deep breath, the salty air teased my nostrils. I knew I'd found my 'old, yet new familiar' place. With no doubt in my mind, I'd return again and again to this inspirational spot—this Kindred Spirit—with husband and animal children.

Our walk back was filled with excitement and emotion.

As I passed others on our walk, I'd smile and ask, “Do you know about the Kindred Spirit Bench? No? Well, let me tell you about it!”



Russell at the Kindred Spirit Beach

THE DOLPHIN'S DANCE

Nearly four years to the day, my husband Russell and I stepped foot again on Cayman Brac—an island paradise about 12 ½ miles long. The Brac, aptly named by locals, boasted a rocky coastline, 140-foot bluff, and cerulean blue waters which gave way to some of the finest diving in the Caribbean.

I was anxious to reacquaint myself with the treasures of the deep. On my bucket list—exploring the everchanging reefs, walls, and wrecks. Little did I know my week on the island would be incomparable. It would be a life adventure.

For our first dive, our boat, *Big Sister*, dropped anchor off the northern shore of Cayman Brac. Divers readied their gear, attaching BC's and regulators to air tanks. After a thorough equipment inspection, everyone settled in on the metal benches or climbed up top to the captain's area in preparation for the pre-dive briefing.

Two tanned and toned dive masters, Craig and Susi, led our group for the first full day of scuba. After a quick survey of the underwater location, both were back onboard for a dive briefing.

With colorful markers, Craig highlighted on the whiteboard landmarks such as coral, sponges, marine life, and other areas we might choose to explore.

“Middle Chute and West Chute exhibit two sloping wall crests with a pinnacle, surrounded by sand chutes—a very special dive site—the wall crest beginning at fifty-five feet and dropping well below 3,000 feet straight down into infinity,” described Craig. “The chutes have a cascading effect—similar to sand waterfalls.”

Craig sketched one last familiar marine mammal on the board, and explained our group was in for a treat.

Shortly after Hurricane Mitch hit Honduras, Central America, in late October, 1998, a young male bottlenose dolphin was seen near Grand Cayman with a lone companion—his mother. The two sustained injuries during the storm—beaten up badly in the surf line. Not long

after their arrival, the female dolphin's body lay lifeless, washed up on the shore. The male dolphin, left with a wound near his tail, longed for his matriarch and stayed close by in the Grand Cayman waters. After the summer of 1999, the young 300-pound dolphin, named Spot by Cayman dive masters, made Cayman Brac his home.

The dive staff chuckled and warned us to be prepared—Spot was quite a character!

Suited up with our gear, hubby and I walked aft on the boat. Side by side, we jumped giant-stride from the platform, keeping one hand on our regulator and mask. As we made descent, we cleared our ears by grasping our nose, blowing and forcing pressure to be released from our masks. Reaching the ocean floor, we hovered above a sand bank waiting for the rest of our group. A quick check of my depth gauge displayed 83 feet.

In the sand flats, our welcoming committee greeted us—Spot!

Within minutes, the playful dolphin bumped several divers. Our group formed an open circle with Spot as the main attraction. The sleek dolphin moved effortlessly—frolicking and cavorting, weaving in and around each of us, sometimes nudging, and always giving the okay to caress his silky gray body so warm to the touch.

The corners of Spot's mouth seemed to upturn into a grin. Picking up speed, he propelled his strong frame to the surface to catch a breath, and then dove head first, turning within inches of the sandy floor. A game of fetch ensued when Craig placed a twig in Spot's mouth. The dolphin dared anyone to snatch the stick—a *catch me if you can* attitude.

My dive computer beeped, signaling it was time for me to ascend. I gave hubby a "thumbs up" and slowly we fin-kicked towards the surface. After leveling off at fifteen feet, I grasped the end of the stainless steel boat chain attached to the vessel for a five-minute safety stop. Russell hovered neutrally buoyant in the waters nearby. The sun's brilliant rays penetrated the crystal clear ocean enveloping my neoprene wetsuit, as I patiently waited out my allotted time.

As I glanced at Russell, he appeared to be sinking deeper. I flashed the hand signal "to come up and level off." He pointed above me. As I looked upward toward the silhouetted boat, I noticed Spot with the heavy chain links draped over his beak-like snout. With my hand securely grasping the chain, the 7-foot long dolphin swung me up, and down, then up again. I smiled and enjoyed the ride! My husband laughed causing bubbles to escape at a rapid pace from his mask.

I garnered one final look at this magnificent creature before I continued my ascent. As I released the chain, Spot, with head tilted, squealed with delight. With soulful eyes, the dolphin gave me a quick wink before swimming off to harass other divers.

Back on the boat, fellow shipmates compared field notes about their personal interactions with Spot. Some were nudged or bumped, others

admit caressing or hugging the dolphin, and still others withstood his merciless teasing.

Following a second morning dive, Big Sister revved her engine, and steered a course to our afternoon site—The Wreck of the Kissimmee, a Cayman energy tugboat well past her prime, deliberately sunk in 1982 to aid in the reef system. As the boat killed her engine near the northern shore, we recognized a familiar face portside.

Spot had returned for an encore. I clapped my hands in delight. The dolphin patiently waited at the surface for our group to re-enter the ocean's warm embrace.

We dropped quickly to the sea bottom, where visibility was excellent—as far as one's eye could see. While exploring the wreck's nooks and crannies, Spot lingered in the sand flats close by.

Swimming the length of the tugboat, we spent time inspecting vibrant macro life decorating the wreck, and gazing at peacock flounders and stingrays skimming along the sand flats. With camera in hand, Russell captured me sitting cross-legged near a hatchway entrance. I snapped a photo of him showing off his muscular legs and looking like Lloyd Bridges from *Sea Hunt*.

A short distance away, behind the shipwreck, a coral reef teamed with grey angelfish, yellow snappers, blue tangs and lionfish. Diligently, I searched for the elusive sharpnose puffer with angel-like fins and seductive eyes. Sadly, she was nowhere to be found.

Steadying the camera, Russell leaned in towards the reef for a close-up photo of a yellowtail damselfish. In my peripheral vision, out of Russell's sight, Spot inched closer. Hubby, unaware of the dolphin's presence, was thrust four feet to his left as Spot playfully side-checked his body.

Russell turned and sneered in my direction as if I was the culprit. Motioning to my right, hubby spun around. His frown quickly turned to a smile as he shook a scolding finger at the dolphin. Beaming, Spot sashayed his head back and forth emitting a quacking sound mimicking laughter.

Craig swam up and floated the dolphin a stick. Ready for another game of fetch, Spot retrieved it in seconds. Divers exploring the wreck lost interest and turned their attention toward them. After a few minutes, Spot released the stick and began spinning in circles. Enamored by the dolphin's presence, I realized how completely perfect this creature was—formed by God's hands.

Craig took a cue from Spot's lead and glided parallel to the dolphin, reeling in the cool sea water. Nuzzling belly to belly, their ethereal dance mesmerized onlookers—as graceful as *Cirque De Soleil*. The high-spirited dolphin squealed with delight. Craig stroked Spot's silky body as their act came to a close.

Nearing journey's end, we joined fellow diver Mike resting in the

sand flats, watching his wife, Rosie, float above. As I relaxed, I reflected on the events of the day and the silly dolphin cavorting, twisting, and rolling in the tepid sea.

It was no coincidence Spot found his way to “The Brac”. Some say several minutes with a wild dolphin is a gift. If that’s so, forty minutes with Spot must have been a miracle.

Choosing a worn beige hammock secured between two winsome palm trees for a nice respite, I closed my eyes and reminisced about my newfound friend.

Spot’s carefree attitude and childlike playfulness taught me it was okay to take risks, just as he did after the loss of his mother, setting a fresh course for adventure.

Stoic and gentle with keen intuition, I remembered the dolphin’s smile, funny character, the gleam in his eye, and the bright white spot near his tail. Wise beyond his years, I learned quickly from this ‘water angel’ to enjoy life, laugh easily and love deeply.

Locals say Spot stuck around the Cayman waters for about a year, bonding and swimming with the dive masters of the Brac nearly every day.

Then just as unexpectedly as he appeared, he left—to discover new horizons, make new friends, and chart new seas.

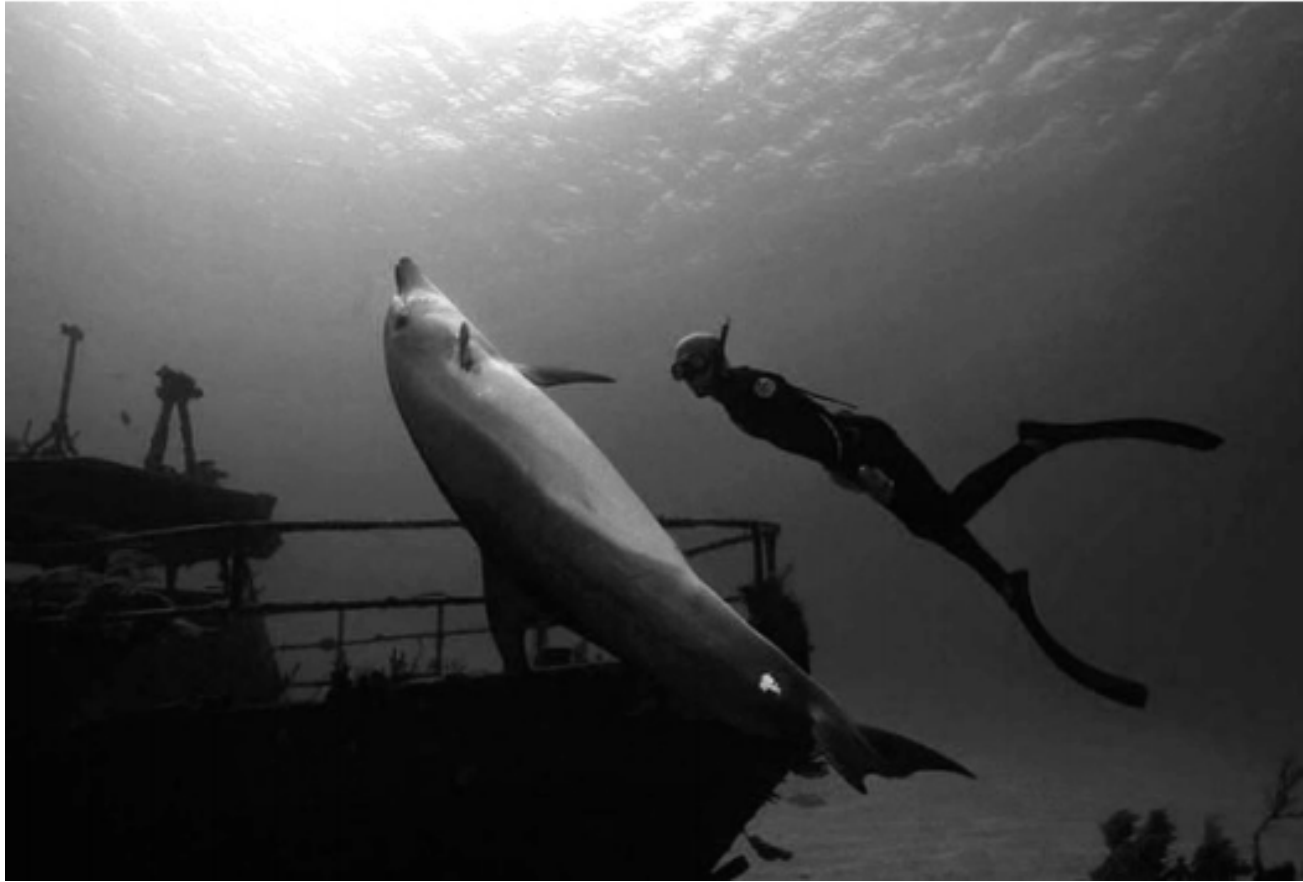


Photo credit: Jason Belport

SWEET SOLES

There's an unspoken truth about shoes left at the beach. No matter how long you leave them on the boardwalk or in the sand, chances are, when you return from your walk or swim or kite flying, they'll be there waiting for you... eager to caress and soothe your tired, exfoliated feet, guiding you back to your house by the sea, Schwinn bicycle, or Jeep. Whether they're Teva black flip-flops, leather Birkenstocks, or the strappy gold metallic kind, sandals gather together for a shoe fest of their own.

I wonder what these shoes would say to each other if they could talk?

"Slow down!" or "You need a pedicure" or "Your soles are killing me!" or even "You're so soft and smooth".

They say you can tell a lot about someone by their shoes. I suppose the same applies for sandals.

I know mine are the 'comfort' Teva's—the longer they're worn, the more they conform to my feet. The fabric straps once ebony black, have faded to a pleasant midnight-purple, bleached by the sun and kissed by my toes.

Sometimes they require a good 'ole Dawn dish liquid washing after particles of sand get stuck in the cracks or they pick up smells from the beach.

Every time I slip on those flip-flops, they remind me of all the places I've visited, and countless adventures I've yet to experience.

Over the years, I've purchased a couple more pairs of sandals. But somehow, I end up choosing the seasoned black Teva's over all the others.

My husband says beach sandals remind him of the diversity in this world, and how each person, like sandals, can be different from one another. Some sandals have thick complex stitching or expensive leather. Others are as simple and humble as a molded ninety-nine cent pair of plastic flip-flops from the Dollar Store.

Eyeing those sandals lined up along the boardwalk steps, or

scattered in the sand, I realize people have chosen to trust each other. When we kick off our shoes, we leave worries behind, allowing the beach to invigorate, renew, and strengthen our minds and bodies. We're left vulnerable—open to sights and sounds, and even conversations with perfect strangers.

And just like our naked soles at the beach, we become one with each other.



Sweet Soles – Shoes on the Beach