

Keeper of the Light

Marge Winski

Marge Winski has been the Keeper of the Montauk Lighthouse for nearly thirty years.

The magnificent term “Poetics of Place” seeks to link the intangible nuances of a location’s allure to art, and ultimately to your heart and soul. Such magical places exist and often, even when first encountered, their mysterious secrets and attraction instantly bond with your psyche and become imbued within every cell of your being. Montauk is part of my core and is my “thin” place, where Heaven and Earth are close. If you are fortunate to encounter such a location you will recognize its intrinsic beauty and be enriched and nourished by its gifts.

We moved full time to Montauk when I was in grade school and my world blossomed with opportunity and freedom. I was given carte blanche to explore and explore I did, hiking, investigating, and yes, I must confess, trespassing on every inch of land. I cherished my newfound independence and embraced the solitude and rugged wildness of an undiscovered Montauk.

After college I was afforded amazing opportunities: I lived in a tent on a tiny Maine island where I studied puffins and later moved to Wisconsin to work with endangered species of cranes. While in the Midwest I was honored and humbled to live in the “shack” where the eminent ecologist Aldo Leopold wrote his classic *A Sand County Almanac*. I returned to the east coast, to Manhattan, where I raised Peregrine Falcons atop the ConEd building on Fourteenth Street. I spent more than a few sunrises locked atop the World Trade Center’s

observation deck watching the four peregrines as they swooped through the city's canyons.

However my dream always was to live in a lighthouse, so I attempted to enlist in the Coast Guard. I tried to bluff my way through the eye exam, failing when they realized I was nearly legally blind without my glasses. When asked why I wanted to sign up I announced my intention to live at a light station. The interviewers laughed and said



there would be no possibility of that happening as all the light keepers were being phased out.

When the Montauk Lighthouse was automated in 1987 the Coast Guard first offered the buildings and grounds to New York State and the Town of East Hampton. When both entities declined the opportunity, the Montauk Historical Society's Lighthouse Committee stepped up to the challenge. They proposed the creation of a museum, offering to open the buildings, tower, and grounds to the public. I worked for the State Park at the time and learned that the park police officers were asked if they would like to live at the Lighthouse. Both men turned down the opportunity, saying that it was a far too remote place to live. I could hardly contain my excitement when I heard the news and decided to write a letter to the Montauk Historical Society.

As I drafted my proposal I found it nearly impossible to list all the jobs I was willing to take on: I could garden, paint, clean, write, keep the books, photograph, and, honestly, I was willing to dangle from a breeches buoy to whitewash the tower. The Committee must have



sensed my longing, wild enthusiasm, and excitement along with my history of living and surviving in unusual situations. They accepted my plea and offered me one of the two apartments in the keeper's house. My joy was incandescent; I glowed and was practically floating on air. My lifelong dream had miraculously come true.

The Coast Guard personnel vacated the Lighthouse in the morning and I moved in that evening. Phil Keyes and Laura King, a young couple from

Vermont, were hired to help with the startup and day-to-day running of the fledgling museum. They moved into the upstairs apartment and I lived on the first floor. For the first few months the foghorn proved to be our greatest challenge. The Coast Guard had yet to install a sensor to automate it and the horn was left on for weeks at a time. As I tried to fall asleep I'd lie awake listening to the two-second blare, counting one and two and three for thirteen seconds to the next blast, four times a minute. Eventually I acclimated to the sound and became oblivious to the noise.

We had only a few weeks before the doors opened to the public. Many volunteers stepped forward to help out; scrubbing, stripping wallpaper, painting, and creating exhibits to launch the museum. The building was a warren of corridors and small rooms which made traffic flow unwieldy. Somehow it all came together and the gate opened on Memorial Day weekend in 1987. That inaugural season we welcomed hundreds of visitors who were thrilled to climb the 137 spiral stairs to the top of the tower, captivated by the incomparable vista at land's end.

After the first year, Phil and Laura decided to leave Montauk and return to Vermont. I moved upstairs to their apartment and my old place was converted into a larger gift shop. I must admit that I am extremely happy to live alone at the Lighthouse, something which baffles most people. Whenever someone learns of my unique life they invariably ask if I get lonely. I have never, ever been lonely at the light. Conversely, I've felt much more isolated in large



crowds. For me there could not be a more perfect place to observe and contemplate life. Montauk Point is the nexus of land, sea, and sky, a confluence of great natural forces. I simply cannot conceive of a moment of boredom or loneliness at a place of such ecological and historic significance. It is, as Aldo Leopold wrote about his farm, “here where we seek and still find our meat from God.”

Each sunrise is a time of revelation and promise. When the sun breaks free of the sea, the cliffs lining Turtle Cove turn red with the first blush of light and the ocean is transformed into molten gold. To witness the sun's steady march along the horizon from day to day and week to week is a calming reassurance. While humans may invoke global crises, nature's rhythms remain constant. What solace it is to be witness to the changing seasons, to slow down, and to garner strength and joy from the appreciation of simple pleasures.

Each morning when I open the front door I encounter a world where fog might soften sharp edges, brine-infused scent could waft upward from the cove, a seal might be sunning on the sand, or I could find winter waves roaring and grinding the shore. Every moment is



a gift; we just have to open our hearts to its presence.

Chance encounters with fellow travelers make for an exciting life. I've stepped outside to behold the stars and nearly bumped into a great horned owl resting on the lawn, startling us both. During the incredible snowy owl incursion last winter I discovered one perched on a sign by the foghorn. She was illuminated in my car's headlights, her lemon-yellow eyes glowing against the black sea beyond. Once a friend gave me a bushel of apples, too many for me to use.

I decided to offer them to a magnificent eight-point buck living on the Lighthouse grounds. Eventually he became so acclimated, I would call "buck" and he would emerge from the darkness and race up the hill, drooling for a treat. Bats have fluttered down the chimney and whispered past my face as they flew through the living room. One night I casually picked up a shirt that had fallen to the bedroom floor, tossed it on the bed, and a milk snake plopped onto the blanket. I gingerly scooped up the snake in a cooking pot, slammed the lid closed, and threw everything out the window to the grass below.

In the wee hours one morning the burglar alarm tripped in the new Conway gift shop building located by the road. I was too nervous to confront any potential intruders by myself and called the police for assistance. It must have been a slow crime night in Montauk because a large team of officers responded. We opened the gift shop's door, cautiously stepped inside, and shone our flashlights into the darkness. We all expected to find a person hiding inside. My heart was pounding when suddenly there was a rustle and a very large

raccoon ambled out from behind a counter, blinking in the spotlights, looking so much like a bandit. I honestly don't know who shrieked the loudest...the raccoon, me...or perhaps the officers!

One of the most poignant moments of my Lighthouse sojourn occurred soon after a deceased baby whale washed ashore on an East Hampton beach. Researchers determined that it was much too young to have survived on its own as it had still been nursing. A few nights later, as I was admiring the silver moonlight illuminating Turtle Cove, I heard the plaintive cries and moans of a great creature. There are moments when I wonder if I did indeed hear such a thing but in my heart I know it was the mother whale mourning her lost calf.

I've weathered too many squalls, snowstorms, blizzards, thunderstorms, gales, and hurricanes to count, some predicted, some unforeseen. Hurricane Sandy was an astounding force of nature. We were fortunate to dodge a direct hit, which would have decimated Montauk.

As the storm slowly made its way up the coast I stepped away from the nonstop radio and television panic to take stock of the sea's condition. Enormous waves were already sweeping around the Point, funneling vast amounts of water westward into Long Island Sound. Turtle Cove was inundated with roiling, boiling white water, wave after wave slamming the cliffs. The sea was actually riding up the bluffs with spray fanning up and streaming like smoke over the moors. I

