

Big Sur River

By Kat Heiden

My husband naps peacefully. I kiss him on the cheek and slip out of the little cabin we've called home for the last three days. I slip on my water shoes, well worth the \$12 at the tiny general store down the road, and totter down to the gentle river, bathing suit on, hotel-provided towel in hand (why didn't we remember to pack beach towels?). Aside from the river current bubbling its invitation, and the birds hidden above in the Redwoods, it is silent. I am cold, as the canopy provided by the trees keeps it pleasantly cool for anyone wearing more than a halter top tankini. But I take a deep breath and make my way down to the water. I am determined to get my river swim in, even if my lips turn blue like a ten-year-old after two hours in the pool. And when I see the river, none of my previous preoccupations matter.

Slowly I wade, ankle deep...thigh deep...it is alarming to my body. And yet, I feel bold and free for doing this. I feel like I am supposed to be here in this place - the middle of a river - right now. Almost as if it were predetermined, though I don't believe in that. But I do believe in energy and that something holds us living things together. And perhaps it's just because I want them to, but I feel the trees welcoming me. I toss the towel on a rock before I get it wet by accident and creep further to the river middle.

The water is so clear you can see the bottom. I don't think I've ever seen a river like that. It's not deep, but there are spots deep enough to fully submerge myself. I focus on the closest one. Here we go. Deep breath...I'm under.

I shoot back up instantly; my skin and the organs underneath it protesting a temperature that is well below what they're used to. But after a moment, like with all change, we adjust. It's not so bad.

Long hair now dripping, I slosh around a bit like the animal I am, the animal we all are, really. Finally, I take a seat amidst the rocks in a shallow part of the water and feel the current gracefully touch my back. A few minutes later, I hardly notice the cold at all and plunge once more into the deeper water. It continues like this for a little while. Five, maybe ten minutes. I walk up and down the river, wade in the deeper parts, float on my back and look at the sun through the redwoods.

It's such a cliché, but in those few moments, I begin to understand why people use rivers for baptisms. These rites are all about renewal, purity, connection to things greater than oneself...and here, alone, floating in three feet of too-cold water, I feel all of it. I feel thankful to be part of the Earth, the human family, to be made of the universe's star stuff. I feel happy to be alive. I feel the acute sense that I AM alive (quite the rush)...and all of this means that I am okay. I have love. I have a mind. I have yesterday, I have tomorrow. But most of all, I have here and now. We all do. So maybe we shouldn't worry so much. Maybe sometimes, we should just head down to the river and see what we can see, feel, learn, love.

Come on in. The water's fine.