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Remembrance and Rebirth in Blue Spring (Volusia County)

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Figure 1. *Blue Spring "boil"*

Within the intentionally insulated confines of our mostly air conditioned world, the summer solstice draws scant attention from contemporary Floridians. Some may even deliberately try to ignore this "longest day of the year" since it marks passage into the Sunshine State's most oppressively uncomfortable weather. Although the sun's intensity

gradually begins to wane following the solstice, Florida's humidity and temperatures continue to rise for at least two more months as the region's seasonal rains intensify and maritime currents from the tropics continue to warm. These exceptionally muggy summer months are Florida's sweltering counterpart to the harshest months of the wintry North when most human activities shift indoors until weather conditions become more inviting.

For a few fortunate free-divers in central Florida, however, the start of this period of generalized human hibernation offers the only yearly opportunity to behold a scene of spectacular underwater grandeur deep within the natural "solstice tube" formed by the ancient limestone of Blue Spring. During just a few days around the solstice, with the sun at its closest annual approach to zenith, direct rays of golden light stream past glistening stone shelves to illuminate a

magnificent underground realm over seventy-five feet inside the earth that is normally hidden in shadows. This unusual phenomenon briefly transforms this hidden world into an aquatic fantasyland far more inspiring than anything seen by the millions of annual visitors to Disney World less than an hour away. Unlike the beguiling siren's call of Florida's attraction tourism, Blue Spring silently invites visitors to turn their awareness inward and gently guides them to a metaphorical rebirth in the steady caress of its healing waters. The spring reminds those of us who bathe there of the exuberance of central Florida's diverse natural heritage and quietly bids us to recall the region's millennial human history.

Blue Spring is the largest of several springs in Florida sharing the same color-based name, discharging an average of over 100 million gallons of mineral-tinted water daily. Of over 300 significant springs in our state, Blue Spring ranks seventeenth in terms of volume, making it one of only twenty-seven classified by hydrologists as "first-magnitude" (German 1). The spring shed, a recharge area supplying most of this

impressive volume of water, spreads across approximately 130 square miles on both sides of the St. Johns River that includes the land under our home in DeLand. Within this zone, rainwater percolates down through central Florida's nearly ubiquitous surface sands, passes slowly through openings in the underlying layer of clay and then into a complex system of fifty to sixty million year-old karst limestone passageways in the Floridan Aquifer. While most of the liquid emerging from Blue Spring fell as rainfall in the last several decades, the rainwater also mixes with ancient seawater moving imperceptibly upward from deep within the earth, making the spring water too high in chloride content for drinking. The spring maintains a fairly consistent temperature of around 73° F, which feels both refreshing in the summer and pleasantly warm during our rare winter freezes when steam billows up from the water's surface into the frigid air. From the spring head, the clear waters flow downstream for a half mile in a channel averaging perhaps fifty feet wide before joining the tannin-tinted "black" waters of the St. Johns River as it slowly meanders

northward before discharging into the Atlantic Ocean at Jacksonville.

Recalling Blue Spring's History

There is no doubt that humans have enjoyed the abundance of food resources and refreshing waters at Blue Spring for millennia. A 6,000 year-old archeological site containing 175 burials lies just a dozen miles downstream, suggesting a substantial human presence along this stretch of the St. Johns River system even in Middle Archaic times. Evidence of pre-Columbian peoples abounds near Blue Spring itself. Hundreds of Native shell middens dot the local landscape, including the truncated remains of what was once a massive mound on the south side of the spring run some 100 yards from the river. The American botanist John Bartram described the site in 1766 writing that, "This mount is formed of snail and muscle-shells [sic], and is 8 or 10 foot perpendicular, about 150 yards long and 20 broad" (Bartram 9). In 1894, Clarence Moore described his excavation of what is now known as the Thursby Mound by proudly proclaiming that after he and his crew were done, "The mound was

completely demolished" (Moore 158). The site produced some of the most elaborate artifacts of pre-Columbian Florida, including animal figurines, human remains and earthenware vessels. A twelve foot tall wooden image of an owl was found in the St. Johns River near the Blue Spring site in 1955 and two other immense shell mounds lie just minutes away by dugout canoe across the river on Hontoon Island.

The first Europeans to explore the St. Johns River system were under the direction the Frenchman René Goulaine de Laudonnière and the Spanish *Adelantado* Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the founder of St. Augustine. A French expedition apparently went upriver on what they called *La Riviere du Mai* as far as the entrance to Lake George in the summer of 1564. Two years later, the Spaniards under Menéndez's direct command ascended even farther up the river they had renamed as the *Río San Mateo*, to a point south of the lake where they were rebuffed by Mayacan warriors (Hann 114). Unfortunately, within a few generations, the Native population in the region around Blue Spring was

decimated from exposure to European diseases and consequentially, precious little is known about its first inhabitants.



Figure 2. *The Thursby House atop an ancient Native midden*

Blue Spring and the surrounding area were acquired by Louis Thursby and his family in 1856. They established a steamboat landing there to take advantage of the then-thriving river traffic as well as a small orange plantation, and eventually built a large home on top of the ancient Native midden in 1872 (Louis). The area was later developed as a minor tourist attraction and finally preserved as the highly popular state park of today.

Remembering Blue Spring's Natural Heritage

In his journal entry for January 4th of 1766, Bartram described Blue Spring as a place where "multitudes of fish resort to its head, as very large gar, cats, and several other sorts; the alligators very numerous either on the shore or swimming on the surface of the water" (Bartram 12). Snorkelers can now share Bartram's wonder at this awe-inspiring scene as they feast their eyes on an astonishing variety of species including the gar and channel catfish he mentioned. The "multitudes of fish" in the Blue Spring run include mullet, tarpon, bass, sunfish, bluegill, shiners, killifish, bowfin and many others, including the highly invasive blue tilapia and sailfin catfish that have become increasingly problematic. Alligators are still common in the spring run but only rarely venture upstream to the boil due to the relative lack of food in the oxygen-poor water pouring from the vent. Turtles are also abundant, including numerous cooters and an occasional Florida snapping turtle or musk turtle. Blue Spring's alluring underwater world even includes rare sightings of anhinga and cormorants as they flap

their wings beneath the surface in pursuit of prey. Groups of river otters occasionally join swimmers. Once I was even surprised by one as it searched for fish about twenty feet down in the stone passageways of the spring. On shore, lucky visitors to the spring might spot an occasional black bear, white-tailed deer, gopher tortoises and raccoons, recalling a central Florida that continues to succumb to our state's unrelenting and often environmentally insensitive development.

No doubt the main attraction at Blue Spring is the annual arrival of the officially "threatened" mammal known as the Florida manatee, a subspecies of the West Indian manatee commonly referred to as a sea cow. A distant relative of the elephant, this massive animal's presence at the spring came to international attention after the French marine conservationist Jacques Cousteau's visit in 1970. His video, "The Forgotten Mermaids," showed the plight of these gentle giants as they endured abuse and death at the hands of careless Florida recreationists. The Cousteau film's reference to mermaids recalls Christopher Columbus' diary entries

from his first voyage where the Genoese explorer described seeing three enormous finned creatures that reminded him of the mythical sirens, though "not as beautiful as they are portrayed" (Cristóbal). Public attention to the sorry treatment of these beleaguered animals led to Florida's purchase of the spring and adjoining lands in 1972 and the establishment of Blue Spring State Park, which now functions as a manatee refuge during the relatively cold months of winter. Manatees cannot survive for long periods in cool winter temperatures, so they flock to the warmth of the spring between mid-November and mid-March. Recent surveys indicate that there are approximately 5,000 manatees in the state (Manatee) and the number of manatees wintering at Blue Spring has increased dramatically. Fewer than fifty animals visited the spring in the early 1980s, but in recent years the numbers have soared to well over 250 manatees annually. Adults generally weigh between 1500-2200 pounds, but the largest manatee recorded was fifteen feet in length and weighed an astounding 3,649 pounds (West Indian). Since these huge creatures

have no natural enemies, they are not particularly fearful of humans, a characteristic that often makes them unfortunate victims of our careless behaviors. Most adults at Blue Spring have scars from boat propellers that have sliced their flesh. A record number of over 800 manatee deaths occurred statewide in 2013, with over 240 dying as a result of red tide (Wines), a toxic algae bloom likely caused by our fertilizers and leaky septic systems.



Figure 3. *Manatees at play in Blue Spring*

Every longtime snorkeler at Blue Spring has his or her own set of stories about manatee encounters. Although entering the spring is now prohibited during the winter months, regular swimmers still accidentally meet

early manatee arrivals to the run or random manatee visitors in the off-season. Some swimmers have been gently lifted up out of the water by manatees from underneath; others found themselves literally locked in an embrace of flippers, and still others describe the playful approach of hyper-curious calves.

My own favorite tale involves an adolescent manatee I encountered one morning during an early morning free-dive. I deliberately got to the State Park promptly for the 8:00 opening time to avoid scuba divers and to have the paradise-like boil area briefly to myself. After swimming upstream to the spring vent, I rested on the rock shelf there waiting for my breathing and heart rate to slow in preparation for my first dive. To my surprise, I noticed the telltale compression waves produced by a manatee's fluke coming directly toward me, passing through the subtle wave patterns formed by the emerging spring water quietly reaching the surface. I remained completely passive, observing the animal's approach through my snorkeling mask but respectful of the legal prohibitions against interactions

with these marvelous creatures. The young manatee came to a halt just a few feet in front of me, established eye contact, turned and then rolled on its side, inviting me to socialize, a behavior I have observed frequently between these highly interactive mammals. I ignored two more similar approaches before the playful adolescent apparently gave up and swam off down the run looking for less boring company.

I returned to the spring the following morning and to my amazement, as I waited for my heartbeat to subside prior to diving, the same young animal approached to greet me. This time, as I kept my distance at edge of the springhead pool, it gave up trying to interact with me after only two fruitless attempts. When I returned the following morning, I was pleasantly shocked to see the same adolescent heading toward me yet again. However, this time it did something both fascinating and delightful. Instead of stopping in front of me, the manatee merely slowed and allowed itself to drift effortlessly closer. Just before knocking into me, the animal turned its immense body sideways and then twisted its fluke so

that its edge lightly brushed against my upper arm and gently pushed into my flesh. The precision and the deliberate nature of the movement were remarkable. The pressure exerted by the manatee's "tail" was just enough to make certain I felt it, but not too much to push me off balance. This extraordinary incident made me aware that these "gentle giants" swim with unexpected exactness in spite of their seemingly awkward proportions and apparently limited agility. Observing these splendid aquatic creatures in their natural surroundings is one of the highlights for any Blue Spring visitor willing to endure immersion in its bracing waters.



Figure 4. *Free-diving Initiation at Barton Springs*

My unapologetic “addiction” to free-diving in La Florida’s brilliantly clear *ojos de agua* (“eyes of water”) began over a thousand miles to the west in the chilly depths of Barton Springs, a millennial site of human habitation in what is now the spiritual heart of Austin, Texas. For hundreds of generations, humans have sought relief in this aquatic gem that emerges from the Edwards Aquifer through a fissure in the surrounding 100 million year-old limestone. After a person first leaps into these springs attempting to escape Austin’s radiating asphalt and the blistering Texas summer sun, an

immediate attachment forms. The physical and psychological relief is profound and immediate, and a childlike joy spontaneously arises. We instinctively remember ourselves as mammals at play, paying heightened attention to our bodies’ sensations as our minds become quiet beholding the staggering beauty of the turquoise pool. After my first visit, Barton Springs became for me a summer sanctuary.

Barton Springs in Austin, Texas

I attended graduate school at the University of Texas in the mid-70s and again in the early 90s when my wife and I would take our young children there to swim as often as possible during our second stay in the Texas capital. After a quick dip in the spring’s frigid waters, we would warm up in the shade of a large cedar tree next to the pool before jumping back in to get refreshed once again. On one occasion while snorkeling over the largest of the spring vents, I noticed something unusual. A young man was gliding down toward the main spring vent at a remarkably slow speed. He seemed to drift downward rather than

swim and stayed submerged for what seemed to be far too long.

On a return trip a few days later, as I swam over the springhead, I noticed the same kid effortlessly emerging from a tiny cave that I had never noticed before and then watched as he floated back to the surface. His diving style was so unusual that I could not resist inquiring about it, and he kindly obliged me with my first lesson in free-diving. First he taught me how to adjust the pressure in my ears. He showed me that by simply holding my nostrils closed as I gently tried to exhale through my nose, a miniscule movement occurred in my head with a tiny click that he said would keep my ears from hurting when I descended. He stressed that it was important never to hyperventilate before free-diving, but instead to simply relax and allow my lungs to fill fully with air before heading down. I learned that I could easily hold my breath for the necessary thirty seconds it would take to get into the cave opening and return to the surface. He told me that once I was in the tiny cave, it was likely that some fear would arise, and that if it did, I should simply distract

myself by closely examining details in the gravel bottom and cave walls.

A few weeks later, after practicing holding my breath for longer periods of time, I felt ready for my first dive. After floating lazily at the surface to slow my heart speed, I started slowly downward. My ears popped easily just as I had been told they would and, in what seemed like moments, I found myself headfirst, and elated, inside the miniature cave. For the first time ever, I could feel the flow of the spring caressing my body as it emerged from the darkness. Just like my youthful mentor had warned, a quick jolt of panic shot through my body as my senses took in this radically unfamiliar environment. Then I remembered his advice and began to scan the rocky details directly in front of me. As I did, I noticed a glimmer just two feet in front of my face. Forgetting my fears, I reached to touch it, and to my amazement, picked up a golden ring that had been lost in the gravel. While still in the cave, I slipped the band on my ring finger and found it to be a perfect fit. It has remained there as a reminder for over twenty years. The extraordinary serendipity of this ring

in my moment of fear has served as a powerful impetus for developing my free-diving skills and was a seemingly miraculous introduction to a passion for spring-diving that has flourished in Florida's underwater fantasyland.

Recollection of our Animal Nature

This past November, the death of Nicholas Mevoli in the Bahamas brought international attention to an extreme and highly competitive variant of free-diving in which participants regularly descend hundreds of feet underwater in literally death-defying conditions. My own free-diving in Florida's springs takes completely the opposite approach, with a focus on profound relaxation, slow and attentive movements, and a reflexive inclination to abort a dive at the slightest hint of discomfort or danger. These dives resemble the slow, lazy-looking swimming of the manatees rather than those of a competitive athlete. Free-diving, for me at least, is neither extreme nor a sport. Instead, it is a calming pastime that reminds me that, at least on a physical level, I am simply another mammal with the capacity to swim.

My relatively modest free-diving abilities developed over the course of several years in dozens of Florida springs, but primarily in the gorgeous limestone shaft of Blue Spring. During this process I have learned much about my own body and mind. For example, the ear adjustment needed to adapt to increasing water pressure no longer requires holding my nose. My body now equalizes the pressure on my middle ears without conscious effort as I descend, spontaneously opening the Eustachian tubes whenever it senses too much compression on the ear drums. The fact that my ears learned to do this without any effort or training suggests that this capability is latent in us as part of our animal heritage. Similarly, our animal nature helps free-divers by way of the "mammalian diving reflex," a body response that is most apparent in marine mammals such as otters and seals, but that is also present in human beings. This reflex occurs spontaneously when the face comes in contact with cold water, triggering a slowing of the heart rate and constriction of the peripheral vascular system, both of which facilitate extended periods underwater without

breathing. More than one-half of the human body is made up of water, and our mammalian heritage bestows us with the ability to float in it, swim through it and dive in it to astonishing depths. The direct experience of this evolutionary heritage through free-diving is both humbling and inspirational.

Restoring Body and Mind in the Healing Waters

Sixteenth-century Spanish shipwreck survivor Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda was skeptical about Juan Ponce de León having explored Florida in search of a legendary “fountain of youth” (Fountain). In spite of the existence of a “Fountain of Youth Archeological Park” named after the famed Spanish explorer, there appears to be no truth to his search for mythical rejuvenating waters on our peninsula. Even so, my own health has improved dramatically in conjunction with regular immersion in dozens of our state’s springs. My respiratory well-being has been most positively affected, although I am unsure whether this has been due to the diving itself, the aerobic effects of swimming, or the body’s response to

the chilly water. Even though I suffered from regular bouts of croup as a child, a near deadly case of a severe lung disease called Valley Fever as a young man, and a history of extreme coughing due to colds, I now rarely suffer from breathing problems of any kind.

The use of cold water treatment is common in physical therapy and in sports medicine in order to increase blood and lymph circulation, and one would expect similar healing effects from the 73° waters of the Blue Spring. The anecdotal benefits of immersion in cold water are numerous and include heightened immunity, decrease in inflammation, and an increase in the body’s ability to regulate stress. One study showed improved antioxidative adaptation in cold water swimmers (Siems). Research from Finland, a country where cold water swimming is a growing national pastime, concluded that regular immersion in cold water results in what was rather unscientifically described as “general well-being” (Huttunen). Hundreds of on-line articles point to an impressive list of health benefits from swimming, showering, and bathing in cold water.

When one combines these potential benefits of cold water therapy with its proven endorphin-producing effects, the sensations of physical elation commonly experienced by those who swim regularly in Blue Spring are readily explained. Additional benefits include that of allowing aquatic exercise without the noxious chlorine found in most swimming pools and the joint relief that comes with virtual weightlessness in the water combined with the cold's analgesic properties. Hydrotherapy using cold water has even proven effective for treatment of headache pain, showing that:

a combination of pressure and cold temperatures can successfully mitigate headache-related pain and also decrease the duration of a headache. Eighty-seven percent of participants said that the combination of pressure as well as temperature therapy was "optimally effective"; 13% said that the temperature therapy was "moderately effective."
(Cryotherapy)

Another potentially favorable effect of the spring may be the negative ions produced by its constantly moving waters. These charged particles are known to purify the air and

purportedly can be effective in increasing oxygen to the brain as well as for treatment of depression (Mann). From the standpoint of hatha yoga, the body's inversion while diving downward and the powerful compression of the organs during a deep free-dive would achieve similar effects by facilitating circulation and the flushing of body tissues. With so many potential benefits from immersion in the spring, one cannot help but wonder if there might be some substance to the legends surrounding Florida's "healing waters."

While acknowledging its physically restorative effects, the mental benefits of free-diving are even more noticeable and include reduced anxiety, an increased capacity for profound relaxation, and the capability to sustain heightened attentiveness. Successful free-diving requires a calm and focused mind. Mental agitation or anxiety prevents the slowing of the heart and breath that are fundamental for reaching significant depth. As one diver recently wrote in the *New York Times*, "a sort of peace washes through the body as you relax beyond your initial limits. Even as the weight of water begins to squeeze your limbs

and organs, your consciousness narrows until your mind feels like a hot copper wire running ever more finely through your core" (Winton).

The contoured spaces of the vertical limestone cave at Blue Spring are a constant that I can use to measure my own mental and emotional state. The handholds are always in the same places. The gradual turn in the cave from a nearly straight vertical drop to a 45° angle remains identical. It is only my own psychological state that changes from one dive to the next. I have consistently found that when I am upset or anxious, my mind quickly succumbs to fear upon descent and I prematurely head for the surface with a charge of distress throughout by body and an intense longing for air. As with most pursuits however, one's skills improve after years of practice and become almost automatic. Now when I approach the spring for a dive, my mind/body system spontaneously calms in response to what is about to take place. Furthermore, safety in free-diving depends upon unbroken focus. A moment of carelessness can result in accidentally bumping one's head on a stone shelf, a potential deathblow underwater. Regular free-

diving leads to an enhanced capacity to focus continuously on the present moment in a state where precious few thoughts arise to break one's concentration. Self-regulating skills such as focus and relaxation transfer easily into other aspects of one's life and offer still more benefits from Blue Spring's waters.

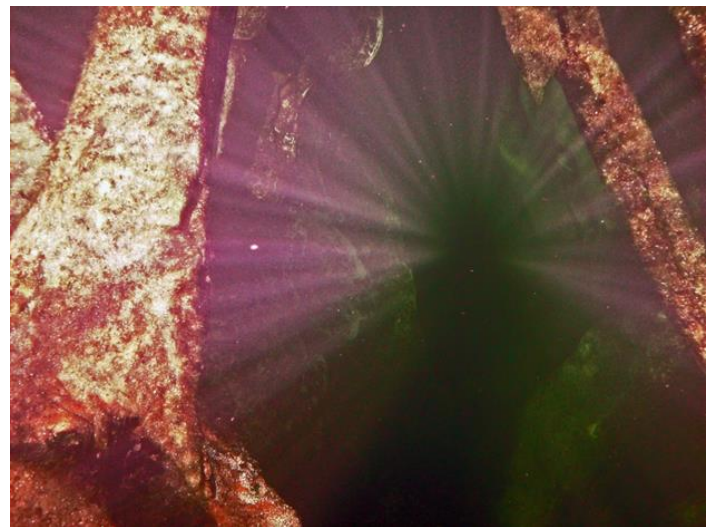


Figure 5. *Streaks of sunlight looking down the Blue Spring shaft*

Rebirth and Recognition of the Divine

The seemingly inevitable mystical orientation in my life has led to a profoundly symbolic approach to Blue Spring, an approach focused on baptism and rebirth. As I descend the steps from the Blue Spring upper dock, I imagine participation in an adult baptismal ceremony, an ancient

rite of purification and initiation among Christians. The full immersion in the clear waters even more closely resembles the Jewish conversion ritual known as *tvilah* since this still-used practice is repeatable, unlike the single Christian baptism. Both the Christian and Jewish rites come to mind as I remove my garments of everyday life and dip below the water's surface. I feel cleansed both physically and psychologically. Like religious converts, I reverentially enter another realm, one of holiness and divine beauty, and I am metaphorically reborn.

According to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, "The poetic imagination nearly always attributes feminine characteristics to water ... how profoundly maternal the waters are. Water swells seeds and causes springs to gush forth....The spring is an irresistible birth, a continuous birth" (Kattau). As free-divers immerse themselves in Blue Spring's feminine waters, they begin a journey that will take them back to their origins in utero. The remarkable configuration of the elongated opening into Mother Earth reinforces the symbolism of birth. Through the

imagination, a similarity between the sculpted stone of the cavern entrance and that of female sexual anatomy becomes apparent. The resemblance is strengthened by conceiving of the cave shaft as a limestone birth canal, and recalling that 120 feet inside, the passageway opens into a large spherical space comparable to a womb. While unaware of this maternal symbolism, Blue Spring free-divers metaphorically retrace their way back to their pre-natal beginnings as they descend. As the water pressure reaches its greatest intensity, they turn toward the light outside and are pushed into the world by the Mother's gentle waters. The first gasp of breath a diver takes upon reaching the surface echoes the newborn's first moments of life.

A Summer Solstice Dive

The symbolic, historical, psychological and physical dimensions of Blue Spring free-diving culminate in the days around the summer solstice. Due to the positioning of the trees surrounding the spring and the angle of the cave shaft, the remarkable solstice sunlight phenomenon occurs somewhat prior to the sun's highest

point in the sky, so I arrive by 11:30. On these special few days, I swim up to the spring from the lower dock, perhaps 1/6th of a mile, so that my lungs are fully activated and expanded in preparation for diving. I cannot resist thinking of baptismal immersion as I descend the steps into the crystalline waters. It takes thirty or forty seconds of intense swimming before the mild shock of the cold on my skin subsides. I glide several feet above sand and fragments of ancient shells, now rock solid, reminders that this area was once under the sea. I quietly slip through schools of mullet almost undetected, spot an occasional bass hiding in the weeds, and look for turtles tucked under the hardwood and palm logs that fell into the spring run ages ago. Once at the springhead, I stand to relax on a stone shelf watching people cool off from the Florida summer heat. I enjoy the delightful squeals of splashing children, sounds no doubt similar to those of Mayacan families bathing here centuries ago. The playful atmosphere calms any lingering agitation from the morning and helps my breathing and heartbeat slow to their resting norms.

Using as little effort as possible I drift out in deeper water to the edge of the cave opening only ten to twelve feet below the surface. With my ears underwater, the sounds of the people are replaced by that of my own breathing. After many hundreds of dives in Blue Spring, I find a sweet spot for my preparation, protected by a rock protrusion from the upwelling waters. Here I can float with virtually no effort and not be pushed away from the opening. Like in yoga class, I allow incoming breath deep down into my abdomen and relax as it gently releases. I recall a moment with Native friends in the Mayan world standing in a circle around a forest spring in the Guatemalan highlands expressing our gratitude for the life-sustaining waters. They call the Earth "Our Mother," and think of the blinding light above as our "Father Sun." My eyes close; I breathe again. Words of reverence and gratitude spontaneously arise and then a seemingly senseless, but inevitable, request for permission. I remember Her. The mind releases, the body floats effortlessly. I am a living creature. I am immersed in life. I am life.

The eyes open wide and the lungs fill with final deep inhalation. The body turns downward, calmly approaching the opening of stone twinkling with waves of brilliantly refracted sunlight. To conserve precious oxygen one uses as little effort as possible to reach the first handhold in the rock. From this point on, the lower body goes limp and the arms reach out like those of an inverted rock climber, grasping one bright limestone shelf after another as ears click in adjustment to each body-length of depth and the increasing pressure. Beams of light, golden emblems of the masculine fireball tens of millions of miles above, point the way. The sun silently descends for his yearly secret rendezvous with the Earth Mother in her innermost recesses. The extraordinary illumination in this usually shadowy space allows for an especially noticeable inner tranquility. Fingers effortlessly locate handholds they have come to know through years of caressing this sacred space. Around seventy feet of depth, the body spontaneously pauses, clinging to an outcropping of rounded stone, resisting the continuous flow emerging from within. The eyes behold a vision

only available once per year when the Earth Mother circles around Father Sun, revealing a realm of illuminated walls of ancient seabed that continue inside another thirty to forty feet to the always fertile uterine chamber. The body faces skyward to bask in the awe-inspiring amber-colored solar shafts from the heavens. A hand blocks the blinding rays as the body drifts with the current, the spring's caressing pressure forcing it slowly upward though this stone-lined birth canal. The green trees of the living world swaying in the breeze appear overhead. As the head reaches the surface, life-staining air refills it and I feel reborn. The everyday ecstasy of living begins anew.

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