

# SUNRISE HAIKU PROJECT: LEARNING TO TRUST

*Diana Tigerlily*

## Abstract

Born and raised in Illinois, I moved to the ocean during a major life transition, leaving behind the familiar: family, forest, and soil. This essay incorporates reflection, photographs, and haiku to represent sixteen months of journeying to the ocean sunrise everyday. The daily practice yielded unexpected insights, moments of deep healing, and growth. The biggest lesson for me was that no matter how thick the clouds and how strong my doubt, the sun will still rise. By witnessing the phenomenon of the sun rising everyday, I have been able to rise up through layers of self-doubt and grief, and begin moving into a place of sustained affirmation and trust.

## Bio

Diana Tigerlily, Ph.D., is a Professor of Practice in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at Southern Illinois University Carbondale where she has taught since 2003. Last year, she was the recipient of the University Teaching Excellence Award, earning the title Distinguished Teacher. She teaches feminism, storytelling, yoga, and meditation, and is a dedicated student of life. Trained in embodied performance methodologies, she practices staying present, writing from the heart, and trusting the process.

Contact: [diana.tigerlily@gmail.com](mailto:diana.tigerlily@gmail.com) | [www.blueheronholistics.com](http://www.blueheronholistics.com)



Sunrise and Ocean  
Have explicitly taught me  
The constant is change

I have been witnessing the truth of the above statement each morning at sunrise over the ocean for the past sixteen months, at the shore each day, taking photos, writing an accompanying haiku, and then posting the haiku with its sunrise photo on social media.

The process of the sunrise itself, plus the witnessing of sunrise, has become for me a generative metaphor for life's daily lessons, and has primarily taught me that very little is predictable and the best thing I can do is to let go of expectations and simply show up. The "showing up" has resulted in layers of insight.

An initially unplanned project, this sunrise haiku series has ultimately become a journey of healing.

Sunrise teaches me  
Anything is possible:  
Show up to find out

The word "sunrise" positions the sun as the star of the show, but the sun is not the only performer on this oceanic stage. In the same way that we as humans do not live in a vacuum or without context, the sunrise too is a collaborative performance with a myriad of qualities of all the elements: the light, the water, the clouds, the reflections, the wind, the sand—and they all distinctly come together each day delivering a spectacle unique as a fingerprint. Every day. Tirelessly.

I'm coming to know on deepening levels, and continuing to unpack, what the witnessing and experiencing of this sunrise phenomenon is teaching me in layers of meaning. In its entirety, the sunrise haiku project--the commitment, the waking up, the showing up, the documenting, the sharing, continues to change my life everyday, in the same way the coastline changes everyday. And just like there are the physical changes of the coastline, there are also the personal changes in my reality. Additionally, via the sharing of my documentations of the sunrise, the project has created change by impacting others.

At the external, visible physical level, there is nothing static about the coastline, the ocean, the waves, the temperature, the degrees of cloudiness and sunshine, the colors of the sunrise, the amount of seaweed, the saltiness of the water, the moisture of the sand, the intensity of the wind, the force of the waves.

Some days there are mounds of seaweed; some days there are walls of sand where the water has cut through. Some days there are rip currents, or marine life such as jellyfish or man-o-war. Some days the sand is rippled; on windy days it shards the air like tiny glass needles piercing the skin, forcing me to take cover.

The ocean itself is unpredictable. Some days the water is calm as a lake, other days the waves are fierce; sometimes the ocean rocks me like a lullaby, other days it spits me out on the shore.

Regardless, the waves are always in motion, and the colors of the sunrise change by the moment and are often unexpected. Thick clouds give way to brilliant colors. Rain clears to shining light.

I used to think I could determine the sunrise based on the view I saw outside my window upon waking each morning; however, I quickly learned that I cannot. Some days it is raining outside, but when I arrive to the ocean there is no rain. Sometimes, the clouds are so thick, I'll think I won't see the sun, but they disap-

pear and the day is bright. I've learned that change in my life is as rapid as the evolving sunrise; my emotions as mobile as the colors.

I didn't set out to "do a sunrise haiku project." I didn't have a preconceived plan that I would photograph the sunrise, write a haiku, and then post the photo with its accompanying haiku everyday for over a year. But about nine months (a gestation period, coincidentally) after living at the ocean, the project organically emerged.

I had recently moved to the ocean from the Midwest. My marriage had ended the year before, then the pandemic arrived and my job went online. I moved to the ocean, manifesting a lifelong dream. I'd always loved the ocean. When I was a young child, before I had ever been to the ocean, I decorated my bedroom with posters of palm trees. I named one of my first two cats "Ocean" (the other, "Moonglow"). When I got my first car, I had my license plates read "Ocean" 28. When I left the Midwest to move to the ocean, the date synchronistically happened to be the 28<sup>th</sup>. I didn't realize the connection until later.

Once I arrived at the ocean, I went to the ocean everyday, though not necessarily at sunrise. The few times I had gone at sunrise, I found the experience extra special, so I decided to try to do that more often.

To make it to the beach in time to witness the sunrise is no easy task for me, and is in fact a triumph. I am naturally a night owl. It's difficult for me to wake up in the mornings. I need the alarm clock, and I need to snooze.

So, one day, on a day that happened to be May 1, 2021, I decided to go the ocean sunrise the next morning. I set my alarm, and then I went. I took a few photos, chose one photo and posted it to Facebook, without any words. I returned the next day at sunrise, took a few photos and posted a photo along with a few words. The following day, I returned to the sunrise, took photos, and this time when I posted the photo, I wrote a haiku to go with it, which felt good. I've always been drawn to haikus. They help me distill my thoughts.

Haikus are cleansing,  
like a flossing of my thoughts  
to clear the debris.

I was enjoying this sunrise process, so I continued to go to the sunrise and post a photo and haiku. And I continued, everyday, until at some point I realized this had become a regular thing. A project. A discipline. A practice. A ritual. A necessity.

I made it an intention to continue doing it everyday, maybe even for a whole year. At that point I wasn't thinking of what the practice would come to mean for me. All I knew was that it was important for me to do this, as a discipline, as a practice, and as an honoring of the ocean that I was finally living near, after living my whole life in the Midwest. What I didn't realize, and have only recently come to realize, is that this practice, this project, has been a healing journey. I thought I was the one in control of the project, but everyday, the project has had a new lesson, a new release, a new epiphany, a new surfacing of grief, a new reckoning:

Seeming obstacles  
Oftentimes are angel's wings  
Guiding us to fly

Followers on social media began commenting, thanking me for these sunrise photos and haiku. Telling me how much they look forward to them everyday. Their comments have ranged from simple thank you's, to comments on how they are inspired, to more involved comments and reflections.

Here are a few recent examples:

"I LOVE your morning pictures! I look forward to your posting every morning! Then each time through the day when it pops up, I enjoy it still again. Thank you so much for doing that!" G.B.

"Diana, you will never know how much your posts mean to me every day. Before I had progressed with my MS, I went to the Pacific (Oregon) and the Atlantic (Outer Banks and Jekyll Island, GA) every year and it's the one thing in my life I miss so much! I rewatch them daily when I want to feel calm and meditate. Thank you so much." Joan Listen



"So, periodic verbal check in besides just hitting the heart: These colors have been haunting me. Hard to describe, it starts with the colors of a Hang-ten shirt one of my best friends in high school had and how that shirt is being re-marketed as a nostalgia brand in some of the same colors from when I was young. These colors. I kept seeing the picture of the shirt/ad go by, thinking of my friend, the light in him, our days at the beach. There's an interesting queer theory book, *Chromophobia*, about men and color and gender expectations/ paradoxical damage. Color is a way to the world, much like sound. I feel like the world responds to us when we are open to these wavelengths and vibrations, how we are struck by light and color and warmth and memory and possibility and all of that. Again, then, spending time with your daily photo has afforded me pleasure and connection, called me back to my body, to story, to the warmth of him and Huntington Beach, to contemplate the (in)finite. I am so grateful for you and your practice, Diana. I sit with them the way I do the Haystacks at the art institute. I give myself to the color. ❤️" Craig Gingrich-Philbrook

"Diana, every morning I share your posts with my 18-year-old grandson who is really struggling with bipolar depression. He seems to like them. Thank you for your inspiration. Just wanted you to know they do touch lives." S.P.



In addition to the online followers, there are also beach “regulars” I have met, who have come to expect my presence, and me theirs. There are also random people on the beach at these sunrises: vacationers, couples, meditators, fishermen. I’ve been inspired by them all, have listened to their stories, shared mine. There’s a community of people, each in their own immersive sunrise experience, honoring the space of each other’s own experience. There is an informal kindred spirit-ship and care among the regulars—a looking out for one another.

It has been approximately 500 days since I attended that first sunrise, and I am still dedicated to this practice and have no desire to stop.

I haven’t been to the ocean sunrise every single one of those 500 days. I tallied the numbers, and I’ve been to the sunrise nearly 70% of the days. At this writing, I have created 341 sunrise photos and accompanying haikus.

The days I missed I was either away visiting family in the Midwest, or I was at the ocean but not going to the sunrise. Those random chunks of time where I was here but not going, were inexplicable to me. I would be awake. Sometimes I would even get out of bed and be ready to go, but for some reason, I couldn’t muster going. This would bother me, but I also did my best to trust my process and not be upset with myself. I came to realize that I simply needed the stillness and the silence. There is a lot of motion, a lot of sound, a lot of energy at the ocean: the movement of the water, the rush of the wind, the blowing of the sand, the heat of the sun. So, I’ve tried to let myself be, to trust my process. And to my relief, each time, I would eventually wake up and attend the sunrise, and begin attending every day once again.

I’ve learned a lot from this project. I’ve learned that coming to the sunrise is the work of healing. This was a recent and grand epiphany. While I already had come to know that this sunrise project was a healing process, the profound realization is the emphasis on “work.” The work of healing.

Through this epiphany—which occurred while I was at the sunrise-- I realized that just because attending the sunrise daily at the beach is a rewarding and pleasant activity, that doesn’t necessarily mean it is an easy one. I tended to become upset with myself those days that had been difficult for me to go to sunrise, wondering if I was lazy or if there was something wrong with me. But I realize now the depth of the work I have been doing while I’m there--not only in the physical action of waking up early and getting there, but in the emotional work I hadn’t yet known I would be doing.

I don’t just go to the sunrise and then leave. I have a specific ritual, a kind of meditation. First, as I witness the sunrise, I take a large number of photos due to the sunrise’s evolving nature. Then I sit on the shore, sift through the photos, narrow them down to the best ones based on my personal criteria I’ve created and what mood I’m feeling that day. I choose the sunrise photo and write the haiku. Writing the haiku is another form of meditation. Often, the haiku only takes a few minutes to write. Some days it takes longer.

Once I complete the process of witnessing the sunrise, taking and selecting the photos, writing the haiku, and then posting to social media, I immerse myself in the ocean. I float, I swim, I stand on my hands, I pray, I offer gratitude, I set my intentions. Sometimes I cry. Always, I marvel that this is my life.

Daily ocean swim  
Deep salt soak in morning light  
Calls me to my truth



After my ocean immersion, I walk and/or run to the pier, which is 1.8 miles down the coast, and then turn around and come back, making it a 3.6 mile journey. When I return to my spot, I delve into my yoga practice, a deep and rich focus for me. I end with alternate nostril breathing and meditation, savasana, and another immersion into the water before I leave.

Ironically, on the morning I ended up having this particular epiphany that going to the sunrise is the work of healing, I didn't want to go to the sunrise. I forced myself to go. I negotiated with myself, told myself I could just go see the sunrise and then come right back home. I've told myself that often, but almost always end up staying once I'm there. I've only left early two or three times, and those times it was because it was either painfully windy or heavily raining.

On this day, when I arrived at the sunrise, the colors of the sky resonated with me in a way that made me feel completely at home. Pastel pinks, lavender blues with hints of neon warmth, these colors were the palette of my soul and inspired this haiku:

If I were to paint  
My soul, I'd choose these colors.  
This is my softness



Looking at the photo now, my feeling is that these are probably not the eternal and essential colors of my soul; but that, in keeping with the theme that the constant of the sunrise is change, these were the colors of my soul in that particular moment, prompted by my emotions present in that moment. The resonance was warm and soothing, fulfilling. It is likely that on another day, my soul would resonate with a different palette.

Remember, that day, I hadn't even wanted to go to the sunrise. I was in a very low energy state. Depressed. Numb. I posted the photo and haiku, and began my walk to the pier. I didn't have the energy for running that day. I walked slow, with my shoulders low, too heavy to hold up. My low energy must have been apparent, because a person I often see on my morning walk remarked, "You're mellow this morning," mistaking my sadness for calmness.

I continued walking. During my walk, sometimes I waded into the water and floated weightless. The water was gentle that day, thankfully, as though it sensed my need to be held. I released all tension, let myself be as heavy as I felt, and the water fully buoyed me.

I soon realized I didn't have it in me to walk all the way to the pier. I let myself accept that. Some days



I pushed myself, knowing that push was what I best needed for that day. But on this day, I knew I simply needed to stop walking and lay down in the sand. And that's what I did. I felt the warm sand beneath me, and I burrowed into it like velvet. The sand hugged me, gave me touch, so I felt less lonely, much like the way the water held and buoyed me so I felt weightless, burdenless. I laid there for several minutes in a restorative state until a wave of water came up and surged beneath me, soaking me, telling me it was time to walk back to do my yoga practice.

During my asana practice, in the middle of seated forward fold, I unexpectedly began to cry. I became aware, in a painfully visceral way, of a grief for loved ones and an old life I hadn't known I was still carrying. The emotional pain was deep, and I hadn't fully realized it in such nuanced ways until that moment. I sobbed and sobbed, from an old place, then eventually, suddenly stopped crying as inexplicably as I had begun.

Release emotions  
Like clouds pouring rain. Find the  
Openings of light



At the end of the practice, while laying in savasana, I realized some energy had moved. It was subtle. Very subtle. So subtle, I nearly didn't register it. But I recognized that I didn't feel as sad. I also recognized that the



pain in my hamstrings that had been hindering my walking the last few days had dissipated. The emotional pain had apparently lodged in my physical body, taut and stuck, but had released. As I immersed myself in the ocean one final time for the day, I recognized that I was now in a much higher energetic state than I had been when I'd first arrived. The morning practice had been transformational. And that's when I realized, *this is the work. Everyday. To come to the beach and heal.*

Radiating peace,  
Healing light illuminates  
My inner spirit



These sunrise reflections reveal something new to me everyday about myself, about my path, about my process. The sunrise haiku project is not really about the sunrise or the haiku; it is about the practice itself of showing up. I show up nearly every day, but there is nothing repetitive about it. Each sunrise is different and each engagement with the sunrise heals something true, reveals something new to me, that I'm then able to share with others.

The practice is about helping me to heal, by releasing tears, grief, and to remember who I am. I'm a person who had always wanted to be at the ocean, and I successfully manifested a home here, an accomplishment that had always seemed unattainable; a feat that had required courage..

I'm a person who reads the signs. I have been guided on my journey by the Great Blue Heron. I followed the heron here. When I arrived, the blue heron showed up on the beach, as did its cousin the White Egret, and

they continue(d) to guide me, leading me to the house I now call home.

Signs are messages  
From angels and spirit guides.  
Pay close attention

My time at these sunrises has yielded other relationships with the wildlife. In keeping with the lesson of showing up without expectation, I went to the sunrise one cold, windy, foggy January morning, and again negotiated with myself that I didn't have to stay. But once there, I stayed and did my practices. Here is the story that emerged that day, which never would have happened had I not shown up. Quoted from my social media post:

“ January 28, 2022

I helped save a Northern Gannet today.

I was walking on the beach and saw what looked like a bird missing its head. I got closer and saw that the feathers around its neck area were matted. Was its head missing or was its head hidden, tucked asleep? It wasn't moving and looked dead. But suddenly I saw a slight movement. I couldn't tell if I imagined it. But it moved again. I wondered if these were just electrical impulses from a dead bird or if it was alive.

I knew it was alive.

I was alone on the beach. I scanned the coastline and saw a fisherman, made my way to him and told him about the bird. We walked to it, and he said it was dead.

I said no, watch.

And sure enough, it very subtly moved. The fisherman poked it with his fishing pole and up popped its head! But there was fish wire sticking out of its mouth. “See that,” pointed the fisherman. “It might have swallowed a hook.”

I said we have to help it. He said these birds bite hard, and so without gloves we could get hurt. But he stuck his pole toward its mouth so the bird would bite the pole instead. Then with some effort he managed to grab hold of the wire with a tool he had. The bird opened its mouth wide and we could see the hook. It was a double hook lodged deep in its mouth. After a few tries, he managed to wriggle the hook completely from the mouth. But the bird was not well. It appeared the wire had been wrapped around its neck at one point. The bird was exhausted and not flying away.

A couple minutes later, a woman taking a walk on the beach saw us and the bird and came over to us and said, “I'm a wildlife specialist.”

What are the odds of that? Her specialty is rhinoceros!

So she called someone she knew at the wildlife rehab center, and that woman called a woman she knows from fish and wildlife services who was nearby and had a crate. We pin dropped our location on the beach and

waited for her until she arrived and got the bird in the crate.

The bird will live. I believe it manifested the four of us for its survival—me who believed it was alive, the fisherman with the tool, the wildlife specialist with the quick connections, and the woman who was nearby with the crate.”

I’ve also witnessed, two different times now, a newly hatched baby sea turtle making its long journey from its nest to the ocean, struggling to traverse the dense seaweed. Its single-pointed focus and determination are inspiring.

Be the sea turtle  
Hatching new and traveling  
With trust towards home

A few days ago, a new symbol showed up for me. I was on my walk, meditating on next steps regarding my career, dreaming up an idea, and wondering if I could do it. The ocean was calm that day, the water clear and nearly lake-like. The sun was getting hot, so I waded into the water, still in my meditative, manifesting state. I was in shallow water, low tide, when something next to me caught my eye. Less than three feet away from me, just chilling on the ocean floor, was a stingray, about three or four feet long, laying there so close to me and so still, I could have easily stepped on it. This was the first stingray I’d ever seen in real life. I admit, it startled me, and I immediately left the water, my heart pounding. But as I continued my walk, I realized this had to be significant. When I returned home, I looked up stingray symbolism and was surprised at the message’s specificity and relevance to my current journey and what I had just been meditating on during my walk:

“Stingray symbolism is letting you know that everything is now in place. You know that you have the means, you have the tools, and you have the skills. Now get busy and get on with it. In other words, your Stingray meaning is telling you that everything you have worked toward is open to you. Therefore, you must stop hesitating. Like the Blue Whale, this spirit animal insists that you have faith in your abilities and follow your inner guidance.” (<https://www.spirit-animals.com/stingray-symbolism/>)

Devote time and space  
For that which is emerging  
Now. You are ready

I had been dealing with a crisis of confidence, and despite this powerful message, I was still in a deep state of self-doubt.

A few days later I was walking on the beach at sunrise and, once again, I was suddenly struck with an intense, unexpected, old grief. At my old home in the Midwest, I had built with my then husband a seven-acre sanctuary that included stone-lined gardens in the shapes of mandalas, a giant labyrinth, and a young oak grove surrounding the Mother Oak Tree. I’d sit beneath the Mother Oak and meditate, while seated on what I called the goddess stone, a sandstone slab imprinted with an image in the shape of a goddess. I had placed the stone at the base of the Mother Oak tree.

For twenty-one years, I lived on this land planting trees, designing gardens, bringing my vision for sanctuary to life. Three years ago, I made the difficult decision to say goodbye.

I had already done a lot of grieving, but on this day of my walk, I was suddenly overcome with an immense grief. I missed the oak grove, missed the Mother Oak, missed the labyrinth, missed the goddess meditation stone. I missed the energy of this land, and I began sobbing inconsolably as I walked blindly through my tears. I was grieving these trees as deeply as I had grieved my animals, as deeply as I had grieved the loss of loved ones and an old life. I knew I had a deep connection to all living beings, but I truly didn't know my love went as deep with the nonhuman world as it does with the humans in my life. But based on the depth of my grief, I learned that it does.

Finally, my sobbing stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and the next day, as I was walking the coastline, I felt a major shift occur. I recognized how far I had come in the last three years. I remembered my power as a manifester. And that memory reminded me to trust. It was a breakthrough, a clearing of the clouds of grief with the bright sun shining through. The darkness had lifted. I felt lighter, brighter than I had in a very long time. I've seen that kind of sunrise, and I have written the haiku for it. My life had become entwined with the metaphors and the lessons of sunrise. I am imbued with sunrise and haiku. I radiate sunrise and haiku.

It's quite the process—  
Sunrise. Moving through layers  
To shine. We are that.









That same day, after the healing breakthrough, I had a creative epiphany, the kind of idea that swirls into my mind instantaneously. These have been rare for me lately, but normally abundant in my life, so the fact that it happened the day right after I experienced the healing breakthrough is a testament to how clearing a block (the cloud) makes room for creative flow (movement and sunlight).

During this project I have come to realize that my haikus fall into categories. Some haikus act as a caption that paints the visual scene of that day's sunrise: (See above photo as accompaniment to the following haiku)

Waves leap up to kiss  
Radiating sun fingers.  
Heart glows from the palm

Others are a caption that make a philosophical statement prompted by the visual of the sunrise:

No horizon line  
Divides us. We're all colors  
Reflecting ourselves





Some capture the emotional mood or energy of that day's sunrise:

Synesthesia  
Each color a nutrient.  
I feast on sunrise





There are also inspirational haiku, sometimes based in Yogic or Buddhist philosophy.

Don't let anyone  
Keep you from being your best  
Self. You are all you.





In your deepest heart  
You already know answers.  
Find the right question

I've noticed that in my own evolution, the haikus have evolved too. I continue to allow the haikus and whatever message is meant for that day, to emerge organically. I do not force the haiku.

Having now amassed quite a collection of photos and haikus over the past year, I intend to compile them into formats that people can enjoy outside of social media, such as print and electronic books, calendars, and a meditation deck.

Meanwhile, I will continue to perform my daily sunrise ritual, and learn and heal.

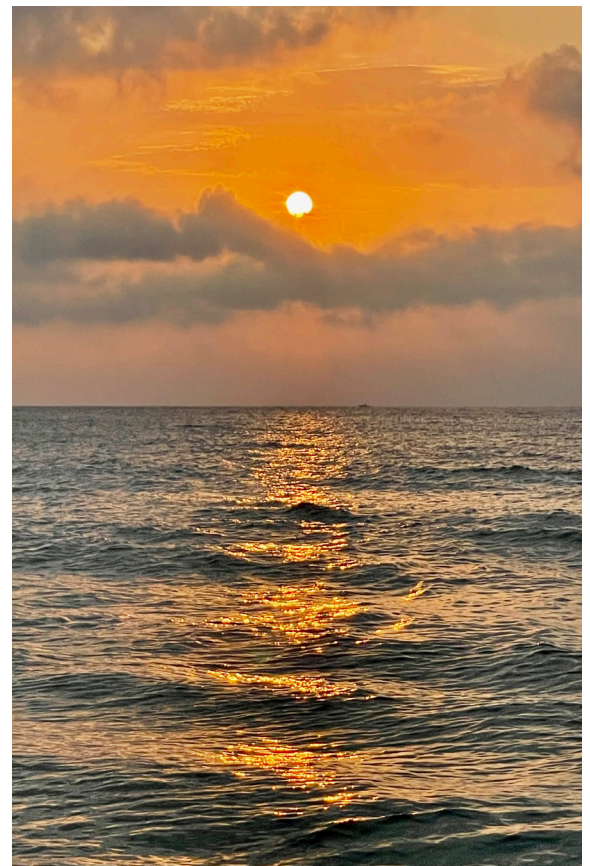
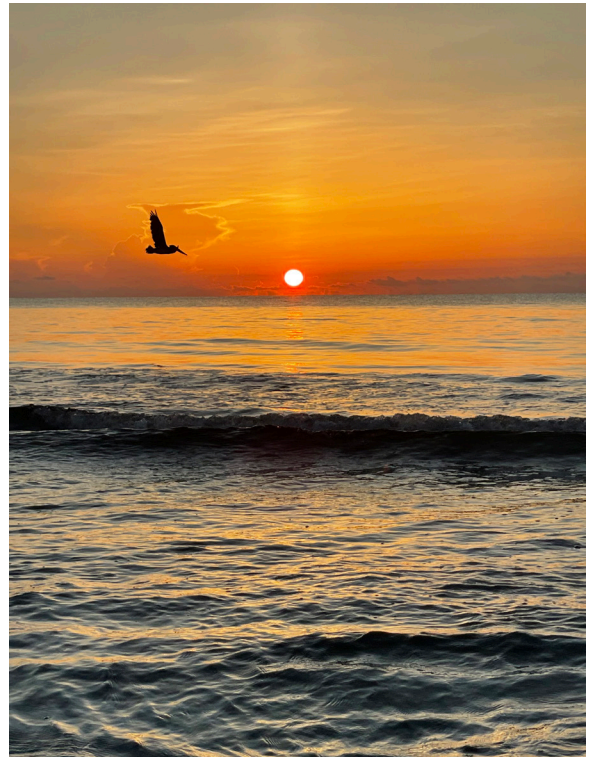
You are beautiful,  
Life, with all your tough lessons,  
Teaching me to shine

This project teaches me to trust. To show up without expectation. To not try to predict a particular outcome. To not attach to a plan.

I am surprised everyday by what comes to pass, what I witness, people I meet. These are often life-path significant moments that I would have otherwise missed.

Through this project, I have evolved in my healing journey and in my power, much like each individual sunrise is a complete evolution from darkness to an emerging of light, a navigation of density and opacity of clouds, to finally the rising of pure light, the dawning of a new day, to clarity.

Before I came to realize this was a healing journey, my first major epiphany was that the only constant was change, in all aspects of the sunrise and the shore. I thought at the time, that was the big metaphor, the big takeaway of the project.



But a year and a quarter into the project, I realized that my personal healing journey has been itself the “constant change” metaphor. In that way, I’ve discovered myself as the sunrise metaphor. Expansively, each one of us is a sunrise metaphor.

We are a sunrise  
In process. Ever changing,  
Giving light each day



The sunrise represents the journey we each go through into becoming our brightest self. We rise from root to crown: from earth, through clouds of illusions, to enlightenment, from body back into our true selves as spirit.



The sun rises up  
Like energy through chakras:  
Red root to white crown





I continue practicing staying present and becoming my best self.

Recently, unbeknownst to me, another photographer took this photo of me photographing the sunrise:

I watch colors dance,  
See them merge and melt and mesh.  
I become their glow

