

The Lesson from a Cicada – The Sails Within

I was in Jaco, Costa Rica for a yoga teacher training in March 2014. My training group and I were staying at a hotel resort that included a beautiful, large swimming pool, fruit trees, cement and rock walking paths and not to mention, a yoga studio. Getting to a room, restaurant, yoga studio and even a car required walking outside, almost as if the resort was plopped in the middle of a rainforest. The wildlife in and around the hotel included lizards, exotic birds like toucans and parrots and some house cats here and there. Not far, about a five minute drive from the hotel, one could get to the beach town with shops and a small night life. But the real night life occurred at dusk and into the night in the hotel, which was when I could hear the high concentration of cicadas begin to make their incredible, ear-piercing noise. It always began with what sounded like a ticking or a toy wind-up toy. The ticking gradually turned into an elongated sound like an ambulance, only a higher pitch that carried on for at least 10 seconds. Then the cicada started up its sound again.

A native Costa Rican told me the hotel where I was staying was unique with its amount of cicadas. While Costa Rica has plenty of these insects, she said their numbers and noise level aren't nearly as loud in other parts of the country as they were at the hotel. I've seen cicadas before in the United States where Maryland has a once every 17-year invasion of them. To most people they're quite unattractive, like roaches with wings with green bodies and red eyes. Cicadas are also blind too, so they seem clumsy when they bump into things. However even in Maryland, I didn't remember the cicadas there making the same annoying noise as those cicadas at my Costa Rica hotel. My fellow yoga trainees also found the noise to be quite deafening at times. God forbid this insect would be making its duty cry right next to us.

Every night during my hotel stay I'd hurry into my room, afraid one of the cicadas outside on the hotel walls would fly into me. Yet even in my scurry I would be tempted to look at the walls and gaze at these creatures. They would congregate in packs in the corners of the hotel, doing what I didn't know. Perhaps they were mating, what every other living thing does. Then they'd lay eggs, die and decompose into the earth, providing new soil for new life. However, I wasn't concerned about the cicadas' purpose as much I was concerned about getting hit by one and freaking out.

One night I tried to go to bed before 10:00 p.m. because I had to be up at 4:30 a.m. to practice yoga at the beach with my training group. It was already almost 10:00 p.m. in the evening, as my teacher training that day was long. As I was settling into my bed about to go to sleep, I heard a thud near my room window. It wasn't until I heard the ticking sound that I knew a cicada had hit my window and was just outside of it. Only this time, the sound was much worse given the cicada was so close.

It seemed the cicada was not going to leave, as it kept making the ear-bleeding sound. I figured it must've been on its back and couldn't turn itself over to fly away. The noise was so loud there was no way I could sleep, even with pillows over my head. Some ear plugs would've been nice. There was no hope to stop the noise, and though maybe I could've done so in hindsight, I didn't go outside to move the creature. I thought for sure the cicada would die soon since it couldn't fly anymore. However, my version of soon didn't happen fast enough. The cicada kept making its sound: the ticking, the pitchy, long noise. It might as well have been in the room with me.

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There was nothing I could do. My eyes were wide open, ears hemorrhaging (figuratively, of course) and my brain writhing with annoyance. No yoga was going to help me now, and I was already in a crunch for sleep. I didn't know if I wanted to cry, curse or make a vain attempt to sleep in the midst of the sound. The power that this one insect had was so immense and incredible, I had to give up.

It was well into the night when I knew sleep would not come for me, and I'd have to find strength within me to make it through the next day of training. I was not looking forward to that, but in that thought came this feeling of acceptance and respect for the screeching noise I'd been hearing the last several hours. This cicada was on its back with no chance of flying, life likely over, and it was still making the same call, the same noise as if it was still resting on a tree branch or the side of a wall. Maybe it didn't know it was going to die. Maybe, out of being the creature it was, the sound the cicada made was all it knew. Being blind, it probably couldn't see where it was on its back anyway. But not matter what, the cicada did as it was supposed to do. It was part of its personal, creaturely duty, and no matter how trite it seemed, I knew even an annoying sound that would keep me from any sleep had an importance in nature, the ecosystem and the flow of life, even if I wasn't entirely sure what the importance was.

As the cicada's life waned, the sound was getting to be likable. Maybe I was delirious at that point or perhaps I'd just found peace in the midst of uncomfortable noise: I'd found my yoga. From that moment and through the time the cicada's sound finally stopped, which was about 2:30 a.m., I'd learned my lesson. No matter how small or how loud or whether we can see or are blind, we all have a place that means something. Even if we're entirely different creatures, we teach each other that we all have a duty and a purpose in the greater universe and nothing can stop us from its fulfillment.

