

## Of Turtles, Angels and Men

The year was 1957. The audience listened in rapt attention. “Each and every one of you has a guardian angel.” Sister Catherine Mary ambled up and down the aisles between the desks. The booming Irish brogue left no doubt in the minds of first graders as to the certainty of her theological pronouncements. “And the most powerful angel of them all,” she continued, “is the mighty Gabriel, the archángel, who wages a constant struggle with the forces of evil-- with Satan himself.”.

Twelve years of catholic brainwashing to the contrary notwithstanding, I had pretty much left the realm of angels alone for a while. The eternal struggle with evil was consigned to the occasional Star Wars rerun and a pronouncement or two from the Oval Office. All that changed last week.

Steve Gordy who manages the venerable beachfront establishment in Playa Junquillal put the icing on the cake of our 12 year friendship. He honored me with a request to translate the public presentation of a multi-year study on the solitary nesting behavior of sea turtles along our nearby beaches. The results were in, the audience notified and the World Wildlife Federation would be in attendance.

An Argentinian marine biologist has spent years of walking the beaches at night, interviewing and playing hide and seek with poachers, measuring sand temperatures, hatching rates and crunching numbers for standard deviation. I knew the guy was up to something,. We had met and conversed briefly on several occasions. There was just one problem, he was always asleep.

My gardening chores impose a daily regimen where light is a real asset. For the turtles, and those who want to observe their behavior it is just the opposite. 'Night time is the right time' for the guardian angel of the turtles of Junquillal. And appropriately enough his name is Gabriel....

Gabriel Francia, studied marine biology in Argentina specializing, ironically enough, in an animal which he had never seen—until he came to Costa Rica. Gabriel saw his first turtle here and now spends his nights observing, recording and protecting their nests. This labor of love stems from a deep understanding of what most of us have to struggle to grasp.

Try the following experiment—Tico style. In the morning make a cup of your favorite coffee. Sit down and start counting: 1-2-3-, each second represents a year. You don't have to be that great a mathematician to realize that in a minute and forty seconds you've got a century. Pour yourself another cup. In an hour you've got 3600 years. The Hebrews wandering around in the desert, Europe full of raging savages, the Chinese already a pretty coherent bunch.

If you've got plenty of stamina, keep it up for 24 hours, 86,400 years. Frankly at this point in history your distant hominid cousins would not be admitted to any place with a dress code, not even a bar at a surf spot.

Call the factory, get a truck of coffee delivered and keep counting for 8 years. You've got the number in seconds—250 million--that is the number of **years** that the turtles have been around. That realization keeps Gabriel going, night after night

Last night, or better yet early on Valentine's day, he just missed a nest of Leatherback eggs. Poachers got there first. 250 million years of evolutionary success poised on the brink of extinction, the highest level of red alert on the extinction-watchers' scale...**forever**. You need a lot more coffee to count that far. A whole lot.

Short on sleep, short on financing, Gabriel treads softly through the night believing that one motivated individual can make a difference. The thoroughness of his study has not fallen on deaf ears.

A recent publication argued that science needs to move from analysis to synthesis. The Junquillal Leatherback Conservation Project does just that, by proposing the extensive involvement of the local community in conservation efforts, developing economic alternatives to poaching as a way to offer financial incentives and a sound education program in area schools so that future generations will connect with the natural world from a viewpoint of conservation and sustainable use.

Silvia Hector, Coordinator of the *Comité de la Bandera Azul*, Junquillal's seal of environmental approval, emphasizes that Gabriel's work offers great potential for ongoing ecological education at the local school. But, she cautions, "sustained success of the proposed hatchery and related programs depends on greater involvement of the local community." It also depends on more support, both financially, and from concerned community members who are willing to "walk the walk" and not just "talk the talk." From this perch in the forest, the involvement of schoolchildren is key. Children have much more of what Einstein referred to as the "sense of mystic wonder—the source of all true science."

My own primary school was a baking classroom in the Arizona desert where Sister Catherine Mary labored away trying to form impresionable young minds. Ironically enough it was in Tucson that I had my first experience with sea turtles. My mother would get turtle soup in the border town of Nogales, the meat-- most likely from green turtles-- brought on ice from the Sea of Cortez. I don't eat turtles any more, and with apologies to Sister Catherine Mary, I didn't believe in angels all along. Not until I saw one in person. At night. Strolling alone on the beaches of Junquillal.

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