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"Lessons from a Turtle on Writing & the Body"

I just saw a snapping turtle out in the forest. The turtle was a she, and she was beginning to give birth. Not like we humans give birth, but with eggs, the way turtles do. I noticed her beautiful shell, like a sculpture, her clawed feet and tiny eyes. Then I came back into my house to write about it. Which is a lot like giving birth. In fact, it is exactly the same.

There are these little eggs—stories—that our bodies hold for us. We might not realize it, but they are always there. Once we're ready, the stories begin to make their way out. Just like little turtles pushing out of their shells. The stories push and push, and are never happy until they have arrived on a page. Since I have been writing every day, I feel these stories more easily. In fact, sometimes I swear I can see them under my skin getting ready to be born.

Yesterday I had an MRI of my brain, an amazing process wherein powerful magnets sweep over you and take pictures. I don't pretend to understand the technology, but I thought I could feel the energy of the magnets in my body. It made me feel warm. I did my best to cooperate with them, so they could extract whatever story is inside my left ear. The left side of my head has been an issue for a long time. I used to get migraines regularly, and they always started on the left side. But I haven't had a migraine in years. Once I started writing stories, the headaches began to fade.

Now the migraines are but a whisper, but something is going on in my left ear. The doctor thinks maybe it is the bones of the inner ear. She mentioned possibly a tumor, but said she was hesitant to say that, as she didn't really think that would be the case. Regardless of what may be going on physically, I think the problem is a very large story lodged inside that ear, getting ready to come out. I have had some experience with this kind of thing, as, when I first began writing, I found stories in my joints, usually on the left side of my body. These then switched to the right, and then spread to the whole of my body.

Now there is a story stuck in this ear, and I wonder if the problem is that I just don't want to hear it. Thus the hearing loss only on the left side. The doctors will probably point to some genetic deformity, a stretched tendon, or maybe deteriorating bone. But I know, deep inside myself, that I have a pretty giant story getting ready to come out.

It might be the case that this is part of my novel. For, after all, the novel is beginning to take shape. Perhaps the left ear is trying to free up material, something that has already been written. Because I have written a lot.

When I saw the birthing turtle, she gave me a message: "Rest is important." Then—"There's always a skeleton"—meaning that I am not to worry, the novel will continue to take shape. Then—"Don't waste your energy." Then—"You have to stand alone sometimes." So, the basic take-aways: I need to give my left ear—and my story—plenty of space, trust my intuition, and align myself with turtle energy!

Some history and facts about snapping turtles¹:

Snapping turtles are sometimes irascible and always prehistoric-looking. But these relics, which have been around for 90 million years, are the ultimate survivors. Snapping turtles have witnessed the drift of continents, the birth of islands, the drowning of coastlines, the rise and fall of mountain ranges, the spread of prairies and deserts, the comings and goings of glaciers.

Between mid-May and late June, female snappers disperse upstream from shallow ponds and marshes, sometimes for weeks, looking for well-drained, exposed ground, anywhere the sun hits for the majority of the day...If you want to see a snapping turtle nest, go out on a rainy early morning in June.

A young snapping turtle's fate depends upon its mother's choice of a nesting site, which determines both a hatchling's size—moist earth produces larger embryos than dry earth—and its sex...Known as temperature-dependent sex determination, the temperature of each egg midway into the first trimester of incubation influences a hatchling's sex...mostly males develop at temperature between 70 and 75 degrees, and mostly female above 84 degrees or below 70 degrees. A clutch of eggs may produce mostly females on top, where it's warmest, and on the bottom, where it's coolest, while males dominate in the middle of the nest.

Lessons from a turtle on how to give birth to a story:

Slow and steady wins the race. Thus you must pay attention to the details in your current project and take your time with it. In other words, don't be tempted to skip steps or take shortcuts. You will get there!

1 Audubon Magazine (Mar/April '12 issue)