

Reggie Rooney On Connections

Part school marm, part adventurer, the combined influence of "a proper mother and a father who was just this side of legit," Mary Ellen (Reggie) Rooney lit out of her native Bridgehampton early on, intrigued by the sophisticated, successful air of the summer people.

Nine years ago, after a long absence, during which she led a city life, held good jobs, and traveled, she came back to start life anew.

"I came back as a city person," Mrs. Rooney said in a conversation at her home on Lumber Lane, Bridgehampton, the other day, "but the old information remained—I could open clams before I went to school, I knew how to eat a lobster clean, and I could pull in crabs without letting them see the shadow of the net. And I knew that no matter how rough the Atlantic was, if you didn't fight it, it would deposit you back on shore. I got all of that from my father. I had these things in my bones."

"Reconnecting with what was authentic" in herself, and, by consequence, with the world at large, began, naturally enough for Mrs. Rooney, with the sea. "It's always the sea," she said, with a smile. "My friends have pointed out that my initials spell 'sea' in French."

Launched

But it wasn't until later that the significance of signing up for the East Hampton Town sailing course that summer became clear. Now she credits it with having launched her on a voyage of discovery which, at times, takes her far afield.

Learning how to sail led, after an arduous two-week course in Sebago, Me., to certification, and employment as an instructor, and later to invitations to crew in sailing races, including one for International One Designs in San Francisco Bay, which led, in turn, to a trip to Hawaii, and celestial navigation and scuba diving lessons.

And, by the same token, when, the summer before last, the tumult was driving her up the wall, she happened to pick up by her bedside one night a copy of the *New York Review Of Books* in which was advertised a "professor's cottage" on St. Anne in the Chesapeake for \$175 a month. It was the answer she hadn't been consciously looking for: She decamped, renting the house on Lumber Lane. Once on the Eastern Shore, Mrs. Rooney connected with the Cousteau Society based in Norfolk, Va., which, in turn, led to a month-long scuba diving expedition in Polynesia this summer with Jacques Cousteau's son, Jean Michel, for which she prepared by taking and passing a scuba diving course in Hampton Bays.

"It's not planned," she said, "yet it all connects." And then, with a wide-eyed laugh, she added, "You have to keep learning how to do things—it leads you to good places."

In the early years back here she had been an avid member of environmental organizations, but found that the "negative" view they fostered, albeit justified by the painful facts of man's environmental abuse, was not for someone seeking positive ways to reconstruct a life. "You know that song, 'Momma Don't Want No Bad News,' from 'The Wiz'? Well, that's how I felt. I wanted to sing my own song, in my own voice."

"I told Jean Michel about the reaction I had, about my heart-break, really, for I found that the more enlightened I became about the environment and what we are doing to it, the less I could love Long Island. He said the best he could do was to give people a positive experience, to show them the beauty. So, my instinct was right."

She said Cousteau's caring, concern, and awareness "brought a grace to him. In everything he did, there was a reverence for life."

"That experience of—I don't know what else to call it but love—brings back your feeling for a place."

"Experience Prone"

Not an armchair traveler—she keeps a globe hard by her stove so she can study it while flipping her two sons' hamburgers—Mrs. Rooney said people have described her as "experience prone."

"My life," she said, with a laugh, "is exhausting as a result."

To experience "the life force," for example, she had to see the volcano, Manakea, on Hawaii. "There, at the same time, you could see in the sweep of ash the destructive force of nature, but also the regenerative force; from a shadow in the rock a lichen starts to grow, then a bird drops a seed, rain comes, and, in time, an entire forest springs forth. There's nothing new about it, but it's a theme that recurs in my writing."

"That harmony, that interconnected-

ness of things, she feels most strongly in the sea—where in the silence, weightless, she senses "the heartbeat of the universe"—and also in music. "These are two of my favorite things; the same harmony I find in the sea, I find in music. I went to a church service on the Maupiti atoll across the lagoon from the motu where we were camped. It was a Baptist church; the service was all in Tahitian. Then they began singing. In seven-part harmony. I had no trouble in picking up a line. It was something wonderful."

Fishing With Pokey

Also while there, she made friends with a native fisherman, Pokey, helped him stretch his nets across the pass in the reef, and helped him afterwards, string the fish on palm strands. He spoke no English; she, no Tahitian, or much French. "But, when you love the sea, you don't need a language."

"It's a long way from Maupiti," she said, looking out kitchen glass doors to flowers planted by the deck, "but I'll never look at those flowers without thinking of the ones I saw on Maupiti. They call them tiare Tahitian, they smell like gardenias, and everybody—men and women—wear them. I was looking for paintings and objects of art.

and then I realized the art was in their lives."

"They work to provide food for themselves and their families; they take care of their needs, but then there's plenty of time afterwards to sit around with the gang and play guitars and ukeleles and spoons. Time isn't spent going to the store or tearing out your hair at the sight of the Liloa bill. Nothing's wasted there. . . . We've got to stay out of those stores."

On The Motu

"Also, there's a lot of love in Polynesia. They believe in giving. When we left, they sent us on our way with prayers, song, and armfuls of blooms. There wasn't a dry eye. I felt like I hadn't given them anything. . . . But, I gave them a lot of joy. On the motu you had a choice of bedding down in the tents with centipedes or of spending a soggy night on the beach. Nevertheless, I was deliriously happy. I've never laughed so much."

The dazzling, diverse sea life she saw on the dives—including, once, a phalanx of 30 sharks—put her more in touch with home. She found, bringing to mind Monarch butterflies, Canada geese, striped bass, scallops, zinnias, and bright blue skies.

"When you do something new, it changes the way in which you see the





New Things, New Places.

Jack Graves

world . . . learning how to navigate, for instance, put me in touch with the universe. It's a romantic notion to take to the sea, but computing the sidereal hour angle of a star—that's real. So, now that I can do these things, I'm

more a part of the mystery."

On the Cousteau expedition one of the other participants had said to her, "You don't seem like an American woman to me." She asked why. "You don't seem to come from anywhere,"

he said.

She liked that, for it meant to her that she was singing her own song.

"If you're yourself, you're part of everything."

Jack Graves