

Chakras, subtle bodies and the aura

Susan Swift, formerly known as Seal Rock masseuse Susan Parker, seeking pure light

It's a modest apartment in Newport where I sit with Susan Swift to go over "quite the life" as any listener might say about this feisty, spiritual and articulate, world-traveling woman.

The hitching post Susan and I tie our respective philosophical steeds on is "philosophy" and "fate," although we could have brought in a whole team of other steeds to pull the conversation toward all spiritual directions.

"I know what is mine to do," the 73-year-old

Swift states early on in our talk. Since her life here on the coast — Five Rivers first — not only started in 1972 as a search for environmental justice, she also fell into a what would be a life-long walkabout as a student of karma, Dharma and the meaning of interconnected "souls."

Before the Central Coast mountains, Waldport, Seal Rock and Newport, Susan was living the Southern California lifestyle in Compton.

The Alsea basin seems worlds away from her birthplace of Inglewood. Quickly, though, she and her husband and a whole slew of residents became embroiled in cloak and dagger drama, rising to the level of the US Forest Service spraying chemicals on their land, Dow Chemical and their lawyers attempting to wear down citizens' groups, bugged telephones, and various sundry nefarious things unfolding in a seemingly isolated rural community.

One of Susan's cohorts has already been featured in my column Deep Dive — Carol Van Strum. For more information on those battles with toxics, bad science and broken promises by officials breaking the rule of protecting public health, safety and welfare, read Oregon Coast TODAY, "Toxic Avenger."

Sometimes a young life lived produces an amazingly detailed and complex life, for sure. However, in the end, when a journalist runs into a person like Swift, with seven-plus decades under her belt, a series of floodgates open up.



Toxins, Dirty Water, Building Family

Sure, Citizens Against Toxic Sprays is a big part of her foundation, 45 years ago when she was living in the woods, in a teepee and a small shack with Calvin Parker, husband number two (one of three, but who's counting), and her son Joe Lund from a previous marriage.

C.A.T.S. was created with the organizing skills of Susan and others in the rural community, propelled by fear — the debilitating, permanent and deadly harm being perpetrated by officials and for-profit companies upon adults, children, pets, penned animals, wildlife and drinking water through herbicide spraying.

There's plenty of newspaper copy and radio clips on Susan's life out here, her singing, putting on events for the legal battle against the chemical companies and their spraying ways; her work on the Lincoln County Planning Commission and other issues tied to public health. She's been featured in a Nov. 23, 1980 article in Salem's Statesman Journal.

What anchors much of what I see while

talking with Susan (and in reporting on the people of this area) is best captured in one short passage from that article about Susan written by Kristine Rosemary with the Statesman Journal:

Now, to make any sense of the art of diplomacy as practiced in the hidden rural valleys and insulated towns of the Oregon Coast Range, you must consider this: It is a place of overlapping generations of emigrants, each with its own notions of how to live with the land. Rain and shards of Chinese-looking mists blow into those hollows in a thrashing wind. And writhing vines of domestic blackberry gone feral make a slow triumph of thorns. The children of homesteaders who came to farm these fertile valleys were joined 50 years after, by a second wave of urban exiles.

An emblematic quote and a microcosm of what this Oregon Coast now faces with population influxes, lack of affordable housing, more pollution to contend with, climate change and shifting economic, cultural and generational baselines. What is left out even in this Statesman Journal's prescient description is what's not included

so many times in countless articles — who was here first.

The Siuslaw and Kuitsh people began settling the coast more than 9,000 years ago. They have probably lived in the same locations for hundreds of generations.

Who knows if that paper mill, hotel or housing development was built on an ancient significant site? Or on top of sacred burial grounds, or over summer root-picking fields or a shaman's spiritual place?

Coast as Healing Center

Susan Swift, RN, formerly known as Mrs. Parker, Swedish massage therapist, is keenly aware of Native American history as her daughter, Autumn Rayne, is part Cheyenne. What has been germinated from those early days in Five Rivers, then in Waldport, and then to the Valley and even Portland, is a determined septuagenarian who has lived on a wildlife refuge in India, ended up in Egypt on a spiritual journey and has met the Dalai Lama.

There are stories layered onto life lessons, like shoots on an old fig tree. Her past, Susan says, is her journey forward. She's helped Mo and her husband (of the Oregon Coast's famed seafood and chowder restaurants) get through the last days of their lives as their in-home certified care taker. She's played guitar and sang with husband number three — musician and instrument maker, and she's chased elephants out of her garden of succulents.

Iterations of her life include head of the Lincoln County Planning Commission, nursing school, working at a mental health unit in Portland, and now writing, which she's recently pursued in a memoir workshop at the senior center.

The coast is the healing breath she takes with her wherever she ventures. Susan believes she has past lives (that we all do) to account for and to make amends with, as well as to understand in order to carry forth on a pathway to enlightenment. Ironically, Susan Swift says her gift of energy empathy and nursing came at a young age: "I first learned my hands could take away pain when I was 10 years old."

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Read on, as Deep Dive continues at www.oregoncoasttoday.com

Paul Haeder is a writer living and working in Lincoln County. He has two books coming out, one a short story collection, "Wide Open Eyes: Surfacing from Vietnam," and a non-fiction book, "No More Messing Around: The Good, Bad and Ugly of America's Education System."