

If I Can't Swim There, I Don't Want to Go

I remember water, immersive. I remember diving, jumping, splashing. Vaguely, I remember learning to swim. I was never good at the choreography of the strokes. This is a metaphor for life. I can do as I want, but rarely can I do as I am told, and float. I am not a water sign, which I always forget. It would make so much more sense, as I might be a mermaid. A mythical creature, no doubt. Highly irregular in practice and in presentation.

Water. Life. Spirit. Connected, intertwined. What propels me into the ocean, sharks and all. Compulsion to return to the source.

Weeki Watchee Springs has been in continuous operation since 1947, open every day, whereas I only began in 1975 and have shut down several times. Weeki Watchee offers diving in the deepest freshwater cave system in the United States, as well as kayaks, paddle boats, and a riverboat cruise. A state park, it offers a wealth of entertainment. I, too, am funded by the State of Florida, and like to have my fun. Weeki Watchee means Little Spring, or Winding River in the Seminole language. Cool, crystal-clear waters host mermaids (of the human variety) who swim gracefully for your pleasure. I swim for my pleasure, though inelegantly at times.

Like me, mermaids are well-traveled. Haitian mermaids are a water spirit called LaSiren. An ocean queen, she plays an important part in Haitian Vodou. She is the Spirit of love and beauty. LaSiren symbolizes the mystical and spiritual aspects of a woman. Long a traditional deity in Haiti, she has roots in both African and European spirituality. Yemaya, of the Nigerian Yoruba, is often depicted as a mermaid and is associated with the feminine mysteries. (I am a feminine mystery.) Cowrie shells represent her wealth. She is worshiped at streams, creeks, springs, and wells.

The best time I was a mermaid was in Aruba. I was under the ocean, shallow, but at a depth sufficient to glide. I could flip and dip, wander below waves. There is an eloquence missing from words, present only in the water. The best time I was a mermaid, I didn't worry for air, catching the ocean's rhythm and using it for breath. In some Medieval stories, mermaids have serpent tails, but I am thoroughly modern and aquatic.

Lately, I've been deep, in the weeds deep. In the seaweed? Maybe, though that's usually right at the shoreline. I wouldn't know if there is deep ocean seaweed, because I'm scared to go out there. I don't think I'm a boat sort of person. Nor am I a land person. I guess if I can't swim there, I don't want to go.

Goddess, creature, legend, myth. I might be a mermaid, but the most implausible idea is that I am an ordinary woman. I don't relate to that, at all.