

Living on an Island

Without a doubt, the summer months are my least favorite. July is the very heart of the season...the belly of the beast...so if the heat and humidity are high as often is the case, I can bear with it albeit grudgingly. Around here August can be just as hot if not more so. However, the second half of the month is a kind of pre pre autumn which you can detect by the lower angle of the sun and shorter days. This is especially noticeable at or around the fifteenth. On the other hand, should June and sometimes May be hot, the summer can drag on in a painfully slow manner. Such is the gamble we take here in central Massachusetts with the weather.

However, with the advent of climate change which seems fairly certain, I fear that we're going to be in for extended hot summers along with the rest of the country. As for the daily shift in weather in these parts, I consider it as a continuation of the Civil War between the North and the South. That is to say, warm humid air always threatens the North and often wins out. On some days the North prevails with more delightful weather but not as much as we'd like. Still, there's a certain charm to the humid weather hard to describe. I think it has to do with a peculiar silence that descends upon the land. In other words, things are more sluggish, and people tend to mosey along, a most suitable word for this time of year.

One day when the North was prevailing with cool, dry air I decided to sit outside in an area which can be described as a complex mini-ecosystem. It was by a charming gingerbread style stone house right out of a storybook built around 1929. It has a garden that slopes gradually downward to the right where it meets some shrubs. In that area are two large majestic oak trees plus some low hedges which offer ample shade. In front of me is a stone wall which put this area about eight feet about a seldom used road leading to several houses.

Furthermore, between me and the road are numerous plants and flowers acting as a buffer. Every so often a chipmunk or two will make known its presence adding to the charm with, of course, a number of birds. Chickadees are my favorite but are more winter birds though from time to time one or two makes its presence felt in a cheerful way. Oh, how sometimes I wish I were one of these critters to live in such a place! Though I'm aware of reading into the situation, somehow I feel they acknowledge it and are grateful for being there. To top all this off directly in front of me about three-quarter a mile away is a magnificent hill which is hayed several times each year. It's one of those in-your-face things, impossible not to ignore but a true delight to behold. To

the right is a seldom used access road flanked on both sides with wonderfully engineered old stone walls and plenty of shade trees. I ask in all honesty, is it possible to be in any better place?

When sitting in that blessed spot somehow I felt that I was at the center of the universe. I literally lacked nothing. In fact, I've frequented that place a number of times over the years enjoying the transition of seasons. You'd think being in one spot like this year after year would be boring. The exact opposite has come to be true. I don't know how or why this is so. Perhaps I'll never know, but I figure now is a good time to set down some thoughts so as to describe my enduring interest with this charming corner of the earth which I've come to perceive as an island.

Actually there's no danger of losing the charm of this place. It's been going on a long time, deepening with each passing season. In fact, I can trace it directly to a time when I had lived in the same house as my maternal grandfather. Being exposed to him from an early age had set my life in a direction I never regretted, especially when I got to be his age around retirement. When he retired, he enjoyed nothing more than to putter around in a modest garden. When the weather wasn't conducive to that, he'd be in the basement fixing something or other. Later in the morning he'd watch some of what we now call classic television shows such as I love Lucy, Sargent Bilko and The Real McCoys. All, of course, were in black and white. I have a clear picture of his legs up on a hassock in front of the television, the rest of his body behind a wall. To me this was the very definition of living.

As I walked down the street a mere two blocks to grammar school I was supremely jealous of my grandfather. Envious might be a more appropriate word. It was somewhat painful for me to head down the driveway as I headed off to school leaving him as he started to plant flowers of the like. Oh, how I wish I could play hooky and be with him! As for school, despite being essentially a stone's throw away, it seemed to be on another planet. Nevertheless, I had wonderful memories of that place. So with all this in mind I decided then and there that when I grow up I wanted to be exactly like him. How that would come about was completely unknown. Nevertheless, the determination to see it through would bring it to fruition.

At the same time I realized that I'd have to go through a bunch of necessary steps as with everyone else before I attained my goal. That consisted of the usual process of growing up, etc., which despite the usual ups and downs, I held as a boring phase to get through. Even the best parts were blah by comparison. We hear of things like

archetypes being implanted in us which tend to guide us through life. Clearly this is one rooted in observations of my grandfather that made its way to orienting the rest of my life. It was something very much alive sustained over a period of time which I couldn't quite put my fingers on. Should I have not listened to it, God knows where I would have ended up...okay perhaps but not in such a wonderful condition as now. At times I was tempted to share this insight with my peers as well as grown-ups but instinctively knew they wouldn't have a clue as to what I meant. Surely I'd make a fool of myself in their eyes.

Now with this lovely magical-mystical garden at my fingertips anytime I wished to partake of, I was doing exactly what my grandfather had done so many years ago. It was a self-contained place in miniature, a place all its own which offered endless wonderment. While in that blessed spot I could glance over and imagine my grandfather who'd be absolutely delighted with the place I had come to associate with him. Yes, that place was indeed alive in a manner hard to describe. As for the intervening years of growing up, they were in general wonderful but as intimated earlier, essentially boring, something to get through. That made them in a sense not exactly enjoyable but by no means miserable.

When you think of it, although anyone would agree my Special Spot was delightful, most people would pass it over for something they'd consider as better. They'd also acknowledge my preference for it but in reality say something like is this all you want from life? It has no outstanding characteristics, and is close to being despised by reason of its commonality. I had realized that through most of my life feeling not totally in sync with the way other people comported themselves was the destiny laid out for me. Despite support, somehow I was almost magically guided without this fundamental difference bothering me. Without such guidance, forgetaboutit. All along, being with regular people felt a bit strange, even alien. At least I had the wisdom not to talk about what was on my mind with people.

This orientation based upon what some would say a flimsy, even unrealistic attraction didn't come from my own initiative but somehow was inserted into my life. No one would come close to understanding this desire to be like a retired old person. Actually it sounds weird when phrasing it as such. Always the possibility remained that I was shirking life's responsibilities, but I was able to override this temptation all the time. That's where an inbuilt hesitation to refrain from sharing my insight played a big role. Observing how people comported themselves day to day revealed that despite their lives at times being exciting, in the end it was simply uninteresting. Their interesting

experiences amounted to small interludes inserted into an otherwise dull existence...not just dull but one characterized by being overworked. At this juncture I could insert the word "vain" as with Ecclesiastes. However, on second thought, that would be a disservice to the good lives most people were leading.

So over the years I considered many patterns or models which could describe this obviously different world view. Two dominant ones were operative. The first was based on a toy construction set and of course, a model train set. Both were fantasy worlds I could invite others of my age to join which they did gladly. The train set took on special meaning at night when the lights were on and the diesel locomotive made its journey in a large circle. The other archetype (I'm not sure if this is the correct word or not) was picturing myself on a large ocean-going cargo ship, not as a crew member but as a passenger. All were characterized by a profound sense of being cared for...by whom or by what I hadn't a clue. That was completely secondary.

Finally both found expression in having read about isolated islands throughout the world. Actually the train and construction sets were little worlds unto themselves which when you look back, fit perfectly into this worldview of living on an island. Both were clearly limited and totally dependent upon a larger context, home and family, a fact which I never lost sight of. Actually they were my guardians protecting my island existence. How, then, can you describe an island not by presenting facts everyone knows but those which come from personal experience?

First of all an island is separate from all other land masses, a body of water intervening with no connections either by land, bridge or tunnel. Islands are out of the way places, not frequented that much except by curiosity. This can be contended, for example, when considering popular island destinations like Hawaii or the Caribbean. We associate them with tourists who go there to unwind and enjoy the tropical climate, generally not places to live on a permanent basis. Obviously there are native inhabitants who to visitors are pretty much like ornaments or servants at one's beck and call. While the natives treat the tourists kindly, to be sure there's some disdain for them.

It doesn't take much to know the layout of an average sized island. No matter where you go you're within sight of the ocean or close enough to feel its effects. In a short time everything and everyone becomes familiar, and soon you find yourself going over the same territory as you had done earlier. If you stay on the island for an extended period of time, those who visit the place seem like outsiders. You have no choice but to

put up with them knowing that soon they'll be jetting off to somewhere else. Their presence serves to make you feel as someone set apart, not special as endowed with unusual gifts but simply as one who's confined to a given space. I had this distinct impression when living in Iceland for some time. Tourists flocked there in the warmer months whereas fewer did so in winter. During winter you felt more in possession of where you lived, that is, minus outsiders.

Awareness of your confined territory makes you feel both secure and vulnerable at the same time, a real paradox difficult to replicate anywhere else. You're an easy target--the receiving end of an intercontinental ballistic missile or otherwise--while at the same time totally secure in that you have your back up against the wall with nowhere to escape. This really is a definition or close to it of genuine freedom. It implies insight into a reality greater than the one at hand, always present but usually not perceptible because our minds are filled with all sorts of...junk. Perhaps this paradox of holding two opposites simultaneously is what makes you a native to the island instead of a visitor. This, of course, depends upon the size of the island. The smaller the population, the more cohesive it is and the more quickly you must fit in else you'll stand out like a sore thumb.

So while you're on an island the vastness of the ocean surrounding you is inescapable. This seems especially true with regard to the Pacific Ocean, the largest of them all. You're being embraced by a vast emptiness, a better term than fullness. The former term is more appropriate since it suggests the role space as well as our spirit which does the perceiving as charged with life and everything that exists under the sun. So while resting in this emptiness you're less aware of borders. That means without moving anywhere or at anytime you embrace everything and therefore are perfectly content. Actually it's a strange if not impossible situation to describe but one worth the price of anything in the world.

All that has been said thus far has limited application for the vast majority of people, for they live on continents with huge uninterrupted spaces. Nevertheless, in reality we all carry around miniature islands wherever we go in the course of a day. They're like little pup tents on our backs, easy to take out and set up anywhere and at any time. In other words, we can camp anywhere we wish and move on whenever we wish. Furthermore, they're surprisingly resilient compared to physical pup tents.

Such a portable tent offers shelter when we wish to distinguish ourselves from other people as well as from various aspects of the environment in which we find ourselves.

At first this sounds negative but is far from it. We need to lay hold of ourselves or better, learn to remain grounded. The best way for this is to circumscribe ourselves which literally means to write around or to draw a circle thereby creating a boundary. I think that's what my grandfather had learned to do all on his own upon retirement. He had paid into the existing nine to five system and knew it was time to move on...moving on while staying put in the same place. A brilliant insight when you think of it. You can't help but wonder how many subscribe to it nowadays.

If it were possible for me to approach him and run these ideas before him, he'd simply give me a quizzical look. That's secondary. He learned all on his own how to circumscribe his life and be as happy as could be. This was evident either when I had observed him alone or interacting with people. For him both were one and the same though obviously he preferred the former. That's why I find it necessary to have recourse to concrete examples as him when it comes to describing something we acknowledge yet can't quite put our fingers on. Fortunately later in life I had come across a few others of his ilk. Rather unusual, but upon further reflection some kind of archetype is making its presence felt, I being quite secondary.

Then arises the inevitable question, with what do we circumscribe ourselves and how do we go about effecting it? This two-in-one question came to mind just now. That is to say, I have off to the right on my computer screen a live railcam with a busy interstate going overhead. All the vehicles were rushing by as islands unto themselves yet moving along on a predetermined path, the highway. For me it wasn't the best example of island life but one with which we're all familiar. Despite the smooth flow of traffic there was a latent sense of hostility. That remains hidden most of the time but becomes evident should an accident happen or a traffic jam stop or hinder the flow. Again, this is familiar to most everyone. By contrast, the rail tracks below were quiet, just waiting there for something to pass over them. Indeed, there's nothing romantic about watching traffic, but it's a whole different story when it comes to train tracks.

Returning to this notion of circumscribing ourselves, that word implies we have a writing tool with which to draw a circle around ourselves. At first glance it comes across as an I-against-them way of looking at reality but is not. The more clearly a border is defined the greater respect we'll receive for taking a such a stance, almost like a pioneer laying claim to land. As in the case of my grandfather, he laid out his circumscribed life unconsciously yet by following a fairly disciplined daily schedule which had the advantage of giving order to his life. Although my memory is dim here, I recall relatives and acquaintances visiting him who came away with the greatest respect

for how he comported himself. When you look at it plain and simple, there was in actuality nothing there! He was simply being himself. I suspect my grandfather knew that if he didn't follow his archetype (I'm not sure if this is putting accurately or not, but will let it go), his life would descend into chaos. In his case he wasn't fully aware of this fact. Actually that didn't matter. It was something inbuilt which guided him while at the same time he remained flexible enough to allow for unexpected events to intervene.

As with the above mentioned limited space of an Island, I had read of one intriguing place particularly vulnerable to typhoons, way out in the Pacific and with minimal elevation about sea level. The natives are fully aware of this as well as being unable to evacuate in an emergency. Actually I read if someone wanted to see the dentist, the wait involving a round trip would amount to three months, something almost inconceivable nowadays. So it takes some courage and stamina to live in a place like that. While you go about your daily routine it's good to be aware of this without allowing it to get to you or being assaulted from any which way and at any time. This indeed is living on the edge which we can gain from those who inhabit islands.

Permit me to throw in footnote or so which I recently heard from a pharmacist, having lived most her life in Fuji. As a native, right away she was so-so on the images we as outsiders project, understandably so. I was expecting that but was more interested in her take about coconut crabs, hideously large creatures from another planet. Indeed, she was glad to be away from them. It seems these diabolical creatures live on most Pacific islands.

Another aspect of island life--and I think of more extreme places like Palmerston--is that you have few contacts and must be ready to wait and in most cases, a very long time, if you're luck enough to have any. Not long ago I had an island-like experience as I like to call it when I was in the hospital for six days. The parallel may be over-extended, but still I found the comparison helpful. I was essentially isolated for long periods of time interrupted by brief visits. These were from doctors and attendants who gather blood plus information then leave as quickly as possible. While I felt essentially fine despite having a serious blood infection, most of my time was spent waiting...and waiting. Of course, the television set was there, but quickly I got bored due to the incessant ads.

Shortly before entering the hospital I had been reading about places such as Palmerston and Kerguelen islands (the latter in the south Indian Ocean not terribly far from Antarctica also aptly known as the Desolation Islands). That means memories of

these strange places were fresh in my memory. Also I was intrigued by Amelia Earhart who vanished in the Pacific near Howland Island, as desolate as the two just mentioned. This material offered just the right ammunition I needed. While the early to mid morning hours are busy with tests and doctor visits as already noted, the rest of the day (and night) posed a challenge that faced me continuously, how to handle the passage of time, something I had gone into detail in a previous article. Drawing on those observation I discovered that waiting sometimes starts off in a kind of nasty way. Thoughts upon thoughts crowd in which if left unchecked, could make you go bonkers or more likely, undergo a ceaseless restlessness that can rankle you on end.

Should you persevere through those initial trials, no small task by any standards, you come out to a level place. Perhaps a better example is swimming in the ocean. You have to get past the breakers before you can enjoy the gentle swelling of the waves as they rise and fall with the greatest of ease. From that unique vantage point you watch the waves from behind as they crash upon the shore. Suddenly their fearsome power doesn't seem so frightening. So while your bobbing up and down you're the only solid thing in a totally liquid environment. I.e., you're a kind of portable island or perhaps a ship which is more like it.

Once you're acclimatized to this situation, you know for sure that you've come in touch with something big, really big. In fact, how can you miss it? Whether you liken yourself to an island or a ship, you're completely vulnerable yet completely at home in such an alien place. This was fine enough when young. If I were do this today, I'd be terrified not by being out there but from what lays beneath. Your smallness compared with the vastness of the ocean makes you shed all thoughts about what other people, including those whom you know well, are doing and how they would affect your idyllic alone-ness. More accurately, you're aware of this blessed shedding being done to you knowing that it's a process of preparing you for a freedom rarely experienced.

Getting back to being in the hospital, I found that night is the ideal time for tapping into your life as resembling an island. I was fortunate enough to have had a private room...just by chance...and overlooked a main road which wasn't too busy but sufficiently so as to keep focused on the action taking place. At night things really slowed down, especially after midnight. Same with regard to activity in the hospital. Thus night is an ideal time for getting a better handle on this island business, for if you're on a real one, the stars seem to stand out all the more against the darkness unhindered by artificial light.

One friend was intrigued by my experience, he having been in the hospital not long before me. His experience was very different, perhaps more along the lines of what most people undergo. When I told him how I sat by the window watching...just watching...spontaneously he said “How boring! Why weren’t you watching the TV instead?” The best approach in such a situation is not to explain nor to argue but to change the tone of the conversation as soon as possible. Later I came to the conclusion, only right in part, that island living isn’t for everyone!

My friend’s inquiry as to whether I was bored or not gave room for further reflection. My day did start out as such knowing that yet again I would face the above mentioned incessant distractions that afflict us. In the situation at hand, one tended to dominate. When was I going to get out of here? Such thoughts comprise our world but when you look further, they’re pretty unsubstantial. Again, the task is to get beyond the rough water breaking upon the shore. Looking at this in greater detail, you can pretty much equate thoughts with various forms of desire. This, of course, is where Buddhism shines. They’re all reduced to that singular entity. Once you see this, you see clearly that which is afflicting you and you as being afflicted. The best part is that you realize escape is impossible or even better, it isn’t worth the effort. You’ve hit upon a really central idea, the mere thought of which...strange to say...is a great source of joy.

Once this realization takes root, it has a way of situating you squarely upon an island or better, makes you become an island. Now any all all opposites are free to rummage around within you. You know that you’re bounded, surrounded by water, which gives both you and the thoughts afflicting you no place to go. Neither you nor they can get off-island. So you’re stuck with the prospect of dealing with limited resources. So how in God’s name do you go about your daily business? Outwardly it’s as boring as the people in those cars driving by my hospital window. You know this but with the big advantage of not subscribing to it. You have this realization minus the fact of considering yourself as some fancy insightful person different from everyone else. No, quite the contrary.

At this juncture I bring up a subject that never ceases to amaze, the example of a cave in Book seven of Plato’s **Republic**. In brief, all humanity is chained to benches as they watch images projected on the cave’s wall. Such images are devised by those located behind the people. Puppeteers is the word or in Greek, makers of wonders, an apt way to describe their role. Everyone’s attention is focused not upon what they’d like to see but what’s presented to them. Such is one way of viewing how most people comport themselves throughout life. However, one person among this vast multitude “was freed

and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up to the light” [515c] ¹. Though this truly miraculous has been examined thoroughly down the ages, little or nothing seems to have been said as to what prompted this individual...one among the human race simply to have gotten up and left. Furthermore, the puppeteers did nothing. It seems they were too astonished, for never has anyone done this before.

Perhaps there’s no explanation except that he won the lottery. As in real life there’s no explanation as to why such-and-such a person wins while other lose. It just happens willy-nilly. Our man happened to be in the right place at the right time. Nothing special is to be attributed to him. Perhaps one hindrance to appreciating this random act is a dogged attempt to find out what makes the man special. He could be looked at with a microscope from top to bottom but to be sure, you’ll find nothing.

And so this famous example seems to have a parallel with those who dwell on islands. Most were born there whereas some moved though most like few in the latter case. Expanding on this further, they either appreciate their island-ness or do not. Chances are if told of the cave example, some would grasp its meaning right away and identify with the man who simply got up and walked out. The reason? Their environment is limited compared with those who live on the mainland. Stretching this a bit further, if you will, we could attribute to the islanders is a more pronounced spirit of gratitude, a theme I had introduced to this cave image in a few other articles. Either an islander is grateful or not, simple as that. Sounds great, but how does one sustain it? You don’t walk around all day either thinking or wishing “thank you” to everyone. That’s as artificial as it gets.

It seems that gratitude is rooted...very much so...in the concrete-ness of daily life. It doesn’t involve a conscious or articulate expression. That may be fine and does happen on occasion. Rather, the gratitude at hand springs from a direct awareness of life itself which in this instance may be associated with physical movement. Actually we’re moving all the time. Our bodies have hearts beating, digestive tracts doing their thing, blood cells growing all the time along with scratching our heads and picking our noses from time to time. Such are a few among countless things transpiring continuously in each and every person. Let’s not to forget to include other living beings.

All these things are operational without us paying attention to them. Should we focus on any one of them or several at a time, it’s a sure way of going crazy which seems to

¹ **Plato Complete Works** edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997).

go against gratitude in terms of life's concrete-ness. Obviously it's not advisable to take this route, just to be aware of the automatic way life goes about its business from time to time. This is where the Hebrew notion of glory may come in, *kavod*. Essentially it means heaviness, a weighing down as from above, heaven pressing upon earth. To be under the influence of such *kavod* or heaviness at all times, every sporadically, would drive you nuts. Perhaps that's why divine glory cannot be endured in the life. It's weight, as it were, is too much to bear while we're in our physical bodies.

This awareness isn't done in isolation. As a favorite Psalm verse puts it rather blandly in translation, "In the Lord my soul shall make its boast, the humble will hear and be glad" [Ps 34.2]. While this boasting or *halal* (also to celebrate, to praise as well as to be foolish insofar as one loves boasting) seems done in isolation, in reality it's shared and done so automatically with those who are *hanawym* or persons who are afflicted. They have the uncanny ability to pick up on it through hearing which implies their ears are always tuned into this *halal*. And so the person boasting shifts with the afflicted to magnifying the Lord, *gadal* fundamentally to be great or enlarged.

So you can see that a spirit of gratitude is quite complex, wonderfully so. It reminds me again of my hospital stay when my primary physician came in. On his own he said that being grateful has a lot...an awful lot...to do with healing. So how does all this tie in with the original theme of this short article, island living? It seems if you're grateful in the more comprehensive sense as described above when it comes to physicality, you're whole and complete. It's your own world. However, conceiving this world in isolation is not the way to view it. That's why the Psalm Thirty-Four verse speaks of a person in apparent isolation (i.e., on an island) boasting in the Lord which automatically reaches out to others and unites them. All it all it's the easiest and most natural thing in the world to do. Unfortunately we don't look at it that way but instead prefer to make things complex. After rummaging around with that for a while we discover how illusory it is and shake it off. End of story.

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