

The background of the cover is an abstract composition of horizontal bands of color and texture. The colors include shades of blue, orange, green, purple, yellow, and brown. The textures vary from smooth to fibrous and mottled, suggesting a layered or woven material. The overall effect is reminiscent of a cross-section of a geological formation or a layered landscape.

OCEANIC
FEELING

Peter Neill

These short essays have been selected from other writings, some reportorial, others more reflective on specifics of the global conversation about the future of the ocean and its implication for human survival. As time has passed, the conversation has become more specific, in the form of research science and policy suggestion, and more urgently, in the form of inertia, delay, and the failure of the global apparatus to reach consensus, much less an effective plan of action.

In the face of this challenge, and the immediacy of its circumstance, it seems still essential to persevere step-by-step, day-by-day. The World Ocean Observatory, now in its 20th anniversary year, is but one agency for such determined focus and comprehensive outreach. There are many others, all well intended, but the success of our collective endeavor is in question as the immediacy and urgency remain.

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OCEANIC FEELING

In my reading, I recently came across the phrase “oceanic feeling” as apparently mentioned by Romain Rolland, recipient of the 1915 Nobel Prize for Literature, in a letter to Sigmund Freud regarding the concept of spontaneous religious feeling, the simple and direct fact of awareness of the “eternal” without perceptible limits. Rolland was considering the example of Ramakrishna and other mystics of the early part of the 20th century.

I have oceanic feeling every time I experience the ocean, regardless of place or condition. It is as close to purity as I suspect ever to come. I am transfixed: by the light, the motion, the smell, the sound, and all the other sensations of body and mind that the ocean inspires in me consistently and profoundly on every occasion. Is it ecstatic? Sometimes. Frightening? Frequently. As profound and joyful an identification of spirit and Nature as I know? Always.

A few years ago, this idea came home to me both emotionally and intellectually when I visited Reynisfjara, a world-famous black-sand beach found on the south coast of Iceland, just beside the small fishing village of Vík í Mýrdal. The place is unique and almost beyond description in its beauty. The approach is along a path through secretive dunes with the roar of waves announcing something very dramatic to come. The sand turns to grey, then to black, a coarse ground that is both dark and light, tessellated, conjoined in an unexpected, anomalous revelation

in contradiction to every beach previously known. Along the way, bits of rusted iron emerge, portions of an anonymous ship, wrecked on that perilous lee shore, relentless waves pounding its humanity to hulk, then pieces, then buried like fragments of being lost to an indifferent, hellish place.

But Hell it is not. What emerges with the full scape of the beach is one of the most heavenly beautiful places I have ever seen – with glaring metallic light that is both cold and warm, harsh and pure, an arrangement of peaked and cragged rocks offshore, fragmenting and foreboding, refracting the light and bifurcating the rollers. The sound of waves and rattling pebbles is enormous, percussive, and galvanic. The onshore wind brings bits of wet sand and disorientation. The birds turn, at once recognizable, and then lost in the light as if dissolved into nothingness by the sun. I have never experienced such a place before. I could neither feel it nor think it adequately. It was simply beyond my imagination. No perceptible limits. Poets try to write of this, artists attempt to paint, and I will surely fail here too. Transcendence does not bend to words, or pictures, or psychoanalytical theories. What could I do before such power? Admit to a God? That was not the outcome. But what was?

At Reynisfjara, I was standing, of course, on the penultimate edge. It was the dividing, and unifying line between aqua and terra. It was a glorious manifestation of Nature, and a celebration of self – mine, yours, and others – as distillate and individual as it gets, as dissolved and communal as it can be. There was no hate there,

no evil, no anger, no greed, no alienating other. It became clear to me there and then that the ocean was, and remains the expression of all that is incorruptible and good in this world, pure and simple, and it was my obligation to protect it. I was to presume to be a voice for its condition, its meaning, its understanding, its fecundity, and its universal and egalitarian contribution to the health and welfare of every person on land forevermore.

Grandiose ambition? Perhaps. Achievable? Probably not. It became then and there my responsibility to the very extent of my self to share the ocean and all its meanings with all who might listen, who might join me, indeed, in transcendent feeling for all the ocean's implications for the best of our selves and for our human survival.

DESERT REFLECTIONS

What is the antithesis of the ocean? The desert it would seem. I recently traveled to Egypt, purported to be the driest, least rainy, country in the world. Rain averages .1 inches a year; snow rarely falls in the mountains of the Sinai. The country is a sliver of water, edged in green, from a delta on the Mediterranean south into the heart of Africa. The Nile, the longest river in the world, flows from its source in Burundi, north to Alexandria where it joins an inland sea. The edges are thin and fragile, vulnerable to flood prior to the construction of the great dam at Aswan that controls the water even as it caused great, historic monuments to be moved to higher ground.

All the habitation and agriculture of the modern nation is clustered there. The monuments, some dating back to 5000 BC, and the ensuing tombs of the Pharaohs, indicate that not much has changed. The pyramids at Giza rise up out of the sand, uncanny geometric sandstone forms, seemingly impervious to time. The Great Sphinx, constructed around 2000 BC, stares into the sun and wind, a man's head, no wings, with an eroded perplexion as if wondering, *Why me? Why here of all places?*

The cultural artifacts do not disappoint. The burial treasures are mostly removed to museums in Cairo, but the tombs are an astonishing compendium of knowledge, amassed and recorded by a caste of scribes, who carved into the walls in complicated relief, documenting all aspects of daily life – the rituals and beliefs, the

science and medicine, the forms of harvest and sustenance, the great ceremonies that characterized the pharaonic periods. The realization that such a level of civilization existed so long ago is profound; the divisions of rich and poor, the challenges of living in a harsh climate, the rise and fall of autocrats, sent shivers of recognition to this 21st century tourist. How is it different? Inequities. Tyranny. Vast engineering achievement. Science opening the world to unimagined possibilities. Transitory nature of life.

Desert reflection. Around all this is a turning of endless sand and horizon. If it was blue, it would be the ocean. There are waves and crests of sand. There are patterns on the surface, made by the wind, sandy spindrift lifted and blown. For infinite water there is infinite rock and gravel and mineral grit that circulates in patterns that cannot easily be anticipated or passed over, as they are so ephemeral that they offer nothing to hold onto, no marks by which to guide one's way. Lost in the desert, lost at sea? Lost.

It is impossible not to connect these views with climate; that desertification is one terrible consequence of increasing drought, declining river volumes, and the loss of once fertile ground. What would happen to Egypt if the present trends of heat and storm and climate consequence remain unchecked and carry on with a relentless transformation to dry, dead ground in which nothing can grow. The desert is a dead zone. There is biodiversity there, numerous examples of algae, birds and animals, many insects, grasses and plants, and a remarkable range of over 2200 hundred

species of fungi and lichens. The Pharaohs' physicians knew about such things. They discovered ways to live in such a climate, to thrive and survive, to build monuments, make glorious art and artifact, and feed and heal themselves whether pharaohs, citizens, priests, or slaves.

Historical research suggests that in 2500 BC, the population of Egypt was 1.6 million; today, census figures indicate over 100 million, still clustered along the Nile, in a land that is 96% desert and rapidly losing habitable land to global warming, urbanization, lost wetlands, saltwater intrusion, and more desert... evermore. Look around. The facts are the same; statistics are similar, the threats are universal.

Standing there, comes to mind the famous Shelly verse from his great poem, *Ozymandias*, a reflection that pertains, and cannot be denied:

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

THE MOON AND THE OCEAN

We live by day with the sun that illuminates our lives, powers growth, and contributes light to the natural processes that nurture our communities and ourselves. But we are reminded these days of the destructive power of the sun, that evaporates our fresh water, dries our fields, and foments the wild fires that consume our forests and threaten our life and property. I associate the sun with the circumstances of climate – shifting weather patterns, extreme storms, rising water temperature, acidification, glacial melt, sea level rise, coral bleaching, shifting marine habitat, and so much more.

But the moon. Yesterday signaled the full moon that, from where I sat on an island watching a spectacular sunset, rose silently and stealthily behind my back and waited patiently for my attention. The moon does that. While the sun blares and glares and demands, the moon awaits, modestly, demurely, patiently, for notice. Turning to the opposing view then offered another perspective on everything – the view of an island, another waterscape of harbor and horizon and all the implication therein.

The tide was full as well. And so the ocean was swollen around the rocks and islands, a kind of calm, soundless fecundity that suggested the teeming life within, and an embracing of those edges as opposed to the clash of wave and storm. There was grace to be seen there, coherent movement that suggested peace

and harmony. And then there was the uncanny light. We call it surreal in its unexpected clarity, so sharp that we can see moon shadow. The vastness of ocean in that light seems so much greater to me than a sunlit day with its mist and haze. The mystery of the ocean is there to be seen and considered, what is revealed above and what lies below in depth that seems so much deeper and impenetrable than the height of the day-lit sky. One becomes pensive, introspective, melancholy, depressed if that is your wont, but the murmurs of that water support reflection, perception, solace, cure, even poetry, as antidote to the cacophony and challenge of daily living. There is no need for exclamation or conversation beyond the quiet, appreciative exhalation as an affirmative response to beauty.

As the sun sets, we look for the so-called green spark, the precise moment when we feel the loss of light and rise of darkness. That moment, seemingly always missed, is an existential measure typical of our time, marking real or psychological coordinates that declare to self and sundry that this, absolutely, is where I am. Not so in moonlight, where things appear always ambiguous, profound, less explicable, more unsure. It is perhaps the constant change within the always shifting tide, its moving nature, rise and fall, fall and rise, that forces a continuing calculation and recalculation of one's place along a progress from somewhere to somewhere else, a journey taken without choice, thus best taken willingly and with exuberance.

The tide covers as much as it reveals. The offshore rocks and ledges and the dangers of the treacherous coast are sometimes visible, sometimes not, and so we seek the reassurance of lighthouses, buoys, charts and maps and calculated tables to provide the navigational aid and avoidance of danger. But the tide also ebbs and flows with powerful currents that can be used to add power to a passage or even to take us through a dangerous place if we can observe and understand its natural flow. A truly remarkable seaman once showed me how the tide and the shifting volume of water around rocks could be used to move through such a tight, seemingly impossible passage without either sail or helm. It was a terrifying, but astonishing demonstration of how knowledge, experience, and appreciation of natural systems can be so powerfully and successfully instructive.

So thanks for the moon, and its power and light, which serve to determine and illuminate our thoughts and actions with a unique, often-unappreciated force. I feel optimistic and emboldened by these thoughts from my ocean-side communion with the moon.

CONFLUENCE

I read that the ocean is the confluence of 1,000 rivers.

Confluence. Coming together, a weaving of strands – of hemp for rope to haul and lift, as lengths of wire for cable to hold bridges between two shores. There is an entwining of material and force inherent in ocean circulation that begins at the mountain-top and descends from glaciers and springs to those 1,000 rivers through watershed to wetland, from crest to coast, to then mix as energy and exchange, as a living entity from which value may be extracted and transformed by human intervention.

We must understand this dynamic system as both natural and social, as both political and inclusive. When we do, we enter and move with the flow, efficient transport of everything from force and food. and, today, pollutants and poisons.

The Galapagos Islands became a magnificent concentration of biodiversity as a result of such currents, that wealth threatened in our time by foul, chemicals and toxins efficiently distributed as illegal, unregulated discharge from industry and human excess far away.

There is this notion that the ocean by virtue of its vast extent and volume can encompass and dilute such poisons and so it is fine that we dump sewerage there, or fracking residue, or obsolete

ships, or nuclear waste, or plastic, plastic, plastic. That has been proven wrong and wrong-headed. The plume of radioactive water from the Fukushima tsunami accident in Japan extended to the west coast of the United States in a few weeks. The toxic dust from mining in Australia finds its way to deposit on Antarctic ice in just a few weeks more.

And the circulation goes in several ways, not just in a circular oceanic gyre, but also up into the atmosphere where different currents distribute in contrapuntal ways, and down into the water column to the seabed where marine communities are disrupted by vertical circulation into sediment unreachable by the human hand. The sea connects all things is more than a glib statement.

Culture can be exchanged by the same forces. The most compelling example is slavery, the involuntary emigration of African people in massive number from home to another home, to tyranny, exploitation, and lasting racial bias, violence, lynching, and exclusion from integrated society and opportunity. That this transit of human life brought with it an astonishing contribution to cultural life is sometimes recognized, mostly forgotten in the social maelstrom of race relations. Without Africa, America would have no soul – not just soul as music that has transformed our world, but also as a manifestation of community that is at once inclusive and redeeming.

For chattel slaves or refugees from modern tyranny, the ocean has

been a mixing medium. So many died, and continue to die, in what might have been an exercise of freedom and opportunity. Our welcome was not equitable, moral, or meaningful. Plantations or camps. Masters or violent police. We live in the aftermath of bias; it is on our conscience; it is an outcome of injustice that must be reversed.

The ocean is a great equalizer. It is prejudiced against all who dare; it is sustaining to all who care to live equitably within its fluid boundaries. It changes all the time, just as does our history, but survival at sea was, and remains, an exercise of intent and skill, a resolve to adapt and cooperate against challenges that tax experience and sometimes defy imagination. The ocean is isolating as a purely natural place, but it is more truly a scape for human action and endeavor. To be successful in such a medium demands respect, collaboration, agreement, equity, reciprocity, and love. There is realism and wisdom there. And we should pay attention.

Can we learn from this? Can we learn from the circumstance we face today: the perversity of pandemic and prejudice? Can we let the ocean teach us? Can we listen? Can we change? Can we understand that community, on land or sea, is about coming together, living together in welcome and peace? In a global confluence defined by the unity of 1,000 rivers.

MORALITY AND THE OCEAN

In my reading I came across this quotation from *The Measure of Time* by Gianrico Carofiglio:

“Nature is morally neutral. It consists of wonderful things and horrible things. It makes no distinction between right and wrong. In nature there are no rewards or punishments, only consequences.”

It was one of those statements made with such certainty, such finality, that it demanded consideration, then consternation over the realization that I had never thought of Nature this way before. Did I not think that Nature was inherently good, thus the embodiment of morality, a particular system of values to honor and conserve, and by which to live? Suddenly, that thought was contradicted by an undeniable alternative: that Nature has no inherent moral value, and that such consideration was a function of my persona, my attitude, and my actions.

If we take the ocean as a paragon of Nature, with all its movement and change, all its many inhabitants, all its species, ugly and strange, we have a metaphoric place wherein to examine the truth of Carofiglio’s dictum. Yes, the ocean is at once wonderful and horrible. It has infinite moods and manifestations, revealed by its mechanics, four types of motion – rotary, oscillating, linear and reciprocating – in all directions at the same time, accentuated

by a spectrum of light from dark absence to a fulsome, blinding purity into which we also cannot see. It is never static, and at each point in time is neither one thing completely or another as if it is suspended as a medium into which, valiantly, we attempt to swim.

There are a million moments of stasis in something so inherently dynamic, always in between one extreme or another, and that place is, where, indeed, there is no right or wrong. It is never fixed, ever changing, unless I impose upon it some rationale, some explanation, some system of data or process, some finality that, if a perfect, placid day, is wonderful, if a rampant, tumultuous storm of wind and wave is horrible, a wild, terrifying dichotomy and contradiction.

The extremes are easy; it is the nuanced in-between that is confusion. A peaceful ocean is good; and angry ocean is bad, conclusion made through observation and experience. Our range of these events is, in effect, a diagram of moral judgments, black or white, no or yes, tranquility or fear, and then, all the emotional spaces in between where things get more complicated, less exact, more confusing, less certain. As written on sailors' charts of unknown waters, *"there be monsters in the margins..."*

Could the same be asserted for human nature? There is a comparable extent to our intellectual and emotional spectrum – happiness vs. misery, optimism vs. despair, pessimism vs. hope

for the future. Are we all now aswim in an ocean of feelings and fears which seem irrational and irreconcilable? And so, to explain, to defend, we make judgements, assert prejudices, reject alternatives, and use morality as justification for our action, acceptance, and rejection in a sea of separation, in a confusing gyre of impersonal circumstance and interpersonal relation? The consequences are evident, and yet we still attempt to mete out rewards and punishments using the harsh intractability of moral absolutes. This condition seems to me desperate, destructive and amoral. If we are attempting to make way forward in such a sea state, we are losing ground.

In this oceanic world, maybe it's time for a little moral neutrality, a return to an accommodating natural state. Maybe we should focus on how to change the consequences of our actions, take responsibility for what we have done to create this disconcerting world we live in, and affirm our moral conviction through humanity, community, creativity, and courage as tools for change. By such action we will outline the true measure of our time.

OCEAN MUSIC

It would appear that one of the most difficult things to do these days is to listen. There is just so much noise. The cacophonies are constant: shrill politics, pandemic alarm, the intensity of work and family, the psychology of complaint and argument, urban confrontation and conflict, the constant background noise as if there is an agreed, self-imposed, imposition of sound to mask the angst, to silence the relentless questions and fears, and to wrap our bodies and minds in a volume of meaningless decibel – a conspiracy of avoidance and protection from a more and more incomprehensible world. If we cannot listen, then we cannot hear, and in that stasis we are paralyzed and lost.

I don't think this is hyperbole. Anecdotal reports and social science studies point to new levels of anxiety and dislocation worldwide. On the surface, we fear the invisible, the virus, not just as life-threatening disease, but also as psychological erosion of dignity, optimism, and meaning. If ever we are to live in a disabling existential crisis, it would seem to be now.

The traditional instruments of solace and renewal seem broken: the confessional, the town meeting, the trust we have found in family and friends. How can we restore ourselves? How can we mend the barriers and disconnection?

The other day, depressed by such thoughts, I went down to the

shore, found a place, and just sat down, apart and alone by the sea. The physical circumstance provided a context almost immediately of silence and solitude. I realize how privileged this must be, but, if you think about it, access to water, whether by the edge of the ocean, a lake, a pond, a river, a park, a fountain, if you put your mind to it, the soothing quality of water is more available than you might think. All the great religions have water as an essential element of ritual and redemption, and the assurance of water, as nurture, from a stream, or a well, is in itself a moment of quietude and renewal – the touch, the taste, the sound, all the instruments of perception condensed into, focused on a sip, a moment of feeling and hope.

I sat down, and listened. At first there was the natural sounds of that place: the rasp of waves on the sandy rocky beach, the cry of the gulls, the distant mowing of an autumnal field. But those things slowly dissipated into what I heard to be universal ocean music – announcing a threshold between my daily world and Nature, a liminal space, a context for transition. Meditation, anywhere, is a similar practice, the placement of self in a state of openness, untrammled by the exigencies of the world, a mindfulness which, in silence, allows one to be acutely aware, to listen for, and perhaps to hear things unheard and helpful.

This space can be evoked in many ways: in the arrangement of definition and rhythm in poetry or prose; in the simple passage of a melod; in the rendering of light across a seascape, landscape,

or through a window. The openness of the ocean to all our senses is made palpable through metaphoric connection, through an opening from chaos to harmony, from irrational to rational, from body to mind, as a place for consideration, imagination, and resolve into resilience, understanding, and access to the future.

All the surrounding noise of our world is a tyranny of distraction from the real things that matter: our personal well-being, the value of family and friendship, the satisfaction of work, and the security of community. No one is immune from this opportunity, only the myriad combinations of circumstance, some inconceivably hard, some overwhelmingly desperate, prevent us from this discovery. Poverty, war, tyranny, virulent disease, ideological conflict, hopelessness – all the terrible things that besiege us – conspire to keep us from this freedom.

The healing power of water, in all its forms and places, is real. If we protect anything, in the name of protecting all the rest, we must understand that loss of water is terminal action against all of us, no matter the status of our being.

I sat down, and I listened, and I heard the ocean music.

THE NIGHT SKY

One of the great ocean experiences is the panoply of the night sky. A vast darkness, shaped by intimations of residual clouds, the crescent moon, complicated by distant planets and stars in their constellations, swept into the arc of the Milky Way, made exhilarating and mysterious by the potential of the northern lights – all as metaphysical and meaningful as pure Nature. I have been anchored offshore in downeast Maine for the past few nights, cool and clear, with the sense of solitude and isolation from the travails of the world diminished, distant, sublime.

Solitude is such a privilege. We live among maddening crowds. We retreat to the ocean as a place apart, where the intrusion of circumstance can be held, briefly, at bay. How often do poets and artists look to the sky for metaphors of freedom and peace? How often do we marvel at the stars when seen in unexpected places. What would life be for sailors, nomads, city-dwellers, creative spirits, if there was no night sky, no stars?

A friend told me a story the other day about a recent evening camping in Montana, where she had laid down on the ground below that vast western sky, far from the ocean, but inspiring of oceanic feeling. She described a night as wide and significant as if she was alone, disconnected from all the complexities of life, as if she was at sea, with only her self for company, only her sensibility as companion.

I expected some personal revelation to follow. But what happened to her next was unexpected and disruptive: the arrival of a cluster of lights, moving in company, explained as a cluster of some fifty low-level satellites launched by an entrepreneur, moving as a coordinated technological cluster, as the beginning of an industrial solution to bring wireless connection, for profit, to every individual on earth – in effect, an intended system for universal connection, global communication, and logistical efficiency that would transform the world we live in.

She felt violated, and outraged, not just by the sudden unnatural modification of the night sky, not just by an invasion of her solitude and privilege, but also by the implication that those things might now never be possible again, for anyone, given the potential of direct surveillance and manipulation of things on earth by a power over which she had no control.

The irony is inescapable. The first ocean navigators used the patterns of the stars to locate themselves in an uncharted ocean, observed patterns of experience that provided certainty of place and direction as they explored and traded across the world. Those satellites are the tools of modern navigation, global positioning systems, that place us precisely in time and space to an extent that we know exactly where we are. Those satellites enable instant communications, cultural and political exchange, guide our ships at sea and our harvesters on land. Those satellites enable us to share art and culture worldwide and to guide the weapons

of war to a lone enemy anywhere. This is the new contradiction now enabled as a modern “music of the spheres.” There may be universal betterment there, just as there may be specific evil easily enabled by a tactic and a keystroke.

Who gave that entrepreneur the right to modify our lives in such a way? Who gave him the authority to change the night sky? Who gave him permission to profit from the privatization of space? Who gave him approval to impose his individual ambition and vision upon our thoughts and oceanic feelings?

My friend was upset; I am incensed. This new reality is the apotheosis of man’s consumption and corruption of Nature. As we deal with the global consequence of the values, structures, and behaviors of this attitude – as we see the burned and desiccated land, the acidified ocean, the polluted atmosphere, the outcome over time of this corrupting approach – how can we allow one man to supersede all authority, national and international, to launch this invasion upon us? It is cosmically extra-legal, beyond even the hand of God.

I thought about this floating on the ocean that connects all things. Dream-state? Or nightmare. Prospect of the final insult to the natural world that sustains us?

THIRD NATURE

Imagine First Nature, the planet at its origin, a swirling mix of forces that resolve into land and sea, a planet uninhabited, a wildness of fluid change and evolutionary being that exists for millennia, irrelevant units of time, itself a construct not yet defined, known, measured. We speak of earth as a blue marble, a colored clarity with tints or flecks of color that extrude from the core as bits of volcano mounts, as glacial mass emerging, drifting, shifting, to form something mass-like called land, even if there was then no one to see or name it. This is First Nature, the foundation for all that follows, that as animals and humans evolved, transitioned from a space to a place, and to an environment that through adaptation and invention becomes a home for first peoples with all their constructs of language, organization, architecture, experiential knowledge, spiritual ideas, wisdom, and generations. A foundation for civilization derived from this First Nature, this beginning.

Second Nature followed: defined as “a characteristic or habit in someone that appears to be instinctive because that person has behaved in a particular way so often.” We built our institutions by repetition, emulation, imagination, creativity, energy, and some innate quality of joined humanity that, despite the endless conflicts and destruction, survived by extracting over and over again the resources provide by First Nature, and turning it into substance by which we survived. When we are born, we know

nothing of this, only to be taught by myth, some knowledge derived from history, some exploration and understanding as layers of experience taught from generation to generation. This was a landside thing, while the ocean still troubled beyond the shore as an unknown, dangerous place. We built industry, in degrees made necessary by our degree of growth, a population that survived from the fruits of the land, grown and extracted, in ever-increasing circles of demand and supply to a point where today we are faced with exhaustion as the consequence of everything that has come before.

We have behaved in a particular way so often. So often that we have consumed the particulars and are at risk and the old behaviors have no traction, and no meaning. We are so used to health and wealth that we ignore those who don't have it, we fight over things, often unnecessary, while we are indifferent, or afraid, of the change demanded by our Second Nature.

What will be our Third Nature? Those of apocalyptic view might argue that we will regress back to the chaos of that first wildness, to dystopian disintegration that reduces us to uncivilized, anti-social conflict that will ultimately destroy even the fittest. Others retain faith that those early constructs, and the values inherent, will show us a way.

What will it look like? It will congregate to water first of all, to communities along rivers and lakes where we can work

successfully to provide, to govern regionally along watersheds, to coasts, and to exchange of necessary goods and services from across the sea. The ocean, then, will be the new land; it will be the source of water, desalinated, to irrigate our bodies and our fields; it will be the energy from released heat, wind, and wave that will support our utilities shared as equitable value derived; it will be the source of food, medicine, and community and cultural connection. The ocean will provide solace and survival because we will know that this Third Nature will only endure as long as we can sustain it, and if that too is fought over and fouled, then we will have lost the opportunity of life and will have no one to blame, no one even to notice that, amidst the resuming chaos, we once were there.

What will it take?

I have asked this question for years. What will it take for us to assume and achieve the best of who we are, to abandon the old paradigm and welcome the new, to live up to, indeed to exceed our highest expectations, by applying our energy and imagination to solutions, not prolongations, but the radical change demanded of the evidence of today? What will it take to define Third Nature and to return to the ocean to make it so?

SHADES OF BLUE

Here is a definition of *blue*: as “the color of the sky and sea, often associated with depth and stability and symbolic of trust, loyalty, wisdom, confidence, intelligence, faith, truth, and heaven.” These represent a profound ascent of meaning.

Most often these days, *blue* is used as an adjective, to modify something else, typically thought of in a context of land, social behavior, conventionally green, and conceived to expand awareness of a vast other part of Nature, not so well known, and in danger of decline by ignorance and indifference. Hence various ocean-related projects: Mission Blue, Blue Ventures, Blue Mind, Blue Economy, Blue Ocean Society, Blue Ocean Foundation, Blue Ocean Institute, Blue New Deal, and many others, all devoted to ocean research, conservation, and public awareness, led by ardent advocates for a blue ocean future, and existing to redress this serious misunderstanding of the fulsomeness of Nature absent knowledge of the freshwater/ocean continuum. This work is important, global, and effective albeit to the limits of available funding, communications, and political receptivity. Let me honor and invite your support for each and every one of these without question.

But I would like to consider *blue* as a noun defined, the singular associations that are a whole phenomenon in themselves. *Depth*, for example, seemingly obvious as measured by ocean soundings in which the earth’s highest mountains are submerged. But deep

may have no limit to its value, an infinite dimension that extends beyond our imagined boundaries of observations and experience. To go there is to explore without inhibition from either mind or body. *Stability* is another unexpected meaning. The ocean is considered a place of constant movement, a dynamic of tide, current, wave, weather, transportation, war, exchange, and other forms of human intervention. But within, below, there may be a stasis of invisible systems in the darkness, unseen, certain, nurturing, a place with the quietude of the womb, a place we all once knew but can't remember.

Pure Nature, then, as in the deep sea, or deep forest, suggests that in the noun there is a place beyond the symbolic, a scape for trust, loyalty, wisdom, for confidence and intelligence, for faith and truth. These each have bearing, as values, on human behavior. When we mistrust, or are disloyal, or are weak or stupid or faithless, we deny the truth of the relationship between our selves and the environment that sustains us.

Denial renders us lost and vulnerable to the surface, to the seductive, unnatural aspects of human society like excess, greed, class and ethnic division, inequity, and injustice. In this time of pandemic, I have considered the idea of *Nature's vengeance*, an inevitable reaction to the myriad insulting, consuming, destroying, and other eco-cidal activities of our time. Does our behavior, known and selfish, merit any outcome other than that in our dark place we drown?

It is our natural predilection to survive. At bottom, we look upwards to see an ascending path of light, upward from death and emptiness to pass through stages of meaning, shades of blue, toward redemption. We return to essential values so cruelly corrupted and denied to restore what we call civilization. Call it a passage to heaven, out of the ocean to the heaven that is earth, both land and sea. Our most fundamental freedom is to choose. Let's move beyond *blue* as an adjective, even as a noun; let's express blue as a verb that drives transformation, regeneration, and renaissance. *Blue* will set us free.

THE SOUND OF WATER

How many ways do we hear the sound of water? Just to think about it demands a total immersion in sensory memory and anecdotal recall. What was that sound? When was it? Where was it? How do these questions pertain to its articulation in words, a medium fractured and evocative, but ultimately limited in comparison to the infinite euphony of water?

Think of water as many sounds in one sound: myriad compositions, with ripples and waves as notation of melodies and embellishments. Every performance is unique; the players invisible; the conductor, wind and weather; the orchestra, a system of conveyance that responds to the direction of planetary turning and gravitational force. Think of the earth as a vast concert hall for the appreciation for how we, as individuals and cultures, explore the extent of water, Nature's most essential element, and interpret its meaning, overtly, or covertly through our senses to our minds.

But who is the composer? Is there a creator? Every culture has its story of origin, often connected to manifestations of water. The great flood. The drowning. The miraculous survival. The baptism. The burial at sea. We want to explain, attribute the making of the ephemeral and fluid to a hand that often looks like ours, as if we are both an expression of the divine and its maker.

Water lies at the core of mystery, the miraculous, the appearances that dissolve into the inexplicable and unknowable. There is no definitive answer to who or how, only the certainty of movement.

Think of the sound of water on water: rain on the pond, incoming waves on those receding. This is the underlying rhythm of constant motion, the fluid beat of time, and change. This is the code we seek to break when we sit by the stream or walk alongshore, looking for answers, reasons, place, and value. That search is universal, not exclusive to any one of us apart from all the others. What would it be if we all found what we look for when we go to the ocean in search for life in a single drop?

That would be value beyond value: a crest of understanding, of spiritual meaning and psychological solace, that might unite the world just as, together, the whales swim long distances north to south, the salmon return home to spawn, the turtle lays her eggs for the next generation to risk its life in the sea. If that is so, why would we do anything to put that conjoining medium at risk by consuming it to extinction, or by poisoning it beyond utility, or by failing to conserve and sustain it as key to our survival? As with so many things that shape the human quandary, it makes no sense.

What would it mean if there was no water? What if all the rain is acid, the wells exhausted, and the aquifers run dry? What if we pollute and consume without limit? What if changing climate and increasing temperature do create conditions that so erode our

industrial, agricultural, sanitation, and urban systems that society is compromised toward chaos? Think about that future as drought, and drought as silence, and silence as the expression of emptiness inside. Who are we then, without vitality, movement, aspiration, security, continuity, hope of a future?

The sound of water is the music of life. Without it we are hollow and dry, deaf and dumb, silent and deadly, useless and unworthy. We need it to birth and grow. We need it to nurture body and soul. We need it to sustain our families and friends, our communities and nation states, our sense of possibility and optimism for a world somehow better, less fraught, more equitable and just through the magical sound of water.

Go down to where that water flows: as you drink, remember; as you listen, resolve, that such beauty must be shared, and that you are now creator, conductor, and virtuoso performer in the symphonic masterpiece called water.

HALCYON OCEAN

Here is an evocative story: According to Greek mythology, Alkyone, the daughter of the god of the winds, became so distraught when she learned that her husband had been killed in a shipwreck that she threw herself into the sea and was changed into a kingfisher. As a result, ancient Greeks called such birds *halcyon*, and the myth ensued that these birds built floating nests on the ocean that so moved the wind god that he created a state of breathless quiet on the water that protected the eggs until the fledglings were born. This legend prompted the use of halcyon both as a noun naming a genus of kingfisher and as an adjective describing unusual, primordial calm.

Calm can be associated with the ocean – a state desirable as an alternative to chaos. On a recent trip to Antarctica, there was much discussion of the Drake Passage, a convergence of current and weather from Cape Horn south, that was portrayed as a collision of wind and wave that wrecked ships and marked its sailors for life as survivors. Our passage both ways was across a placid sea, birds and dolphins racing alongside, not even a hint of any storm to come. I can't say that I was disappointed.

Calm can be also associated with an inner state of being – a neuro-chemical-physical quietude that is a desirable condition that expels and denies the neurotic conditions of our lives and brings us peace of mind and body. Be calm we say to soldiers under attack, rebels with violent causes. Be calm, we say to our

children grappling with their futures; be calm, we say to our parents and friends in illness or the fear of death. *Be calm*, we say to ourselves en route to Antarctica: *chill, it's going to be a Drake Lake*. And it was.

Why is it that all major religions involve water as an essential place of ritual: baptism, cleansing, purity of purpose and soul? The ocean is a vast reservoir of water to the point of no dimension: its horizon has no meaning; its depth and breadth cannot be perceived, disorienting in space and disconnecting in time. The ocean is in constant movement, and there is no foretelling even with the best observations above and below that can be said to be certain. A storm can materialize in a sudden shift of pressure; a wind can reach gale force by a minor adjustment of degree; a reef or bar can appear when the charts and satellites assert that for all time there has been nothing there. Clearly, the ocean strikes every chord, each lost in one coherent resonating tone.

I have a friend, colleague, and fellow ocean advocate, Wallace J. Nichols, who for years has given out a simple blue glass marble as a evocation of the Earth from space – presented to any and all, from national presidents to the Dalai Lama to the most secular surfer, literally to thousands who understand the ocean calm, directly or indirectly, through experience, study, and intuition. I have emulated this distribution myself, carrying marbles with me as an almost perfect metaphor that I can hold up to the light to release the calm, the fluidity, and the peace of the ocean world

in my hand. It connects, it captures and refracts all the available light, and it consistently elicits a quiet understanding between those assembled, even in a crowded elevator, a giant auditorium, and across borders of nations and the boundaries of language. J. writes about “blue mind,” what he measures physically in the body, psychologically in the head, and spiritually in the heart – a pervasive state of harmonic blue. He has relentlessly spread this message and I hope he will never stop.

How many stories in how many cultures is there an account of the wife bereft of her fisher husband lost at sea, grieving and regenerating through immersion in such a dynamic, mysterious space? How many floating nests will be accommodated by the ocean, over how many generations? How many fledglings will find the ocean calm to clear their way?

Halcyon!

LOST AT SEA

Several years ago, I visited Ireland with my son, a musician, and one day we ventured to a small coastal village in search of the grave of a famous Irish traditional singer whose voice and repertoire had shaped my son's first music in a fundamental way. At the local pub, we learned there were five graveyards in the area and we visited them all in our search to pay homage, a lovely walk alongshore looking out over the sea that seemed as much of the place as was the land itself.

We found the stone and, while my son placed a guitar pick in the ground as a respectful tribute, I observed the other stones there, canted by wind and encrusted by the salt air, almost all of which were the final resting place for fishermen, each marked with name, date, and the phrase *lost at sea*.

Ironically, all the stones were facing inland, as if the mourners had insisted that this final resting place must turn its back on what took those lives, and so many others, from a community that fished more than it farmed, and by so doing, lost generations of husbands, sons, and brothers to a cold, hard, dangerous, and unforgiving ocean.

Work on or by the sea is challenged by extremes of weather, wave, wind, and dynamic forces that can equal the wrath of God. Human responses, even in today's most sophisticated technical

and engineered world, are limited by the shape and strength of the boat, the durability of the gear, the uncertain availability of the catch, and the weaknesses of the human body and spirit. The graves in that lost cemetery are not unique; indeed, they can be found along every coast worldwide shaped by the realities of maritime culture.

And then, there are the unmarked graves of men swept overboard or died and committed to the ocean as their final port of call, without memorial. How many thousands of these are there, dissolved in this history, forgotten?

I came from the heartland of the United States and never saw the ocean until I was eighteen when my father took me to Gloucester, Massachusetts, a town that has relied on fishing as its primary source of sustenance and survival since its founding. A famous statue stands there, a fisherman looking out to sea; the local churches have stained glass windows commemorative of over 4,000 captains and crew lost at sea since the 19th century. The village houses along the Atlantic shore are known for their widows' walks—on the roof look-outs from which to scan the horizon for the returning sails of whaling ships absent for years at a time, sometimes bringing home sperm-oil and ambergris fortune, oft-times bringing nothing but sadness and loss.

Every major fishing port or coastal city will have its fisherman's memorial, its monument to lost seamen, its maritime museum documenting the contributions to the early history of the place –

not just the fishing, but the boatbuilding and the merchant trade, immigration, emigration, associated international commerce, and the exchange of ideas. Typically, these monuments will stand at the heart of the old port, in the nearby shipyards, or in the old warehouses, markets and exchanges, in the sailor-town neighborhoods that were the physical center and socio-economic heart of these first urban concentrations – in natural harbors or at the confluence of rivers with the sea.

Today more and more people the world over live alongshore – and more are moving there still to relocate to harbor cities with rich regional histories – where the waterfront and port facilities are being modernized to accommodate the old. These cities are proud of their revitalized ocean-related historical architecture, brick and iron buildings adapted to the 21st century. The old fish sheds and docks are mostly gone, the buyers and sellers, product distributors and processors, lobster boats and draggers displaced and re-located inland to anonymous warehouses serviced by trucks. The loss of the Fulton Fish Market in lower Manhattan in New York and the Tsukijii Market in Tokyo are two of the most egregious examples.

What is left behind? Usually it's a fishermen's memorial, a statue, an empty after-thought of a proud history of ocean enterprise and harvest from the sea. It seems a cruel indifference to abandon that authenticity, that formative force in the building of community, to permit an insensitive forgetfulness of family, friends, and neighbors gone before, once lost at sea, now lost to memory.

RECIPROCITY

This is a critical time for gratitude and giving – for health, and peace, and the best of the world we live in. Let me suggest reciprocity as a concept for consideration as a value on which to build our response for all this good, and to the environmental sustainability of the terrestrial and ocean systems on which we depend for survival. Reciprocity is a state of mutual exchange, the categorization of an action by its motivation and consequence in relationship to another, and let me suggest these thoughts:

What if we accepted the power of reciprocity as a standard of behavior at all levels, in all areas of exchange, with Nature? What if we acknowledged that the land and sea provide us value, not for the taking and exhausting as an entitlement, but as the giving of a gift, the making of a loan, with a consequent obligation that we give back that value through complementary behavior, equitable patterns of consumption, and forms of exchange that sustain Nature through accepted future obligation? What if we accept such a reciprocal relationship and system of connection with Nature as our obligation, our contribution, to ourselves, our children, and the public good?

Let me offer three illustrative statements, with examples of what I mean: First: By not taking, we are giving back. If we choose to forego or reduce our consumption of fossil fuels or plastic bags or tuna, we are leaving that value for others, a collective choice

that, taken to scale, will extend or conserve that resource at a sustainable level.

Second: By paying a fair price for what we need and use, we are giving back. If we pay for our consumption at a level of true cost – withdraw subsidies for fossil fuels; reinvest such underwriting in clean technology; price water as the most valuable commodity on earth; reparation from environmental destruction as part of regulatory requirement and permit fees; increase taxes and royalties to establish financial disincentives for polluting industries; allocate incentives to support of non-polluting alternatives; all based on the value added by environmental protection and sustainability outcomes.

Third: By acting and applying these values, we are giving back. Modify personal, family, and community behaviors in every way possible to affirm these values through action. Become a sustainability citizen—a *Citizen of the Ocean*. Set an example. Sign petitions. Vote. Demonstrate when necessary. Communicate your commitment at every level, and hold others accountable in your daily purchases, your employment, your investments, civic organizations of which you are a member, schools that you attend or have attended, churches that you belong to, recreational activities that you enjoy, and politicians that you support.

Communicate. Advocate by example. And amplify your voice by joining other exemplars into a movement of giving back.

Some will react to these thoughts as politically naïve, impractical, impossible, too radical, too whatever – all the predictable responses by those who don't care, whose personal benefit is threatened, or who are afraid of any change. What I am describing here actually is a democratic process and expression of popular will based not on narrow ideology, but on our understanding of the consequences for us all if we fail to act.

Reciprocity makes every one of us a winner, everyone a builder, everyone a giver. It is a simple framework that allows us to understand another way of being, how to support, individually and collectively, a shift from our present way that is making us all losers, all destroyers, and all takers until we have nothing left. Is that really what we want for the land, for the ocean, for ourselves and our future?

Reciprocity. It seems so clear.

Think what the land gives us.
Think what the ocean gives us.
Are we not obligated to give back?

The sea connects all things.

PETER NEILL is founder and director of the World Ocean Observatory, a web-based place of exchange for information and educational services about the health of the ocean. Peter is a frequent speaker at conferences related to fresh water, ocean issues, fisheries, maritime culture, sustainability, policy, and education.

Throughout his career Peter has dedicated his expertise to organizations devoted to marine affairs, education, and culture. He contributes to a number of environmental blogs and has appeared in numerous documentaries on The History Channel, Discovery, and the National Geographic Society.

He lives in Maine with his partner, visual artist Mary Barnes.

OTHER TITLES BY PETER NEILL

NON-FICTION

Aqua Terra (2020)

The Once and Future Ocean (2016)

On a Painted Ocean (1998)

Great Maritime Museums of the World (1991)

Maritime America (1988)

FICTION

3 (2014)

Acoma (1978)

Mock Turtle Soup (1972)

A Time Piece (1970)

ANTHOLOGIES

American Sea Writing (2000)

The City: American Experience (1978)

To re-ignite determination and commitment, sometimes it is best to let our feelings release to clear and revive our spirit. These few pieces, distilled as personal experience and emotion, are, for me, just that, thoughts, provoked by tactile and psychological contact with the ocean and valued as the core of our individual commitment to optimism and continuation.

Please accept them as glimpses, epiphanies, illuminations, presuming, like poetry, to provide some inner justification for engagement, some shared oceanic connection between us as writer and reader, conjoined as active global citizens in the shared knowledge of the ocean's fecundity, generosity, and capacity for sustenance and life.



Photo by Sean Kernan

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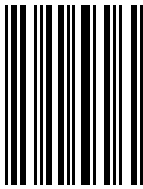
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