



“Soul on the Tide”

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from *Hearth: A Global Conversation on Community, Identity, and Place*

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Sometimes I get this image that my soul, anchored along the shore, floats in and out on the waxing and waning tides. In fact my actual house, between the shore dunes and the pines, anchors me on this coastal morning. In metaphor, my life vessel swings in the tides of time. Sometimes gently. Sometimes inner storms rage and my vessel bucks, and this mooring-place is that steadies me.

Many a *house* would do—but it could scarcely be just any *place*. My place is on the eastern end of Long Island, New York City and way out past where the island—which is named “Long” for a reason—splits into two forks that poke eastward for another forty miles. I’m near the east end of the south fork, the one that holds the ocean on its south and safe-keeps a bevy of bats and islands on its north in the scissored expanse between itself and its sibling northern fork. At night or during storms I can often hear the ocean surf along the south side of our narrow fork, but my little house is on the bay side, along the gentle shore facing Block Island Sound. So, like I said, not just any place. For me the meaning of home is the place where, when you arrive from wide wanderings, you can harbor your heart right where it wants to be. My place is a special anchorage—for some good reasons.

The light: that’s one thing. The seasons, another. The haunts of varied waters—ocean, harbor, sound, marshes—another yet. Together, they sum to one place, this holy trinity of coast, season, light.

And what is it about the light here? Is it that the waters reflect light up into the clouds, which suffuse it back so that, between water and sky in the vapor off the sea, the light doesn’t so much shine as glow? I’m not sure what causes it, but I’m sure that at times, usually in calm airs, the light here becomes glorious.

Other things—more obvious to me than the widely appreciated light—seem overlooked by others. “I’ve been coming here every summer for forty years,” one summer-neighbor told me, “and I’ve never seen any of the things you talk about.” I wasn’t sure how to gently suggest that there’s more to the place than wine and cheese. Visitors here to Long Island’s waterborne east end come, overwhelmingly, for scenery and socials. Those who seem most outgoing seem least likely to actually go outside. For many, there’s one season (summer), one acceptable forecast (sunny), one place (the beach), one animal (deer), one bird (seagull). It’s not that I don’t like spending time with people—some of my best friends are human—it’s just that few people are more interesting than an hour spend outside.

Some people appreciate what they have and some don’t, and appreciation seems to have a lot to do with going outside. At a recent dinner party the host complained of her dissatisfaction with her kitchen cabinets and the location of her stove (both of which looked spotless and perfect to me), and her fear of aging gracelessly. She fretted as though reordering her countertops might gain her some reprieve from time. I share, of course, her all-too-human fear. But I write myself a different prescription: never mind what you have; attend to deeper meanings and things that matter. Right outside her door a large and beautiful bay stood ready to grant as much



timelessness as is available. She asked if we had herons around here, or maybe egrets; she'd seen a bird. There were herons visible right now from her dock, I replied. Great blues. And though I said nothing, I thought about how much more than with cabinets and countertops might she have enhanced her surroundings, how much more outer and inner beauty might she have summoned, if we'd simply say on her dock watching those herons as the shifting daylight altered the blues and hues of their layered feathers, if we'd let them show us the grace in all living things, reminding us in their stately patience that life is its own affirmation.

As the sun went down, a beautiful full moon rose like a ripe peach. Oh, I could have done something with that moon! And with only three moons per summer I felt the loss acutely as I say on her gorgeous patio listening to the list of complaints my host was lodging against her spotless cabinets and sturdy stove. The moon, I knew, was urging the ocean tides into fierce, powerful motion. The full moon of August creates perhaps the best tide of the year for hunting our greatest inshore fish: huge striped bass. The biggest fish feed when the tide runs hardest. During the many days between new and full moons when the current is less urgent, those big fish make themselves so spread out and scarce that they seem nonexistent. During the exceptional incoming current that occurs on the full moon tide, though, the whole sea off the point runs over drowned boulder ridges like a mile-wide river. And then thirty- to forty-pound fish gather for their nighttime hunt. Such a big and meaty being surging and throbbing on your taut line in the darkness means feeling and stealing a little of that tide-stemming power; it means that for only one death inflicted one reaps many meals to share with a story behind them. This calm, moon-bright evening was among the best few nights of the short summer—of the year—to obtain some very good food in the oldest and most satisfying way: by the adventure of catching it.

But for me that night there would be no fishing, and the moon would remain just an object in the sky, and no amount of howling—were I inclined—could narrow that gap.

Had I been shrewder I would have declined the dinner party, sending respectful regrets. And then I could have headed to the boat, but not before sharing sundown with my across-the-street neighbors J. P. and Marilyn, who are the greatest aficionados of skies, cloudscapes, and sunsets. In their eighties, they live in a shack that J. P.'s father built in the 1930s for one hundred and fifty dollars' worth of building supplies. It's tiny—maybe four hundred square feet—crammed with mementoes and artifacts. J. P. and Marilyn happen to own what has been time-ripened into several million dollars' worth of land. But they are wise enough to keep their shack and sand dune and sky, where the spirit has unlimited room to roam and the mind to muse, and the sunsets are world class. Any material trade “up” would be a decisive spiritual downgrade. Smart people. Rooted, appreciative. Living in their tiny shack, their mansion of gratuities.

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Ours is a locale of riches generously offered, seldom sought. The ever-changing light, the ever-shifting migrations of creatures of the waters and the skies, the woodlands and the wetlands; the place welcomes more intimate looks. Put in some time, surprises begin to come.

Because I like looking for things, I favor a calm overcast. Diffuse light, soft shadows, a low sun, the golds of dawn and dusk; these I prefer. As with painting or photography, so for the eye itself. For richness of color and the sightings of nonhuman beings, I look to both ends of the day



while the sun is near contact with the horizon. Any season. There's a lot to see, especially because we live along the waterlines.

Water makes the world kin; its fluidity a great conveyor. And in addition to the coast, we have the luck of latitude. Our particular latitude is a kind of crossroads. In the span of a year here, arctic migrants and tropical animals cross tracks. One can see a snowy owl on a frigid dune in February, overlooking the same bay that by summer's end will float sea turtles and tropical butterfly fishes. Compared to almost anywhere, we enjoy wide possibilities.

So many animals are always on the move, that each month seems its own season. The birds and fishes, the turtles and whales, come and go in epic migrations. More than once, a spring morning has brought me one hundred looks along the beach; a summer morning one hundred whales far at sea; an autumn morning ten thousand swallows in the marsh. And even a winter morning in the "empty" beach finds sanderlings scurrying between the wipe of waves, in the narrow span of sand between tides.

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Like today/ Mild day and mild swell, a snoring surf. And there, scurrying along—sanderlings.

These sanderlings breed high in the Arctic in the short flare of summer. They spend winter as far south as Patagonia, but some winter this far north, keeping us Long Islanders company in the sparest time of year. So I see some in every season. They're usually busy probing for food from wet sand in the moments between waves, their bills bobbing like needles on sewing machines, working one of the thinnest threads of habitat on Earth.

Once, from my kayak, I was watching about twenty sanderlings mixed with a few dunlins and ruddy turnstones on the shoreline. Suddenly a merlin streaked meteorically past me. Despite all the flock's eyes, the alarm went up too late. Unlucky timing. The merlin struck the last bird rising, pinning it to the sand with its talons while steadying itself with wings and tail feathers spread tripod-like. But when a rushing wave threatened to inundate them both, the merlin let go and the sanderling achieved an unlikely escape. Lucky timing.

And so you can tell by all these stories, here's a thing that makes it *home*: experiences connect time. What you've seen enriches whatever you see, even when you're not seeing much.

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Beyond the breakers, those ducks over there—they're called surf scoters. They, too, nest in the Arctic. No one knows how the word *scoter* originated. Yet two other scoter species, white-winged and black—live in the open ocean here all winter, never coming ashore, never taking cover of any kind—no matter the bitter gales or the long and frigid nights. Eiders, red-breasted mergansers—they all stay absolutely dry and adequately warm in their duck-down jackets, save their feet. And to save their bare feet the prospect of draining their core body heat into the insatiable frigidity of the sea, the blood vessels in their legs form a countercurrent heat exchanger. Blood going to the feet passes through an intermeshed system of capillaries so that before the warm blood from their body goes into their feet, its heat is transferred to cooled blood coming



back from their toes. Warming the returning blood sends the warmth back into the body before it could drain away into the cold ocean through bare toes and. Webbing, conserving their precious heat of life.

Eastward off the tip of the beach at Montauk Point, sea ducks pile in by the tens of thousands for the whole winter. The food necessary to sustain thirty thousand ducks for months...If each bird eats—I'll guess—a quarter pound of food a day for three months, that would be 675,000 pounds of mussels, little crabs, and the like.

A few harlequin ducks—stunning in their boldly harlequin-patterned blue and white and russet plumage—sometimes spend their winters among the surf boulders at a place called Ditch Plains, though never on the open-sand beaches. Why? I'm not sure. The mysteries are many.

The big white birds flying a little farther offshore are gannets. They follow the herring of autumn. When they fold up and plunge, they send geysers of spray. Just like that one, yes; and sometimes a big flock, hundreds, will hurl themselves like thunderbolts, like white missiles, into the sea. And when we're out in the fall fishing for anything that's chasing herring, from bluefish to tuna, gannets will be around us. Canadian breeders, they winter from here all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico. Hundreds got oiled in the BP Deepwater Horizon blowout, but there were plenty saved from that nightmare mess by the sheer vernal luck of having already started back north on the breath of lengthening days.

Recently we've been a bit concerned about the loons. Right before they travel northward in May, loons molt their flannel pajamas for plush new satin breeding plumage. Just beautiful. But in autumn they arrive when the fish are migrating and the nets are many, and we sometimes find them drowned and washed ashore. We'd like to do something about that. But you meet resistance when nets are all some people have spanning the continual gap between themselves and unpaid bills.

The challenges are many, yes. But not everything is getting scarcer. Animals that are much more abundant now than when I was a kid include, to mention a few, the long-winged ospreys, the sea bass, and the whales. In recent years I've even seen whales from shore. Falcons are back. Eagles are coming back—there's a lot of recovery going on.

Way up ahead—is that just driftwood? My binoculars reveal an almost horselike profile: gray seal. We usually see harbor seals. Thanks to legal protection that works *most* of the time, they're both recovering from the depletion brought on by fishermen's enmity. Sometimes, our visitor will be a harp seal, having been born on Canadian ice as one of the famous white-coated pups so infamously slaughtered for fur by the hundreds of thousands. And still they come, as if forgiving us, or begging mercy.

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All seasons bring their triumphs and their tragedies. For me the most triumphal season is summer. Watching the world grow back, fill up. Ospreys attending their huge stick-nests, so many fishes. Travel just a few miles from shore and the green water changes to clear blue in the realm of dolphins and shearwaters and sharks and turtles.

I think of them all—and I don't mean this just metaphorically—as my neighbors. That's who they are. It's who we all are. We live here and we all search for our food in the same waters.



When I'm searching for fish I often seek the counsel of seabirds. They are professional fish-finders, and following them has allowed me to put many a fine meal on my table.

Following the terns also allowed me to catch my first inkling of how rapidly the ocean is changing. For a decade I studied terns formally and intensively. Their breeding, feeding, hatching, the growth and survival of chicks. For my graduate studies I put numbered leg bands on thousands of just-hatched tern chicks. Two were found breeding on Great Gull Island just across the Sound from where we're standing, *twenty-five years* after I banded them. Think of it: migrating each year from Long Island to South America and back, no shelter of any kind, for two and a half decades.

For studying them I'd earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Ecology. I thought, why "Philosophy"? It took thirty years for me to realize how much philosophy there is in watching terns, to understand that in all of philosophy there is only one important question: How ought we live? These creatures provide answers that have withstood the test of deep time.

You don't sense the answers during ceaseless travels; you see them by coming home, and letting a few decades coil up in the same spot, giving your mind the room to consider what the world beyond our human borders all means, having the courage to ask whether it means anything at all, and having the humility to realize that it means everything.

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Each season brings certain rituals in specific haunts. As early as February we witness one of the strangest, most seemingly unlikely migrations. Even on frosted nights, and especially after rains, salamanders come out of woodland burrows and somehow navigate hundreds of yards to little freshwater pools, meeting other salamanders, producing and fertilizing eggs. Standing in nighttime woods amidst fallen logs, it's difficult imagining salamanders, at a cold crawl, successfully navigating to tiny half-frozen ponds.

Wearing warm boots and rainproof jackets we find marbled, blue-spotted, and tiger salamanders. Theirs is a strange life. And it gets stranger. Our blue-spotted salamander is a rare form of the species living in Montauk at Long Island's tip, and in Nova Scotia, and almost nowhere else. Blue-spotted have a bizarre reproductive résumé. In most of their range, they're almost all female. To breed, they have to mate with a male—and any related species will do. But while they require sperm penetration of the egg cell to initiate embryo development, the egg usually *discards the sperm's genes*—and begins *cloning* itself. But the sperm's genome, no so easily jilted, is often incorporated into the fetus in the form of an added genome. Isn't that bizarre? And why? No one knows. Again, we may note, the mysteries are many. The result animals with extra sets of genes, called polypoids. But sometimes the male genome may even replace part of the female genome. The scientists who managed to figure all this out termed this reproductive mode "kleptogenesis." Stolen beginnings. I'm not sure what's more amazing, the biology or the naturalists who perceived it all.

The salamanders of late winter are followed in those same ponds by the spring peepers whose chorus is surely among nature's most joyful noises. As Emerson said, each moment of the year has its own beauty. The seasons turn our one time, our moment here, into so many different times. The habitats turn this one place, our place, into so many different places. The migrants



who span the hemisphere in their continual comings and goings let us travel more and more widely by staying rooted. We're so spoiled. And the more we look around here, the more we spoil ourselves.

On a good day here, a skilled birder can sight a hundred species and a skilled fisher can catch a hundred -pound fish and a practiced clammer can carry home a hundred clams. Not everyone from this place can do all these things. Skill and know-how is still required. But the *place*—this special, varied place—makes the people who can. Those are the people not just *from* but *of* this place.

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I want to live up to the place, to honor it. And sharing helps to honor it, and by honoring I hope to help keep it. And if I help keep it, perhaps I've justified my existence a little bit. Is *home* the place where one justifies one's existence? Is it the feeling that comes when a place inspires us to belong to it as our home? Increasingly—after decades—I apprehend the miraculous in the mundane. The sparkle of water. Miraculous! Minnows in a bucket. Miraculous! The warmth ignited from a pile of cold wood as freezing wind shrieks across the icy bay—miraculous! Knowing during long, languid days and long, cold nights that seasons turn and tides flow in and out; that for now I am right here with my soul afloat, moored safely in this ancient feeling called home. Miraculous.