

An aerial photograph of a mountainous landscape. The foreground and middle ground show a mix of green forested areas and reddish-brown, rocky terrain. The background features more distant, hazy mountain peaks under a light sky.

ALAN WATTS

CLOUD-HIDDEN
Whereabouts Unknown
A Mountain Journal

*Cloud-hidden,
Whereabouts Unknown*

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山水

April 1970

Ever since I can remember anything at all, the light, the smell, the sound, and motion of the sea have been pure magic. Even the mere intimation of its presence—gulls flying a little way inland, the quality of light in the sky beyond hills which screen it from view, the lowing of foghorns in the night. If ever I have to get away from it all, and in the words of the Chinese poet “wash all the wrongs of life from my pores,” there is simply nothing better than to climb out onto a rock, and sit for hours with nothing in sight but sea and sky. Although the rhythm of the waves beats a kind of time, it is not clock or calendar time. It has no urgency. It happens to be timeless time. I know that I am listening to a rhythm which has been just the same for millions of years, and it takes me out of a world of relentlessly ticking clocks. Clocks for some reason or other always seem to be marching, and, as with armies, marching is never to anything but doom. But in the motion of waves there is no marching rhythm. It harmonizes with our very breathing. It does not count our days. Its pulse is not

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in the stingy spirit of measuring, of marking out how much still remains. It is the breathing of eternity, like the God Brahma of Indian mythology inhaling and exhaling, manifesting and dissolving the worlds, forever. As a mere conception this might sound appallingly monotonous, until you come to listen to the breaking and washing of waves.

Thus, I have come to live right on the edge of the water. I have a studio, library, a place for writing on an old ferryboat tied up on the waterfront of Sausalito, north of San Francisco. I suppose this place is the nearest thing in America to a Mediterranean fishing village. Steep hills clustered with little houses, and below along the rim of the bay a forest of masts rocking almost imperceptibly against a background of water and wooded promontories. In some ways this is a rather messy waterfront, not just piers and boats, but junkyards, industrial buildings, and all the inevitable "litterature" of our culture. But somehow the land-and-seascape absorbs and pacifies the mess. Sheds and shacks thrown together out of old timbers and plywood, heaps of disused lumber, rusted machinery, and rotting hulls—all of this is transformed in the beneficent presence of the sea.

Perhaps it is the quality of the light, especially early in the morning and towards evening, when the distinction between sky and water becomes uncertain, when the whole of space becomes opalescent in a sort of pearly luminous grey, and when the rising or setting moon is straw yellow. In this light all the ram-

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bling mess of sheds and junkyards is magical, blessed with the patterns of masts and ropes and boats at anchor. It all puts me in mind of landfalls a long way off, and all the voyages one has dreamed of.

I look out now across a wide space of nothing but water and birds ending in a line of green slopes with clumps of trees. Right over the edge of the boat the water contains seemingly just under the surface a ceaselessly moving network of reflected sunlight through which a school of very tiny fish passes delightfully uncaught. Yet only a few yards from where we are moored, tackle shops sell the salmon and crabs with which this particular area abounds.

This is the paradox of the ocean. Sand, flying spray, pebbles and shells, driftwood, sparkling water, space incredibly luminous with cloudbanks along horizons underlying skies into which one's imagination can reach without end. But under the surface of both sky and water there is the grim business of preying. Men and birds against fish, fish against fish. The tortuous process of life continuing by the painful transformation of one form or body into another. To creatures who do not anticipate and reflect imaginatively on this holocaust of eating and being eaten, this is perhaps not so terrible. But poor man! Skillful beyond all other animals, by being able to think in time, and abstractly knowing the future, he dies before he is dead. He shrinks from the shark's teeth before they bite him, and he dreads the alien germ long, long before its banquet begins.

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At this moment I see a gull that has picked a crab from a tidepool. Sprawled now upon the sand, the crab shrinks from the walls of its shell which is resounding to the tap, tap, tap of the gull's beak. Who's that knocking at my door?

I suppose the shell of a crab, a clam, or a mussel is the boundary of its universe. To put ourselves into their position, we would have to imagine a knocking sound louder and louder, a sound which doesn't come from anywhere in particular, from some door, the walls, the ceiling, the floor. No, instead think of a knocking which comes from everywhere, beating against all the boundaries of space and consciousness, intruding like some utterly unknown dimension into our known and familiar world.

"Let me in! Let me in! I love you so much I could eat you. I love you to the very core, especially the soft, juicy parts, the vitals most tender and alive. Surrender to this agony, and you will be transformed into Me. Dying to yourself you will become alive as Me. We shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, on the morning when the last trumpet sounds. For behold! I am He who stands at the door and knocks."

There is simply no way of getting around all this. The gull can't really be said to be rapacious or greedy. It's just that his being alive at all is the same thing as eating crabs. Sea birds are transformations of fish; men are transformations of wheat, steers, and chickens. A love for the food is the very agony of the food. To object to this inseparability of pleasure and

pain, life and death, is to object to existence. But, of course, we cannot help objecting when our time comes. *Objecting to pain is pain.* So far as we know, the gull and the fish don't philosophize. They appear instead to enjoy life when they are eating, and hate it when being eaten. But they don't reflect upon the process as a whole and say, "How rough to have to work so hard for a living," or, "It's just hell having to watch out all the time for those damn gulls." I'm sure that in their world this is all something that just goes along with life like having eyes or feet or wings.

But man, with his astonishing ability to stand aside from himself and think about himself—in short, to comment on life, man has done something which confuses his own existence down to its roots. For the more sensitive he is, the more he finds the very act of living in conflict with his moral conscience. Upon reflection a universe so arranged that there is no way of living except by destroying other lives seems to be a hideous mistake, not a divine but a devilish creation. Of course, there is the myth that once upon a time things were quite otherwise, that there was no death, that the lion lay down with the lamb. But that since then there has been a fall, a vast error which has corrupted the whole of nature. But all that must have been eons ago, perhaps in some other galaxy where the conditions of life were quite different. Or perhaps the ghastly mistake was just that step in man's evolution which made it possible for him to reflect, to comment upon life as a whole. For in being able to stand

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aside from life and think about it, he also put himself outside it and found it alien. Perhaps thinking about the world and objecting to its whole principle are simply two aspects of but one activity. The very words suggest, do they not, that *we must object to everything that becomes an object?* But aren't there also times when we speak of something that we know as a *subject*—the subject of this book, the subject I am now studying. I wonder, then, *would it be possible to subject to life instead of objecting to it?* Is this merely playing with words, or does it possibly mean something?

Now, if the gulls and the fish do not philosophize, they have no consciousness of life being good as a whole or bad as a whole. So when we philosophize and pity the poor fish, that really turns out to be just our own problem. From its own standpoint, the world of plants and animals and insects and birds does not find itself problematic at all. There isn't the slightest evidence to suggest such dis-ease. On the contrary, I incline to feel that all these creatures really "swing" or "groove." They go on living right up to the very moment when the game is no longer worth the candle. I'm quite sure that they don't lecture each other about their duties or worry about where they are going after they die.

Isn't it, then, an enormous relief for us men to see that the plant and animal world is not a problem to itself, and that we are wasting intellectual energy in making moral judgments about it? But, of course, we can't return to the unreflective consciousness of the animal world

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space so real because of the light and color can be seen as joining things instead of separating them.

And, oh yes, I have just discovered that that knocking on the walls of all space and consciousness is my own heart beating.



August 1970

There is the water, and now there is also the mountain. (In Chinese the two characters for "mountain" and "water" mean "landscape.") I have the use of a small one-room cottage on the slopes of the mountain—Tamalpais—which I can see from the ferryboat. It is hidden in a grove of high eucalyptus trees and overlooks a long valley whose far side is covered with a dense forest of bay, oak, and madrone so even in height that from a distance it looks like brush. No human dwelling is in view, and the principal inhabitant of the forest is a wild she-goat who has been there for at least nine years. Every now and then she comes out and dances upon the crown of an immense rock which rises far out of the forest. No one goes to this forest. I have been down to its edge, where there is a meadow, good for practicing archery, and I think that one of these days I will explore the forest. But then again I may not, for there are places which people should leave alone.

In these days of overpopulation and social evils crying for concern it may seem wicked to withdraw from the crowd

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—even from the bohemian and hippie crowd of the Sausalito waterfront. But, to tell the truth, I have some—but little—faith in the historical idealism of “human progress.” Like the planet itself, human history goes round. There are dawns of hope and sunsets of sorrow, springs of aspiration and autumns of despair, even though one’s attitude can so be changed that one sees in autumn the beginning of a cycle whose end is spring. This is not saying, “To hell with people!”—as if I were somehow superior to the common man, a term which actually means the Man common to us all and thus (if I may be forgiven a pun in Sanskrit) the *atman*, our supra-individual Self.

There are situations when one *owes* solitude to other people, if only not to bother them. But, more than this, the multitude needs solitaries as it needs postmen, doctors, and fishermen. They go out and they send, or bring, something back—even if they send no word and vanish finally from sight. The solitary is as necessary to our common sanity as wilderness, as the forest where no one goes, as the waterfall in a canyon which no one has ever seen or heard. We do not *see* our hearts. I do not expect to be all that solitary for, as a paradoxical person, I am also gregarious and favor the rhythm of withdrawal and return. But in the mountain I watch the Tao, the way of nonhuman nature (if there is really any such thing) and feel myself into it to discover that I was never outside, because nature “peoples” just as much as it “forests.”

To realize this one must go beyond what

And the Mountain

both distinguishes and segregates us as human beings—our thoughts and ideas. To put it in a rather extreme way: We are misled when we believe that our ideas represent or mirror nature, because that sets us outside nature as mere observers. The tree does not represent the fish, though both use light and water. The point is rather that our thoughts and ideas *are* nature, just as much as waves on the ocean and clouds in the sky. The mind grows thoughts as the field grows grass. If I think about thoughts, as if there were some "I," some thinker watching them from outside, there arises the infinite regression of thinking about thinking, etc., because this "I" is itself a thought, and thoughts, like trees, grow of themselves. In solitude it is easier for thoughts to leave themselves alone. It is, thus, a mistake to try to get rid of thoughts, for who will push them out? But when thoughts leave themselves alone the mind clears up.

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illusion in the sense that I, too, am in flow and likewise have no final destination—for can anyone imagine finality as a form of life? My death will be the disappearance of a particular pattern in the water.

Feeling all that I can possibly feel, aware of every level and dimension of experience, I find nothing but a streaming. If I ask myself *what* is streaming, I cannot imagine an answer even though I have the definite impression that “It”—some energy, some basic gazoozle—is streaming in every kind of stream, streams of rock, streams of light, streams of air, streams of consciousness. This “It” is not different from the streaming and its patterns as clay is different from the shape of this or that particular vessel. It isn’t the stuff of which waves are made. There is simply no way of thinking or talking about It, and the significance of this is not so much that there is indeed some unthinkable and transcendental It, but that there is absolutely no way of standing outside It and getting hold of It. It could of course be myself, considered as the relatively enduring center of all my experiences. But if this is so, myself is beyond my reach, and the more I try to pin it down, the more it dissolves into the streaming—into various kinds of pulsing and textures of tensing only arbitrarily distinguishable from the sights and sounds of the world outside me. If this “I” should try to stop the streaming or to manage it all, there is only a futile state of tension without the intended result.

But this particular kind of tension against the stream is habitual, and the frustration