

SEA AROUND US, SEA WITHIN US

Returning to the Source for Guidance



by K. Lauren de Boer

I'M STARING straight up at the underbelly of the Golden Gate bridge. I've seen the bridge often, always with a sense of delight at its towering grace, but this is a new vantage point. The sway of the boat beneath me forces me to look down again to keep from getting too queasy, and when I do, spray shoots up over the prow, misting my face. I taste salt as I gaze up again, this time at the sheer rocky shoulder of the Marin headlands. They rise above us, draped with a green shawl of heather looming like some great elder who silently watches over our passage across the threshold of the Golden Gate. We're swept outward into the huge expanse of the Pacific, headed for the Farallon Islands.

I'm on the New Seeker a fishing boat. My preoccupation with the fate of the world's oceans has brought me here. I wanted a way to be at sea for a day, to feel the oceans' presence directly, to get beyond my bookish sense of them. For me the Pacific Ocean has been a vast field for the imagination, stretching without end, a global titan, like the god Oceanus, who with the age of charting and discovery came to represent the stranger, unknown waters to the Western mind. And beneath the surface, a story of death, birth, and remarkable vigor and fecundity, relentlessly enacted. Often, standing on a seashore, sensing the depth and the expanse before me, I've felt a longing that I've always thought rivers might have to reach the sea: the desire for return, for union. I used to fantasize about having the power to freely navigate the underwater universe. It seemed endless and the beings inhabiting them numberless. The wonders I would encounter from deep sea caves, to luminous blue water, to delicate comb jellies, to the formidable leviathan! The oceans—so huge as to be untouchable, impossible to bring totally under human sway. Our destructive powers stopped at the cusp of land and sea. Or so we've thought.

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There is a cacophony on deck as grown men turn into boys in free abandon, forgetting themselves, babbling their excitement to each other with each new catch. We're drifting just off the Farallones, fishing for rockfish and ling cod, using small flounder called sand dabs for bait. The action is quick. The scene has the feel of play, but instead of tire swings and merry-go-rounds, there is blood on the deck, seawater and slime, and giant ling cod writhing. The great maws of the fish open as if in astonishment to be yanked into another element, and close again in consternation to be so duped. When I look into the eyes, there is something so cold and ancient, I can't quite grasp it, although it feels familiar. I can only translate it into more human terms as a kind of silent reproach, a reprimand from the deep. It's not the killing, but an absence of something. There is no prayer, no ritual marking the giving and taking. Some old pact of sacrifice and remembrance seems violated.

I look out in the direction of the Farallones, and the moment I do, something I've never witnessed unfolds. A dozen or so sleek brown bodies burst from the grey water in unison. They glide for several yards, then plummet again. Barely a splash in their wake as they reenter the waves, nor in their reappearing. Sea lions, leaping the way dolphins leap, with the grace of a single body. As I watch them, rapt, the riot on deck sinks to a muffle and the rock of the boat beneath me, rising, falling, swelling, dipping, as I grip the rail, seems to correspond in some way to the rise and fall of the sea lions. For a moment, I'm in a dance with them. The gulls and murrelets, the islands, the sea lions leaping in unison, are all centers of life converging

into a breathtaking vibrancy. I soar off the deck, backward in time, outward in space, then as quickly I plunge beneath the surface into the depths, lost in my longing again.

I'm jolted back on deck by a loud shout just to my right: "I see color!" This is the signal to the crewman with a net that a big fish someone is fighting is close enough to the surface to be visible. I look down and see a deep orange surge of flesh underwater that quickly sinks out of sight as the fish flees the light and the air in one last desperate plunge. A giant red rockfish, a bocaccio, known to diners as red snapper, brought up from the depths. A boy next to me, perhaps ten, reels and reels, holds on tightly, grimacing, reels again. Occasionally he looks up to find his father's face, as if for reassurance. A long-handled net plunges down and back up, and the fish is up on deck. The flesh flares like a sunrise, the scales glisten, the eyes bulge grotesquely from the massive head. Amazed shouts issue from the boy's father. The child seems oddly quiet, almost passive, as if reserving judgment about the value of this experience. It was to be the largest catch of the day. Big reds like this one are rare now, I realize, illegal to keep in some places. The grief, the excitement, the absence of ceremony, all mill around me on deck. I try to read the boy's mood and I can't. What will he remember? Will there be a rockfish like this when he is grown into a man? Is this a passage, or merely another diversion to be inventoried among his net surfing and I-pod world? What will mark this for him?



There are around 70 varieties of rockfish in the northeastern Pacific. Most of them are slow growing and some kinds, like the bocaccio, can live to be 200 years old, placing them among the longest lived vertebrates on the planet. Based on its size, this fish could be over 100 years old. With a mix of feelings, I look at the burlap bag hanging from a post on the railing, that holds my limit of rock fish and ling cod. Blood drips onto the deck beneath and flows beneath our boots. The bodies of sand dabs lie strewn about the deck. The boat rocks and dips, the gulls cry, and I sink and rise along with them, riding the tension of excitement and grief, like waves. Seawater surmounts the railing and lashes the fisherman. My rod, set in its

socket on the railing, bends double. I reel in another rockfish. Someone exclaims that it's an "olive." I hold the fish in my hands, take in its stunning olive green flesh. With a silent bow, surreptitiously, I slip it over the edge, back into the gray water.

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BALANCING A NEW TENSION

The wildness of millions of square miles of ocean seemed inviolable to me, and thus, as a comforting touchstone to return to for guidance, they loomed large in my imagination. The great swell of the sea would always conceive and give birth. They were an endless well and vista for conceiving thought too, and for the imagination. The god Proteus, from Greek mythology, was a shape-shifter who could foretell the future, but only if someone were able to capture him. To be "protean" means to be versatile, adaptable, capable of assuming many forms.

Our destiny as a species could always be defined from the great womb of the sea. It's where we came from; humans, and other species, were ultimately safe within her embrace. She is the great mother, "the river girdling the globe," holding Earth's community, regulating the planet's temperature, weather, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and nutrient flows so that life can flourish. Our own imagination has been nurtured by that embrace. To an extent, our identity grew out of the tension created when we evolved out of that embrace long ago, although we never fully left it: A human embryo is 97 percent water, a newborn 77 percent, a full grown person 60 percent. Human blood has the salinity of seawater. As writer Peter Steinhart aptly describes it, we are "miniature oceans, dressed in skin and gone exploring the arid world that rose out of the ancient seas."

Throughout time, people have had to live with tensions that are contingent on conditions due both to human agency and to forces beyond human control. Part of being human in my own country in the post-World War II era was to ride the tension of a burst of optimism brought by material prosperity with the grim revelation of the human capacity to perpetrate violence. Other eras brought other revelations, giving rise to new tensions in their time. Copernicus brought Earth out of the center of the universe and caused a revolution in human thinking, along with the tensions of uncertainty. Today, we face an unprecedented tension, one that vacillates between celebration and loss. We who share the Ecozoic vision are exhilarated by

the promise of a new human identity emerging from a new-found knowledge of our common universe story; we're grief-stricken at the number of species we're sending to extinction.

For nearly ten years, as editor of *EarthLight* magazine, I faced news of the industrial impact of the planet on an almost daily basis. But a recent five-part series in the *LA Times*¹ brought home to me a sense of the human as a planetary power like never before. It was what compelled me to go out to sea. A few highlights:

- Industrial activity is turning the oceans acidic. Massive amounts of carbon dioxide pumped into the atmosphere is absorbed by the oceans. The seas, more acidic today than they have been for 650,000 years, are literally dissolving marine snails, sea stars, sea cumpers, sea urchins, and other animals that support other creatures higher on the food chain.
- 1,000 miles from the nearest city, at the Midway Atoll, albatross chicks are dying, their bellies full of plastic. Adult albatross, foraging at sea for food, encounter vast expanses of floating plastic debris. Mistaking it for food, they feed it to their chicks. This tide of plastic debris has spread throughout the world's oceans creating "garbage patch" areas stretching for hundreds of miles. These giant swirls of plastic debris spin about the globe. One scientist who has studied the Eastern Garbage Patch, midway between San Francisco and Hawaii, has likened it to tracking a beast.
- Toxic algae, blooming from a torrent of nutrients unleashed by farming, deforestation, and urban development are being linked to dead and dying whales, dolphins, seals, sea lions, and other mammals. The neuro-toxins in the algae can kill sea mammals outright or cause seizures and tumors. The California sea lion, a species with "as warm and strong a maternal instinct with a newborn as you can see in any animal," according to a government biologist, are showing no interest in their young, even turning against them, the result of neuro-toxic poisoning.
- We are returning the oceans to a more primeval state. Millions of tons of fertilizer, human and animal waste, and other farm runoff are creating dead zones where rivers run into the sea. Dead zones actually do contain life, but most of it is bacteria and ancient creatures that evolved in a very different kind of ocean. Over 150 dead zones around the world are actually vast areas of a primordial white slime where the more highly evolved sea creatures can't survive.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a UN-commissioned report compiled by over 1,300 scientists worldwide, gives dire warning. An estimated 90% of the total weight of the ocean's large predators—tuna, swordfish, and sharks—has disappeared in recent years. Since 1980,

20% of the world's coral reefs have been destroyed and another 20% badly degraded; 35% of mangroves are gone. In many areas of the sea, the total weight of fish is less than a tenth of levels before the onset of industrial fishing. At least one quarter of marine fish stocks are over-harvested. Newfoundland's cod stocks have collapsed and may never recover.²

These are some of the findings of the report related to the oceans. The extinction of species and the degradation of the planet continue unabated in all ecosystems planet-wide.

The poet Stanley Kunitz writes, in "The Testing-Tree":

*In a murderous time
the heart breaks and breaks and lives by breaking.
It is necessary to go
through dark and deeper dark and not to turn.*

In another poem, "The Layers," he asks: "How shall the heart be reconciled to its feast of losses?"³

Can grief be a feast from which our hearts grow and we find the energy to stay engaged? How do we transform loss into creativity? Loss is natural, an inevitable part of our stay on Earth. Senseless loss, to a conscious self-aware species, is a violation of the divine revelation pouring out to us from the natural world. Much of our decimation of Earth is senseless loss.

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## HOW DO WE LIVE IN AN ECOZOIC WAY?

The Cenozoic Era on Earth has been marked by an astounding diversity of species. The choice before us, writes cultural historian Thomas Berry, is now to create a new era. This era can be driven through our blind faith in technological fixes or it can consciously seek to build "mutually enhancing relations" with Earth's community of life. A Technozoic Era or an Ecozoic Era. Choosing the Ecozoic path isn't simply about following an inventory of green initiatives, important as they might be. Those actions come out of a deeper intention, one that comes out of a capacity to live in the great tensions of our time with equanimity. That is where the creativity resides.

I was concerned for the oceans and so I tried, in my own way, to go to the ocean for guidance. Literally “at sea,” without any answers, what I found on that fishing boat was the very tension we live. Wonder and slaughter, exhilaration and grief, were all played out. I found that answers have more to do with asking the right questions than knowing anything with certainty. To live, to eat, we kill. We do damage. Something dies. It’s an ancient human drama we enact within the Earth community. Because we are consciously self-aware, we need rituals that foster gratitude and that give us the strength to let the mystery and the terror of the conditions of our existence sweep over us. We allow our hearts to break and we allow them to become bigger. Altering our mode of consciousness to that appropriate for the Ecozoic will require reconditioning ourselves, and that may require a willingness to go face to face with darker primordial powers, acknowledging that we need guidance from a greater source.

In his novel *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley draws the picture of a human-created Eden where people are conditioned, not only to be placid and content, but to feel an aversion to the natural world. People drawn to the charms of the countryside, the architects of this world discovered, don’t make productive, consuming citizens. Huxley’s brave new world is one where consuming is a high virtue, the noblest civic duty one can perform. In a scene where the character Bernard makes a blind attempt to break free of the trance of Eden, he pilots his helicopter within 100 feet of the dark, churning sea. His date, Lenina, reacts with horror:

“But it’s horrible,” said Lenina, shrinking back from the window. She was appalled by the rushing emptiness of the night, by the black, foam-flecked water heaving beneath them, by the pale face of the moon, so haggard and distracted among the hastening clouds. “Let’s turn on the radio. Quick!” She reached for the dialing knob on the dashboard and turned it at random.<sup>4</sup>

Bernard, in a rare fit of frustration with their placid existence, has taken her out beyond the comforts of their predictable, fabricated world, to the liminal zone. He feels more alive, “more himself,” when he looks at the dark sea. The prescience of Huxley’s vision tells us that our ideal state is not a conditioned and placid domesticity but in the wild creativity at the edges, the tension, the uncertainties and surprise that the universe brings us. To face them with courage (from the French *coeur* = heart) means to be big-hearted. As with Huxley’s sanitized and streamlined Eden, we have been so conditioned by our wonder-world so as to numb us to the very source of what might guide us. Instead of being enthralled by the powers all around us, we are enthralled by our own cleverness. In a state of sleep, we often fail to feel their presence bodily. We are prisoners of our own ingenuity. It’s not cleverness and ingenuity that will guide us into the future, but humility and openness, a willingness to bear witness. Where we can, and when we are so moved, to take a stand. At the boundary between numbness and

aliveness, we maintain the gaze, not as voyeurs of our own demise, but to keep our vigor and not sink into despair.



## A PRACTICE TO GUIDE US

Still contemplating the oceans, I am on spiritual retreat in a remarkable area of the California coast and I'm out for a walk. With each step, I feel a deepening stillness grow within me. A falling maple leaf catches my eye. I stop. It falls softly to the ground at my feet and for a moment I'm unaccountably transfixed by this event. Quadrillions of leaves have fallen, are falling. Why is this feeling of presence I have to this one leaf important? Because in the moment it falls, I am aware, fully, of the falling. I'm conscious that I'm watching it fall. Its yellow color tells me its lifeblood of chlorophyll has drawn back into the tree, that it's completing its journey from birth to death, returning to Earth, from whence it came. Its death brings forth a new beauty. I let my fingers follow the green striations that follow the leaf's veins, an accent left by chlorophyll that hadn't yet been pulled back into the mother tree. Transformed seawater in the veins of my hand, in the leaf's veins—one carrying chlorophyll, the other carrying blood. The change of a single ion, from magnesium to iron, and chlorophyll becomes blood; we are so close. I feel the leaf's connection to the story of photosynthesis, thus to the relationship of Earth and Sun, and back through time to the birth of stars. My stillness is now linked to some greater equanimity that began with the first flicker of earlier suns, to some embrace from beyond that my mind will never fully grasp.

Stillness, an inner peace, is the first step in what I call the practice of spiritual ecology. In this sense, I mean Spirit as consciousness. Our practice is to apply ecology in a conscious way to our lives not only through the gifts of science, but through respectful presence, through the breath, by being watchful whenever and wherever we are able. To be the witness of our own unfolding in communion with all that is. Our exterior lives will follow, whether it be activism, or building green cities, or educating in Earth literacy, or mentoring a younger person into the Great Story.

The late poet William Stafford wrote, in the poem "You Reading This, Be Ready:"

*Will you ever bring a better gift for the world*

*than the breathing respect that you carry  
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting  
for time to show you some better thoughts?*<sup>5</sup>

Our actions, emerging in this way, will be marked by a great spirit of generosity. We find that our own gifts unite us to the creative powers of the cosmos because that is their source. In a time of great tension and uncertainty, it is necessary to surrender ourselves to what we don't understand, to accept that there are mysteries not fathomable by the conscious mind. Far from a passive state, this involves an active patience, alert to possibility and surprise.

In this stillness, we must let ourselves long. Longing is what will draw us to the core of who we are, to our unique gift. At that core, we find that we are Earth herself longing. To return time and again to Earth for guidance, to let the quality of stillness feed our inner intention, is to find faith in the powers that brought us into being. And so we find faith in ourselves, as the planet evolving. The seas around us and within us, as the source of life, can also be a source of faith, if we go back to them for guidance. Viewed from space, they embrace the planet, as if holding our swirling imagination in a protective membrane, waiting for the next great birth.

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The crew cleans the catch all the way back from the Islands. A riot of gulls appears out of nowhere, feeding on the entrails of the fish cast overboard. I watch them with gratitude. Usually I am several steps distant from the harvest of fish I eat from the supermarket and wielding a filet knife isn't in my repertoire of skills.

As the New Seeker crosses back through the threshold, and we return from the Farallones into our daily lives, I gaze once again at the span of the Golden Gate above us and realize for the first time why I am so moved when I'm in its presence. The bridge represents to me a quality we have for working with, not against the natural world. Despite the uglification of the world brought by the industrial thrust of recent decades, the human imagination can be the architect of great beauty and grace, of contributing, not detracting from, the positive arc of evolution. The Golden Gate is one reminder to me of this capacity in our species. Today, it means something more to me, as a virtue we need to live in the Ecozoic Era, on a new Earth, as a reinvented species.

We began our return to the sea, restless and wild-eyed, long ago. We now need to be bridge-builders, to return to the sea in a different sense, clear-eyed and with humility, for guidance. Our way into the future draws from balancing the tension between our longing for conquest and transcending life's conditions and finding our deepest identity within the Earth community that sustains us. Turning toward the ocean is turning toward the source, asking the universe for guidance, for primary revelation. If we ask the right questions we may feel our way into the answers of how to live.

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2. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005. *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Synthesis*. Island Press, Washington, DC.
3. Stanley Kunitz, *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden*, (W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 32, 82.
4. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (Bantam Books, NY, 1932), p. 60
5. William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New & Selected Poems*, (Graywolf Press, 1999), 45.