

## ISLANDS

A friend pointed out the other day that I lived most of my life on islands. Choice, or chance? Well, chance at first, of course, but in the end choice, definitely. Living on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean is a privileged way to learn. Islands are different. They restrict movement and so force adjustment to the other people on your island and to what the island has to offer, and what it doesn't. You learn to live within boundaries, geographical, social, cultural, financial...

Well, yes, it depends on the size of the island. Sumatra—where I lived my youth, went to school—is a very large island, has (or at least had) many different kinds of people, even though thinly populated then. In the extreme north there was Aceh, whose people had the reputation of being fiercely independent. In the upper middle were people who did not think of themselves as Malay, living in a highland area around a huge inland lake, they wore indigo dyed wraps and painted their skin with indigo. In the far southwest there was a matriarchy with a rich, ancient culture. It had active volcanoes, monsoon swollen rivers, enormous jungles, a rich variety of wild life in all sizes and degrees of danger, now probably extinct. To my eyes a magical world; my world.

The island that I have now lived on for twenty years is larger than the other Hawaiian islands — twice the size of all other islands combined — but thinly populated. Its most obvious distinction is that it is a live volcano. The entire island is one volcano with five different peaks, two of them 14,000 feet above sea level. From the foot of this island to the peaks it is 36,000 feet high. The high peaks have snow in winter, although we are in the tropics. Because of the large bulk reaching high into the atmosphere we have a stunning variety of climates. Officially twenty-eight micro-climates, from mountain meadows to beach, from desert to rain forest. We who live here know that there are many more differences in rain fall, wind, and temperature. I think that the weather here, where I live now, is changing because so much lava rock land has been clear cut of whatever finally managed to grow: it is drier. And drier for land that has very little soil yet, that must rely on rainfall, is critical.

For us who live on and love this island there is something special about it. Something special about our mountains, something mysterious, spiritual. The desolation of a lava desert, virtually impassable, black with tiny glimpses of green, mosses, a sprig of green, has a fascination that never wanes. The mountains draw our eyes that take note of their color which changes hourly, with clouds that hide the middle but leave the top clear. This

island is the home of the Lady Pele, Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes, of destruction and creation. Her presence is undeniable. It is also the home of her (or one of her) lovers, Kamapua'a, a lecherous man with a pig-like face the protector of green, growing things. At the caldera (area of many craters) of Kilauea, one of the outlets on the slope of one of the tops, there is a sharp boundary between the sere, rocky side where the Lady Kele rules, and, abruptly, without anything in between, the green forest of the land protected by Kamapua'a. The west side of the island is the leeward side, dryer, with white (ground coral) beaches. On our side, the east side, we have black (lava sand) beaches and not many of them. Our side is supposed to have more rain, and because of that and our black beaches we have fewer tourists. This side is where the poor people live. But both sides were overrun by speculators during the brief boom we had in earlier years of this century, the crash that followed the bubble. The speculators who made fortunes buying and selling land during the years of madness don't live here. We are left with destroyed land and empty vastly overbuilt houses that do not fit the climate or the spirit of this island.

Our land has changed in a very few years, not because of an eruption of the volcano or an earthquake or a hurricane, but because of the greed of people from elsewhere — that is hard to take.

This island is also a live volcano, magma from the innards of our earth bursts through at least two, occasionally more openings that we, on the surface, can see. We get accustomed to the frequent earth quakes that accompany the lava as it is forced up, and the gases that accompany the lava, and other gases formed where hot lava flows into the ocean, making more land. As the lava flows from holes on the slopes of high mountains it flows at times through areas we have claimed for ourselves. Even with all our powers we cannot halt, or divert, flows of fluid rock. The Hawaiians know and accept that from a few thousand years of experience with what the Lady Pele can and does do. We, newcomers, learn that She takes land and makes land; destroys and also creates. This is the latest island of the chain, still being created. We live where lava is so recent that in many places no soil has formed yet. Fascinating to watch life birthing and changing what was rock to land. Worth the occasional earth quake that shakes us, the sometimes poisonous gases that make my eyes tear, or make breathing difficult.

On this island, called the Big Island, I live on, in, my own little island. The acre or so that I know like my own skin (equally scarred), that I walk daily, is lush with green, trees and plants. Even the plants I have planted look

wild. I am always careful to choose a spot that is right for the plant: how mature it is, what it needs in the way of soil, water, shade or sun, wind. More often than not, the newly planted plant blends in and looks as if it has grown there. One of the reasons I avoid buying a plant from a nursery is that it is so hard to tell what the nature of that particular plant is. Nursery plants always have been heavily fertilized, watered: they always look better than they look when they have to blend in the natural circumstances here. Occasionally I buy vegetable starts at the nearby nursery, knowing that they will not look as good in a few days, and I won't eat a leaf until at least a week later when the fertilizer and other chemicals it was 'forced' with have sufficiently disappeared. My little island has the feel of wild that I cherish.

The season for the orange passion fruit that grows here has finally arrived; late because we had so little rain. The fruit is smaller than usual, but abundant nevertheless. After I take the pulp out I freeze it in bags so that I have it as a fruit staple almost the year round. My bananas do not do well, they were planted some years ago on a long heap of soil my son brought in. The soil is heaped on top of thick impenetrable rock; not enough soil for bananas to develop healthy root systems deep enough. But we planted them to make a shield so that my house would not be so visible from the road; bananas grow very fast. Now I am planting other, slower growing, plants there to make a more permanent screen. That project is doing well.

Another project is planting papayas. Papayas too grow fairly fast, they should bear fruit in a year. Papayas have a tap root that needs to go deep. I planted them where I hoped they would be able to find a crack in the lava rock. Gradually I am discovering that many of them grew well until the probing root did not find a crack; fortunately some are still doing well. A few will be enough to make fruit for one person. They too are planted in between other plants and trees, blending in.

As many islands in the Pacific my personal island is shrinking, not because of rising sea level but the rising of people's doing. Paving our road changed the amount of traffic a hundred-fold it seems. Before, the road was a pot-holed path that nobody in her or his right mind would brave if they had no business here; now it is a thoroughfare for commuters. Where do they commute to? Hilo is a very small town with few businesses. The fashion here — because that is what it was — is large, extra high, four-wheel drive monster trucks, that have extra big tires that make a loud noise. The morning commute would wake me up if I did not wake up at four or five before they start at six thirty. Occasionally I wonder why the commuters do not choose to take this road on the way home in the afternoon, but of course that is none of my business.

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It is now a month later. A new year, in fact: 'twenty-ten'. The weather is getting stranger this winter. What is called winter does not change daytime temperatures much, but nights are cooler, and usually we have more rain. This year we have a pattern of several weeks without any rain at all and then two or three days of torrential rains, thunder and lightning, and then again many weeks with no rain. Where there is little soil yet, no ground water, this pattern is not good for plants and trees. I have to grow my vegetables in large pots because there is little real soil and because of the chickens of course. Everything I plant here has to be with an awareness that the chickens here are wild, go where they can and will scratch any little area of what looks like loose soil. Whenever I plant, in between other plants, I must cover the little heap of soil with rocks big enough to prevent chickens from rolling them away. I discovered that chickens also stay away from very thorny weeds, like touch-me-not, even if it is just a tangle of stems that are no longer alive but as thorny as before. There are other animals of course that like some of my vegetables: slugs, snails, ants. I have learned all kinds of tricks to prevent them to reach their chosen leaves or stems. Needless to say some will succeed in passing my clever barriers and will eat leaves; I leave those for them, and cut only the whole leaves for my dinner. The slugs spread a very ugly disease, so I eat vegetables steamed for a minute or less; I don't think 'washing' them makes much difference.

Most of the chickens here are dark, either black or dark brown. All of them different enough so that I know many of them by now. A few years ago a white hen found her way here. She had two white offspring, with a few black feathers here and there. Now we have one mostly white rooster, with one black tail feather, the other is white. From the beginning it was clear that the white chickens, even part white, were more aggressive than the darker ones. The other chickens seem to avoid them. When the white rooster approaches a hen there is always a loud, indignant cackling while the hen flies up in a tree. Roosters fly just as well as hens but mating is difficult on a tree branch.

I think my attention to the chickens is in part a consequence of the constant damage they do to plants and the bits of softer soil they find. I have to watch where I walk because today there might be a round dip that wasn't there yesterday. They have become very smart at hiding their eggs. A few years ago I regularly had eggs from the chickens here; now haven't found any eggs for almost a year. I'm too old to crawl on the ground. I can still bend down well enough, but getting on my knees means having to get

up, and that is getting more difficult... I walk with a staff, a tough young guava tree I cut myself. It makes me feel like a wizard. I don't need it to walk but it has all kinds of very useful aspects. I can reach up or over, I can pound the ground and find hollows under the lava, I can test the ground for how deep it goes (hardly ever more than a few inches), or knock off a grapefruit that grows too high on the tree. And, best of all, the chickens and the ducks are afraid of the stick. They're not afraid of me — after all, I feed them. But I can point my staff at a rooster, and he will flee loudly complaining. There are also three black ducks who chose to live here. In fact, I am not sure they 'live' here. I think they have another home as well. Some days I hear and see them fly on their way down to the pond. And sometimes they sail down in front of my house. The three ducks always fly in a V, or in a slant, one behind and to the side of another. They are much less aggressive than chickens, quite friendly in fact. It is hard to feed them without having to defend them from aggressive hens. Roosters have free passage among hens, even a hen with baby chicks. But that does not work with ducks. My observation is that among the chickens the hens are a lot more aggressive than the roosters. I've seen roosters face each other, feathers fluffed, but I've never seen them fight. Hens fight with each other all the time. The ducks are one male and two females. The male is the smallest, very 'henpecked' by the two females. But on the whole they stick together. There is also one very large Muskovy duck. He can't come to the feeding place any more because the three black ducks, half his size, snap and push him away. I wonder about those fowls, the strange likes and dislikes they have. The chickens definitely feel they are the owners of this area, even the cats stay away from them. Yes, there are also an uncounted number of cats of both sexes and therefore of all sizes and ages. Some of them get fed by the humans living here. Others live a mysterious life somewhere in the bushes but I see them wander around everywhere: even food does not tempt them to get too close to me. I used to think that the cats would eat baby chicks or eggs, but I don't think they do. What do they eat? Rats, certainly (I haven't any left around here) and perhaps the lizards and other small wild there is.

I love the ecology here. Small enough to almost comprehend. Always changing, constantly different. Tribes of chickens, cats, ducks. And a great variety of birds of course — I don't think of chickens and ducks as birds, although they are. To me, birds are the small wonders who flit and fly with such abandon, singing, calling each other, making nests with threads unraveled from pieces of the rope that I use to sew the pieces of netting together that protect my vegetables from ferocious chickens.

Grasping the concept that in an ecology everything is connected to everything else is easier in the abstract, than in real life. But I can when I step out of my western self and allow an inner awareness to take over. Doesn't sound convincing; does it? Words, words. Words confuse. All I can say is, it works. I wander around feeling the sap rising in trees, I sense the lives everywhere that I am part of. I am acutely aware of the connectedness of us all. What I looked at looks at me. What I love, loves me.

As soon as I think of myself as observing rather than being, it's lost. When I think of myself as a 'self', an I, it is gone. Then I see the creeping vine that is new this year spreading like an infectious disease, strangling some tender plants. I think of the white rooster as my enemy. I worry about not enough rain, would the green, still forming papayas make it in this dry spell? And then my thoughts spread to what I read not long ago, and I 'know' that we in the west have made a completely unsustainable world and that daily we destroy more of miraculous nature.

I touch a tree that for whatever reason is a particular friend. I feel its energy flowing into my finger, up my arm. I lean my head against the rough bark and feel embraced somehow. There is no time, no tomorrow. There is only there is.

In the evening when I am inside, flat walls, square corners, glass windows, screen on the outside. I think grand thoughts about the planet, about billions of people. I think about governments and money and machines that don't even cut trees any more but push trees down and then crush them under treads. It's hard to remember when I felt —no, I was part of, inside, the ecology. That is the way we all, humans all over the world, used to live. As part of our whole (what we now call environment, making it something other, an object). When we were one with the all it couldn't enter our minds to destroy what was as close as our own skin. We might kill for food but asking permission and thanks for giving life so that we could live. We cut trees very carefully, feeling, sensing each tree before choosing the one that would be the mast of a boat, or the pole of a house — it was already a mast, all we needed to do was shape it a little.

How did we shift our thinking so radically?

And in my house, a square house, everything flat and straight, unknown in the real world outside — in my house I think of the people who make the rules, the bankers who sell imaginary ideas with illusionary values and get 'rich'. What is rich? What can you do with a billion dollars, or even a million.

If you have one, why want more. Power, because we all play the same game. But they too must know what by now everyone in the world knows that the globe is warming, that ice is melting, oceans are more acid, that soon (whatever that means) there will not be enough land, enough food, enough air to breathe. What do they need their billions for then? The strange thing is that it is they who deny that anything is happening while they heap up more make-believe money. It is the rich corporations that insist we don't do anything to clean up the air. Do they think they can make artificial bubbles to survive when the rest of us cook? It is the 'conservatives' who deny that anything is going on at all, when all the rest of the world is waiting for us to DO something. No, we must wage wars in two countries, three, four, five at a time.

All those unthinkable thoughts I can only think inside this artificial cube house, I get angry and sad. Crazy.

Go outside in the dark. Pitch dark. The moon is just past full, but evidently there are thick clouds that hide even a shimmer of moonlight. I know where it is supposed to be, but nothing shows. With a little flashlight I find my way to that tree. Solid. It feels almost cold out, but the tree warms me. Take a deep breath, the scent of the tree. In the dark I hear what I think of as the early evening 'concert' of little frogs, crickets, lizards. Am not sure who make the different chirps and calls. And I am whole and warm.

Inside again. Now am shivering even though it is warmer than outside. The concert is in full swing, some dogs in the distance. Traffic noises.

Are there really two worlds, so different one from the other? It's the same planet of course. Two quite different ways of seeing the one planet. I see and feel and sense a world that is part of me and I am part of it — and I also see a world as others tell me the world is, with loud noises that are machine made and houses that are straight square, and money, manufactured food, a computer that shows what I want to see in color and movement. It looks real but I know very well it is just a picture on a flat screen that needs a little electricity that flows from the street through a cable attached to a stick straight up from the roof. All manmade.

The difficulty is that 'they' have made it so that I cannot do without that power flowing to my house. I can grow some of the food I need here, and much already grows here, but not all. I need money to buy the power that makes my refrigerator work, that powers the water pump from the tank where I store rain water. The food I buy comes from food factories all over

the world; that food has to be moved by plane and boat, using oil. The electricity I use is 75% generated by oil imported from thousands of miles away, brought here by boat, driven by oil.

How could I do without?

But not all that long ago, two hundred and some years ago, four times more people were living on this island and they did not import anything at all. They lived from what grew here, the fish they caught. Their light at night came from burning another kind of oil made from coconut palms and kukui trees (kukui means light). They walked, barefoot: the soles of their feet were thick with callus so they walked on lava, even hot lava — footprints in what is now solid rock. They sang and danced, loved and had children.

The first white men who “discovered” these islands in 1776 remarked how happy, healthy, muscular and beautiful the people here were.

A completely sustainable society. No money, no bankers, but fishers and farmers, some chiefs. No doctors but healers. Polynesians are strong and fierce people, not like the languorous women painted by Gauguin. They had spears and knew how to use them, but no atom bombs and no stealth planes, certainly no drones.

We’ve come far in a bit over two hundred years. I read somewhere that we, humans, made more changes on and in the planet in the last 60 years than naturally happened in the last 200,000 years.

Here we are. Now.

When I’m outside I cannot think of polar ice melting. I see differently. I see a different world. A better world I think, when I remember it inside and can think of climate change.

How to bridge the two worlds...

robert wolff, 3 january 2010