

A Meditation on the Sea

By Phyllis Chesler

I am editing and also expanding a new book and thought—why not? Let me share some pieces that are not “political,” that do not document or analyze the considerable sorrows of our 21st century here on earth. I hope you enjoy this little piece, first published in 1998 in *On The Issues Magazine*. Do tell me what you think of it, whether it gave you a moment’s pause from the incessant debates about the incessant war zones.

When in doubt or trouble, but also in times of joy, I always return to the sea: to put things in perspective. In America, only the elements seem eternal, and as such, afford splendid relief. Elements have the power to transport me out of my self. Perhaps the sea is my Confessional. Always, I come down smelling of the city and secular anxiety, grimed over with it. The sea washes all that away, I am reborn in her salty beginning.

I meant to go to France, but when the trip fell through, I found myself driving out to the Hamptons, on New York’s Long Island, a place that, for me, is far more than merely “trendy.” I’ve written books here; the place is my own splendid, shining, American Riviera. I need only squint, slightly, and I can see Monet’s Mediterranean: lush green foliage, dazzling white light, sails on the water, umbrellas on the beach, the human enterprise—sandy, wet, impossibly hopeful.

Before I see her, I can hear her, smell her, taste her in the air; she is misty-salty on my tongue, pleasantly rank in my nostrils, a rhythmic pounding in my ears. It never fails. I am always slightly overwhelmed each and every time I first catch sight of the sea, it is so heart-stoppingly enormous and yet

utterly familiar; it brings one back to childhood summers—no, to a world far older than that: to the very origin of our species. When we left, we took the ocean with us; it is in our every cell, we are, as biologist Carl Safina writes in his recent book **Song to the Blue Sea**, “soft vessels of sea water...70 percent of our bodies is water, the same percent that covers the Earth’s surface. We are wrapped around an ocean within.”

In America, the elements remind me that life is short, and therefore precious. Only the elements truly comfort me. Sky, sea, stars, all were here long before human beings first built campfires; with any luck, they may still be here at the end of time. The elements test your mettle against natural forces. The sea reminds us that we have to take what comes as it comes, that some disasters cannot be avoided; that luck or fate is everything, but skill and courage count too. Especially, expect the unexpected and prepare: to ride it out, pray, die, live—and live hard.



The town of Easthampton is 350 years old, older than the American Revolution, far older than that, since Indians once lived here. On April 29, 1648, white settlers (mainly Englishmen from Maidstone, in Kent, but some from Holland and Wales, too) purchased Easthampton from the Indians for 20 coats, 24 hatchets, 24 hoes, 24 knives, 24 looking glasses, and 100 muxes (tools for making wampum). In 1660, a group of Easthampton men bought Montauk for 100 pounds sterling.

Once, I owned a pre-Revolutionary cottage on Three Mile Harbor. I never did find out whether its earliest inhabitants had been whalers or tanners, soldiers or preachers. Tradesmen, perhaps. I do know that the house was cold in winter and hot in summer, had low ceilings, incredibly wide plank floors, small rooms—but I was charmed, instantly, by its long history. It belonged to this place. The large, modern houses have yet to prove their staying power.

Monday: A rainy day, sea-side. Midmorning, the sky is dark and Scandinavian-wintery; by midday, thunder rumbles, indoor lights keep flickering off, the sea is grey-black, the air raw, wet, damp. There is no lightning, but the sky is pale and ominous, sheets of darkening rainwater slant before our eyes; the sky closes in, descends over the waters, the sea turns up the volume, her waves grow wider, wilder, white. A few wet birds sing. A lone figure trudges along the beach. Friday: Today, morning is all haze and fog, and the beach-walkers appear, as if in a dream. One cannot tell air from water, land from sky. After five days of steady, often torrential rain, suddenly, in a flash of unannounced heat and light—the sun appears. I do not trust it, but I have no choice.

It is disingenuous, cruel perhaps, for outsiders to romanticize an element in which they themselves do not risk their lives. On a bad day I'd call it slumming, or even exploitation, as when heroes die, are maimed, and the bard is praised and enriched for telling their tale. But it is oh so human to honor others for doing something we dare not do.

I have no illusions about the sea, which has been known to wipe out a human being—no, entire shiploads of sailors and passengers—in hours. Suddenly. Without pity. Only a hundred yards from land, minutes from rescue. Sometimes, ships have gone down off the treacherous, sandy bars of southern Long Island in full view of distraught rescuers, who could do nothing. In 1850, feminist writer Margaret Fuller, on her way home from Italy, drowned only a hundred yards from the Fire Island shore. The cemeteries in Amagansett and Easthampton are filled with monuments to native sons who died at sea and to strangers who washed up on these shores: frozen in “great blocks of ice”, still clinging to shattered masts. The sea is so lovely—for a killer. Make no mistake: Despite sophisticated rescue technology and heroic air- and sea-rescue teams, here “weather”—hurricanes, gale-force winds, rogue waves—remains a Major Player in human destiny. (Read Sebastian Junger's

book, **The Perfect Storm.**)

Although I used to sail, in my twenties, and will never forget the blessing of calm waters and steady wind, or the nights on board under the stars, I lack the sailor's and the fisherman's profound patience and courage in the face of natural catastrophe. I am no Viking, or pirate (although I love all the myths about them, the true stories even more). I love the sea as metaphor, and from shore, safely. Although there was that one time, five years ago, in Amagansett, when I was alone at the ocean's edge and a great storm hit. All the houses around me were dark. Someone called to say that the police were evacuating Long Island beachfront communities. And then the phone went dead. Rain lashed the windows, sounded like hail. I made myself a stiff drink and decided: "What the hell, so one Jew gets washed out to sea," and went to bed, woke up to a shining Hampton morning.

It was as if the storm had never happened—but it had. "Time is but the stream I go fishing in," wrote Henry David Thoreau. I also fish, in other, more metaphoric waters. Like sailors and fishermen, I have premonitions. I act on them. Despite the dangers, and the high risk of failure, the wearing, boom-and-bust cycles of the writing life, I, too, keep returning to sea. I have traveled through deep waters, usually alone, my entire life, so I'm used to it; it's too late to turn back, too late to learn another way of being in the world.

Over the years, I've asked mountain climbers, deep-sea divers, sailors, wilderness survivalists, what living in Nature requires. They say: You must be prepared, remain alert, never lose your "cool" or give up hope; they say your chances of survival are better in a group than alone. Enormous patience is everything. Time stands still, or is irrelevant when one lives in the moment and for the task at hand. One gets to where one wants to go not at any cost, but rather as a function of adjusting, and re-adjusting to the weather. Is the sea too stormy, the surf too high? Is "getting there" on time

worth dying for? Can we get “there” if we die? Saturday, Montauk Harbor, 5:15 pm: The fleet comes in all at once, like a school of fish, in formation, silent, safely home. I note the tanned and barefoot boys of summer on board. Ye olde fishermen would probably be amazed that there is only one commercial fishing boat among them. All the rest are sport-fishing boats. It’s a recreational Armada. Still they keep coming. A mighty brigade of stragglers begins to round the bend. One is flying a skull and crossbones and playing the Grateful Dead. The day is so very lovely that even this does not offend.

Sunday: A bride and groom are in each other’s arms on the beach, close to the surf; all decked out in white gown and tuxedo, shoe-less. The sea is to be their witness, their place of memory. It seems absolutely right.

I am unanchored now, heading off, once again, into uncharted waters. My mother recently died. The sea is my mother now; the surf, her heartbeat. For the moment, it is all I need.

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