



Islandness

“ISLANDNESS” IS A CONSTRUCT OF THE MIND, a singular way of looking at the world. Articulating this perspective is perhaps more important to outsiders who for some reason associate themselves with islands than it is to islanders themselves, who understand the concept of islandness instinctively but may never feel called upon to express it in words, except for distinguishing between being “on island” or “off-island.”

Islandness may be something experienced, like solitude; observed, like the ways islanders respond to change; or learned, like the lessons newcomers must absorb as they gradually become part of an island community.

Island Journal has explored islandness many times, most often through the eyes of people who “discover” islands and want to understand their meaning. “My definition of friendship and community has changed a lot over the last four years,” writes Karen Roberts Jackson, reflecting on her own experience as an island transplant. “I feel sometimes as if my place is at the back of the line, behind a long list of people who have come before us. ... Sometimes there seems to be no end to the dues that must be paid before the initiation into simply belonging.”

British author John Fowles, a visitor to many islands, takes note of “the boundedness of the smaller island, encompassable in a glance, walkable in one day, that relates it to the human body closer than any other geographical conformation of land.”

For Philip Conkling a defining moment was the solitude of a deserted island in eastern Maine, experiences there that “work like the tide and fog in strange ways of muffled sound and obscured sight to bring me back and back again to things that cannot be named.”

Islands teach us lessons we forget at our peril, according to David Weale of Prince Edward Island. “For the island community, no less than for an individual,” he writes, “the failure to respect the truth about ourselves is a serious and soul-destroying failure. Any repudiation of our Islandness is, therefore, a deep and fundamental repudiation of who we are — and of our uniquely precious existence.”

Because it is a state of mind, islandness can be as simple or as complex as we wish it to be. But if we fail to appreciate it or don’t pay attention to it — if we are guilty of “undersight,” as George Putz would say — it will be lost, and the world will become a poorer place.

David D. Platt

Mosquito Island



PETER RALSTON