



PETER RALSTON

## *Islandness*

*David Weale*

I was driving with my 10-year-old son along the shore on the way to a late afternoon hockey game in a town an hour or so away. He sat quietly in the seat just looking out the window at the passing landscape and seascape. I turned to look at him several times, but he didn't even notice. He was absorbed in his looking. Then it occurred to me what he was doing. He was taking in the landscape. He was, if you will, ingesting the Island. And that is exactly what happens when you live here for long — you take the Island inside, deep inside. You become an Islander, which is to say, a creature of the Island. Islandness becomes a part of your being, a part as deep as marrow, and as natural and unselfconscious as breathing....

Wherever we look in the world we discover peoples whose lives and cultures have been shaped by their natural environment. There are mountain people, valley people, and people of the open plains. There are polar people, coastal people, and people of the forests. In each case the nature of the community — its mythology, imagination, its very soul — has been sculpted and colored by its geographical

circumstances. Further more, it would certainly be foolish to think of any one of these as being superior to the others. Each is good and bad in its own way, and its strength and genius is derived from its adaptation and response to its own geographic peculiarities....

The uniqueness of an Island is its geographic precision. "An Island," as I was taught in grade four, "is a body of land completely surrounded by water," — or, as a friend from Cape Breton recently expressed it, "An Island is geographically perfect."

The topography and landscape of this province — that is to say, its Islandness — is the source and reference point for the imagination of Islanders. It is the primal source of our communal insight and wisdom....

For the island community, no less than for an individual, 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.

The term Islandness, or "insularity," frightens some people. They think it is a sign of narrowness or narcissism. There is, however, no inherent contradiction between "Island-identity" and "global citizenship," any more than there is a conflict between the healthy self-esteem of an individual and her ability to participate in community life. Indeed, the two are not conflictual, but complementary. In other words, my identity as a citizen of this Island we call Prince Edward is a complement to my identity as a citizen of this Island we call the Earth...

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