Living There

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It is simple and it is precious. Some are born to it. For others, it is an identity consciously chosen and, in some cases, fought hard for and won — the right to call oneself an "islander." Strictly speaking, the term "intentional community" applies to a place like a commune, a monastery, or an enclosed culture such as that of the Amish, where people willfully come together with the hope of proclaiming and living out some set of values that are crucially important to them. While it may at first seem far-fetched to apply this category to island communities, on closer inspection the criteria hold up surprisingly well — and in the process offer a telling commentary on where we members of the larger, end-of-century American society are in our effort to proclaim, choose, and live out the things that are truly precious to us.

From the first time I set foot on Swan's Island in 1972, I could feel it, almost welling up through my shoes: the call to a life that seemed wildly more authentic, more true, more compelling, than anything I could live back home in Philadelphia. I came full-time in 1979, and for something more than a dozen years Swan's Island was home. I lived, sailed my boat, built a home, raised a family, scrounged for a living — house painting, mowing lawns, teaching on the mainland, whatever it took. Every moment was precious. Still is.

For the past three years, I have lived in Colorado, next door to a more classically "intentional com-

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Crew Neck, Andrew Wyeth, 1992

munity" — Saint Benedict's Monastery, a small, Trappist contemplative community making its living through ranching and meditation retreats….

An intentional community in the classic sense has finite boundaries. Here at the monastery they call it "the enclosure." You know when you're in it and when you're out of it. It is the geographical space in which the rules and values of the community hold sway.

A lot of people point out, quite rightly in some ways, that island communities are really not that different from small, isolated mainland communities: still populated by traditional New England Yankees with similar values of frugality, reticence and self-reliance. One of my mainland friends insists that Vinalhaven is simply "a little Belfast miles out to sea."

True, but there is that one all-important distinction: an island is surrounded by water. It has finite boundaries…. It is this element of finiteness that puts the distinctive intentional spin on the otherwise generic similarity to stock New England community life….

In all my years on Swan's, I never locked my home, and the keys stayed in the car. Our one local robbery was an island classic. Once when a neighbor, a fine-art collector, went away for a while, thieves came from off-island, broke into his house, and looted his collection. The sight of an unfamiliar van headed down his remote road attracted a neighbor en route, who went over to check out his house for signs of mischief while the van waited in line for the 1:30 boat. When the van rolled off the ferry in Bass Harbor, the state police were waiting to meet it. In a world where crime and violence seem to thrive on anonymity, that rootless world where nobody knows one's neighbors or cares, an island seems to be, and still remarkably is, a place where the high end of finiteness is a safety too rare in the world at large.

Deeper than fear, however, the driving motivation for many who come to islands, I believe, is the quest to find one's identity, a place where one belongs, with skills one can contribute. This sense of identity has both a personal dimension and a community one.

On the personal level, a good deal of the attraction of island life lies in discovering and developing skills in oneself: skills of self-reliance, ingenuity, that sense of being actually and personally in control of one's life.…

I arrived on Swan's Island with a Ph.D. and ten years of college teaching under my belt. But medievalists were not highly in demand on Swan's,

Sons of fishermen, Metinic Island

so I started my working career bagging scallops at the co-op, then went on to mowing lawns and painting houses. Along the way, I learned precious skills: I could saw, hammer, replace soffits; could fix my car when it wouldn't start, sharpen a chain saw, re-putty a window, frame in a wall, lay a foundation — practical skills that made me feel connected and useful in a real universe. The pride I felt in my own self-sufficiency is more than just a vestige of my old tomboy spirit; it speaks, I believe, to a basic yearning in all of us to see the relationship between means and ends, to draw satisfaction from the work of our own hands and from living up to our uniquely human responsibility truly to tend a small piece of the earth that has been entrusted to us.

Perhaps the most powerful magnet drawing people to island life is the tangible sense of belonging to a community, a finite universe where folks watch out and care for one another.…

And reciprocally, this finite universe is a place to share one's gifts. Many who have come to island communities have made generous donations of their time and resources: founding libraries and historical societies, serving on boards, helping out at the school, sometimes taking key roles in island conservation or economic development initiatives.…

For me, there was always a more philosophical dimension to this as well. Knowing your place in community also meant watching the progression through time. The kid whose mother I tutored when she was pregnant is now old enough to buy my house; several others whom I watched enter kindergarten are now homeowners and civic leaders.

The native-born islander comes with a birthright as special as any ever to be conveyed, something tantamount to an inviolable place, unconditional acceptance. Island tots are community property, really; everyone knows their names, says, "Hello, deah," and fusses over them at the store. Only by really seriously "being a jerk" is that birthright ever jeopardized; and even then, one remains a native son or daughter.

For those coming "from away," acceptance must be earned; a place in the community must be won. Some newcomers, I notice, wear this very lightly, while for others it becomes almost a grail quest to have the mythical "they" confer this sacrament of belonging to "us."

Whatever form this takes — that initial breathless excitement or idealism that casts one up on the beaches of an island — the acceptance gets under way in earnest with the first making it through the winter. Those first couple of years will

test the depth, realism and resiliency of the original commitment. As the days grow short, the weather raw, the winter endless, as tempers fray and distractions dwindle, the would-be islander will come face-to-face with the reality of island life and with his or her own internal resources.

A would-be islander, like a novice monk, may place himself under the care of a wise elder, and, if he is alert and adaptable, will catch that he is being molded to a basic pattern that allows for survival in close community. He will learn to talk very little, to listen first and hard, not to ventilate his opinions, to be alert to gesture and innuendo, and to submit his own self-interest to the greater needs of the community. These are not only virtues in their own rights, but survival skills for both the individual and the community.

It is a mixed bag emotionally. Anything worthwhile and difficult always is. But as I listen to the stories, the words, the hopes, of those who have stayed and those who have left, I feel the saga of something very moving being attempted — something very humanly significant. From these many folks who have voted to cast their allegiance with a small scrap of earth in the sea and the folks already floating on it, there are lessons to be learned of import to our wider human culture.

The most powerful lesson is the relationship between scale and human value. In contrast to the predominant culture, which tells us that the meaning of life is to get, to satisfy, to consume, to possess, island community says that real meaning is to find a place, to put down roots, to participate, to serve. If the culture tells us our goal is to be fully an individual, to grow to the max, to "do our own thing," island culture suggests that the only sustaining identity is ultimately relational — in a community, in time — and that growth is not by maximizing, but by pruning, like the strawberry vine, so that real blossoms and fruits emerge. And in contrast to the sense of self formed in a society that is fast-paced, crowded and sprawling, island identity is a fierce, tiny particularity, grounded in a finiteness, surrounded by solitude and face-to-face with the rugged force and beauty of nature, that reminds us of our true place in the scale of things.

For whatever shortcomings, living on Swan's Island was the most profound and formative experience of my life, and wherever I may be, I will never leave it behind.

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Fifield's general store, Vinalhaven