

## Five Things You Should Know about Arne Naess

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Andrei Whitaker

Andrei Whitaker is currently completing his Masters of Environmental Studies at Dalhousie University. His thesis is on the possibility of restoring wolves to the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. On most days you have a better chance of finding Andrei out in the woods instead of in front of the computer where he belongs. A slightly different version of this article appears in *Hobo Magazine*.

It's 2:00 a.m. and I'm in a punk bar in northern Norway surrounded by heavily tattooed men and empty shot glasses—never a good sign when you have an early flight—exceedingly worse if the plane is carrying you to meet a world renowned intellect. As I watch in dismay, Per bashes the next round on the table. The others murmur in agreement. This scene has been ritualistically repeated since I let it slip in the bathroom line that tomorrow I am to interview Arne Naess, Norway's most famous philosopher. The clout of this statement apparently goes a long way in this land; my offer to buy beer for these guys has steadfastly been refused all night, the only stipulation being that I must say hello to Arne from them.

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Many Norwegians consider Arne Naess to be one of their greatest living treasures. A man of incredible ease and depth, Arne is an original thinker who, at the age of 27, became the chair of philosophy at the University of Oslo. Known for his social activism, mountaineering, writings, and exploits, he conjures up the romantic image of the swashbuckling professor—an adventurer equally at home in the remote wilderness as he is in front of a classroom. Credited with reviving Norwegian philosophy and influencing the global environmental movement, Arne's contributions to modern thought haven't gone unnoticed. Among the many distinguished awards he has received are the Sonning prize for contribution to European culture, the Mahatma

Gandhi prize for non-violent peace, and the Star of St. Olav's Order, Norway's equivalent of a knighthood. A tremendously prolific writer, with over thirty books and 400 academic articles published, this year he celebrates the release of a ten-volume set of his selected works (*SWAN*). Yet despite this illustrious resume, Arne is barely known outside of Europe. Intrigued with the character my editor described as a real life Indiana Jones (no guns, lots of Nazis), I trundled off to the land of the midnight sun to find out more about Scandinavia's most beloved philosopher.

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## **1 Arne loves to box**

Thirty seconds into our first meeting, he begins to playfully box me around an imaginary ring in his living room. At 93, he still swoops and side-steps with grace, quickly finding the holes in my ineffectual technique. He seems really good, but then again he should be—Arne's been boxing since before the start of the Second World War.

When we finally sink onto the couch to talk, it's under a menacing portrait of a younger Arne (but still over 80) in full boxing attire, punching out at the camera. I remark that it is unusual, to say the least, that a philosophy professor and practitioner of Gandhian non-violence would want to learn such an inherently violent sport. He laughs as he replies. "When I started it made headlines. People found it very amusing that Professor Naess wanted to learn to box."

While his initial motivation may have been exercise, Arne quickly understood that boxing had other areas that were equally beneficial. Specifically, it taught him how to take a punch. This rid him of any anxiety associated with being hit in the face. Once the anxiety's gone, Arne explains, "One's behaviour is then free to be of a kind most likely to pacify attackers."<sup>1</sup> In an improbable twist, learning to box allowed Arne to practise non-violent resistance at a higher level.

Arne's days of traditional boxing, however, were brief. As a person who lives philosophy rather than merely teaching it, Arne quickly morphed boxing into an embodiment of Gandhian non-violence. "The object became to put your fist in the right position but without strength," he says as he offers to show me. Arne then grins at old memories. "It was the speed and movement I was after. It was a wonderful, friendly way to box."

*Andrei: You engaged in non-violent boxing?*

Arne: Yes (laughs). I used to do it for exercise. It took such a short time for you to get completely... what do you call it?

*Wiped out?*

Yes wiped out. Three minutes of boxing is an hour of other exercise. The way we boxed was to try and get in the right place but without any force. Not to touch them. Not to knock them out. It was for fun.

*How did that evolve?*

I would train for boxing in the University gym. I was able to mix with the young people and we would box together. They didn't want to hit me because I was a professor. They were afraid (chuckles). Gandhian boxing—it was good times.

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## **2 He was profoundly inspired by the Mahatma**

Arne was just a teenager when he read about Gandhi's salt march in 1930. "I admired him risking his life in favour of peace," he says, "his march was so simple and elegant. I liked that." Arne laughs, but then gets concerned that I might not be following him. "Do you know about this walk?" he asks, brow slightly furrowed. When I tell him yes, he smiles again. "It was good the way he took on the British Empire in a non-violent way. He had nothing against the British, but he thought India should have its own government. I liked that very much." Arne leans forward and looks me in the eyes. "So," he says, "I became a follower of Gandhian activism."

Gandhian non-violence has permeated Arne's life ever since. From environmental activism to Nazi occupation, Arne has always remained a firm believer in non-violent resistance. He doesn't like physical aggression, but at the same time he thinks we should always seek the centre of conflict; albeit in a non-violent way. Arne is more apt to invite his adversaries over for a cup of tea than to concern himself with hate or anger. To Arne, every opponent is a potential ally.<sup>2</sup>

When asked, Arne admits that he appreciates the power of non-violent resistance. But even more so, he admires the composure Gandhi maintained throughout his struggle: "The more hatred that surrounded [Gandhi], the more respect he showed for himself and others. I was

very impressed for this is hard to do. It was marvellous how he always behaved well and in a completely non-violent way.”

Arne reflected Gandhi’s composure during his own experiences with non-violent resistance. He’s been arrested for civil disobedience while protesting environmental injustices, and has chained himself (at age 70!) in front of bulldozers to stop a dam from being constructed. However, the most notable test of his Gandhian values occurred during World War II. When I ask him if he ever considered using force during the German occupation he responds strongly—“NO.” For Arne, the horrors of invasion only helped to solidify his views on the philosophy of non-violence.

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### **3 He was active in the Norwegian resistance during World War II**

He mentions it almost casually, slipped into the conversation somewhere between Einstein and wolves. “During the war I spied for the Norwegians. I was a member of the XU.”

It’s hard not to be impressed. The XU was an underground Norwegian intelligence organization formed after the Germans invaded in 1940. Its activities were considered so vital to national security that most of its work was kept secret for fifty years. When I inquire about the long delay, Arne replies, “I think this was in case Norway was invaded again. So we could do it another time.”

The XU did much of its recruiting at the University of Oslo, where Arne was a professor. Because of his profession and fluency in German, Arne became a spy. This fit perfectly with his commitment to non-violent resistance. When I ask about his success, he humbly shrugs and says “I never really discovered what the Germans were doing.” But the truth is most likely the opposite—in 1998 Arne received a medal from the King of Norway for his contributions to the XU.

Arne: While I worked for the XU, my code name was Sigurd

*Andrei: What does that mean? Like, the dove or something?*

No, no (laughs). It was just a name. A common Norwegian name, like Arne.

*What did you do?*

When the Germans got together and discussed occupation matters, I was a spy hiding close.

*Oh right! That must have been dangerous.*

Very dangerous.

He says this with a cheeky grin on his face, but in reality Arne came close to becoming a World War II statistic. One night while working late, he was arrested by a Nazi patrol.

Arne was at his father-in-law's house when the Germans came bursting in. "They were suspicious for some reason or another," he says, sipping his Pepsi as he mulls the memory over. "I was alone. In the desk there were some documents relating to the resistance. I knew they were there." He takes another sip.

"I remember asking by what authority they were doing this and a young soldier pointed his gun at me and said, 'Is this authority enough?'" Arne laughs and repeats the last phrase disbelievingly. "Is this authority enough?" He shakes his head.

"The officer found the papers and I was taken back to headquarters to be interrogated. In those days I spoke good German," says Arne, "so while I was being questioned I started a conversation with the arresting officer. I found out that he was from the area of Germany near Denmark." He pauses and his face darkens slightly. "I then started to get worried because I began to think it was possible that he could have read what the documents were about." He notices my puzzled look and explains the danger, "Norwegian is very close to Danish."

Luckily for Arne, the officer had been 'recruited' into the army on the threat of imprisonment. "I found out from him that he had been forced to join and that he didn't like it at all." Arne smiles. "The officer was very nice. We talked and became friendly and eventually I was let go."

Again he notices that I don't understand, so Arne gently offers an explanation. "He let me go because we became friendly. Wars, for the most part, are between countries, not people. It has nothing to do with personal relationships. It was an unhappy coincidence that we were enemies." When I ask about the officer, Arne gets wistful. "He was a very civilized man. I often regret not getting his name for I would have

liked to have kept in contact with him after the war. He made an impression on me.”

He pauses and takes another sip and then we sit in silence for a while. Inside I am bursting with a question that I’m not quite sure is appropriate to ask. Finally I blurt it out: “What were the documents about and what happened to them?” Arne laughs at my enthusiasm before I get my answer. He seems to remember that they might have been about sabotaging some factories. Regardless, the resistance got to keep them. The Germans had left the papers in the desk drawer.

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#### **4 His father is a mountain (literally)**

Just prior to the war, Arne built a small rough hut on the high plateau of Mt. Hallingskarvet. Known as Tvergastein, it is Arne’s refuge of peace from society. Inside its thin wooden walls is a detailed log of the time he has lived there. At last count, Arne has spent over twelve years of his life on these wind swept slopes.

Arne has always been drawn to the mountains. His love of the outdoors as a child blossomed into a love of climbing and mountaineering in his teens. He has stated that he values “mountaineering and life among mountains higher than university studies”<sup>3</sup> and has always found time to escape on climbs and hikes. Despite the rigours of academic society, he managed to embark on many mountaineering first accents around the world, including Tirich Mir (7706 metres), the highest peak in the Hindu Kush. In some areas, Arne is more famous for his mountaineering than his philosophy.

Arne’s relationship with Mt. Hallingskarvet is not, however, based on mountaineering alone. Though there are plenty of cliffs to climb (and not even Arne has scaled them all), Arne views this mountain instead as a father figure. The connection developed out of the long stays at the family cabin on Hallingskarvet’s base. Arne explained their bond perfectly in an interview with Stephen Bodian: “Because I had no father, the mountain somehow became my father, as a friendly, immensely powerful being, perfect and extremely tranquil.”<sup>4</sup> The mountain taught Arne about respect and nature, forging a deep relationship that has lasted his entire life.

On the slopes of Mt. Hallingskarvet, Arne writes that he finds the “serenity within . . . the kind of serenity [that] does not prevent the wind

blowing strongly in my life. But it is an inner consolidation and presence that means that in every kind of situation one can feel like a complete human.”<sup>5</sup> This peace and harmony has allowed Arne’s mind to wander freely—much of his most original philosophical work was created during his stays at Tvergastein. His love and respect for his mountain and hut has never wavered over his 90-plus years. He recently published a book about his relationship with them—a rough translation of the title—*Hallingskarvet: The father of a good long life*.

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### **5 His philosophical musings are at the cutting edge of the environmental movement**

When Arne is at Tvergastein, he states that he cannot “make a very clear distinction between myself and the hut and the vegetation.”<sup>6</sup> For those who know him, this is not a surprising declaration. Arne has felt an essence ‘of oneness’ with nature his whole life.

When Arne was a child, his family would vacation in western Norway. One of Arne’s favourite things to do on these holidays was to stand in the ocean up to his knees, sometimes for hours on end. He glows as he tells me about it. “The sea creatures would come and go around my feet. The water was never still because of their movement—marvellous!” He laughs after he says this and I laugh with him. His enthusiasm for a memory almost a century old is contagious.

While this may seem like a relatively tame childhood recollection, his experiences in the fjords as a boy led him to recognize that all of life was connected—not only as part of the food web—but also in a metaphysical sense.

*Andrei: What did you feel when you stood in the water?*

Arne: Standing there, small living creatures would try to hide under my feet and plant eggs. They thought it was a very good place to stay and we liked each other. I got the feeling of being one of them. Being bigger but being together with them.

*How did that affect you?*

There was this feeling of nearness to the situation they have in life to the situation in my life. I understood them and they understood me.

[Later] it was so clear that we have a tremendous responsibility . . . we need to let nature be.

Arne translated this experience, among others, into what would eventually be called the deep ecology movement. For Arne, the environmental movement that was sprouting out of the '60s and '70s didn't address the root of the problem—humanity's relationship with nature. Instead, this mainstream environmentalism was still ultimately concerned with fulfilling human needs. There didn't seem to be much consideration regarding any other creatures on the planet, unless they were endangered. Arne believed this type of conservationism to be shallow and thought that humanity should strive for something deeper—nothing less than a total paradigm shift from an anthropocentric (human oriented) to a biocentric (all life oriented) way of thinking and acting.

Arne believes that humanity should stop thinking about the world in terms of a hierarchy of life. Through his work on the deep ecology movement, Arne articulated the principle that all species have a right to exist and flourish. In his eyes, all life has intrinsic value; a value not determined by any potential usefulness to humanity. Arne also extends this same consideration to ecosystems and life-sustaining processes. To him, a forest or a river has inherent value, as does a tiger or a human being. With a few deft strokes, Arne's writing removes humanity from its usurped throne and places us back within nature's realm.

“We have to limit the ways we are changing nature,” Arne tells me, “especially diminishing it.” He is worried about the environment and has been for a long time. He even took retirement a decade early, so that he could devote more time to thinking about, writing on, and being active in the budding environmental movement. Despite the fact that we haven't seemed to have learned our lesson yet, Arne is completely optimistic about the future of this planet. While he thinks this next century might be a little rough, he believes we will eventually come up smiling. When I voice my doubts, he gently looks me in the eye and says, “100 years from now we will have much more nature than today.” I am almost moved to tears by the power of this statement. There is such conviction, strength, and peace in his tone that I don't doubt him for a minute. I only wish he could be here to see us get it right.

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When I get up to go, I feel a profound sense of sadness at leaving his side. I realize that I am going to miss Arne greatly, even though I have



only known him a few days. When we shake hands I try to take it all in—the mischievous curls of white hair, the intense calm that surrounds him—but it’s too much. The only thing I walk away with is a sense of complete and absolute beauty.

I open the door and start to leave when I suddenly remember something I had forgotten to say. I turn. “There are some boys up in Tromsø who wanted me to say hello.” Arne grins, “Tell them I say hi back.” And he shuts the door.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Arne Naess. 1992. To Grow Up Or To Get To Be More Mature. *The Trumpeter* 9.2: 80–91, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Arne Naess. 2002. *Life’s Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*. London: University of Georgia Press, xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Arne Naess. 1983. How My Philosophy Seemed To Develop. In *Philosophers on Their Own Works*, vol. 10, eds., A. Mercier and M. Svilar. Bern: Peter Lang: 209–226. Quoted in Warwick Fox’s 1992 article: Intellectual Origins of the Depth Theme in The Philosophy of Arne Naess. *The Trumpeter* 9.2: 68–73, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Bodian. 1982. Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: A Conversation with Arne Naess. *The Ten Directions* Summer/Fall: 7–12, p.10.

<sup>5</sup> Arne Naess. 2002. *Life’s Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*. London: University of Georgia Press, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.