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Living in the World: Mountain Humility, Great Humility

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Haiku to Arne Coming to visit; am used to travelling up to see the mountains.

We ski with heavy packs ever upward; Eva and I have brought enough supplies to feed four people for a week. In his terse note Arne hadn't mentioned whether his companion would be with him or not during our stay, so we planned to be on the safe side with sufficient food. It turns out that he's actually been up there alone for two weeks. And where has he gone now, anyway? The snow-covered Norwegian tundra rises in undulations until its abrupt end in the black cliffs which form the entire horizon ahead of us. No sign of him.

We keep climbing slowly, trying to avoid sweating. We're chasing a 77-year-old man who has sprung off ahead of us, perhaps in impatience, but certainly in anticipation of preparing tea for us in advance of our eventual arrival at his hut. He's only carrying a day pack, mind you; still, he disappeared behind the rim of a foreshortened ravine some time ago and we haven't seen him since. Slow step after slow step, then another rest, and we see him. He's far enough away that he appears to be just another tiny speck among the many specks which are the tips of boulders poking up against the white slopes.

The minute black figure skiing steadily ever mountainwards had once written that "...the smaller we come to feel ourselves compared to the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness." This is the same scholar and practitioner of Spinozan ethics and Gandhian non-violence who has become known, through his development of ecosophy, or ecological philosophy, as an inspiration in the formation of the Deep Ecology, environmental, social movement, which is becoming increasingly influential throughout the West. This is Arne Naess, whose environmentally-oriented civil disobedience has made him a household name in Norway and in most of Scandinavia. It is the same man who founded the journal *Inquiry* and who led successful expeditions to Tirich Mir in 1950 and 1964; the same person who at 27 became Norway's young-est Professor, and yet gave up the same Chair in Philosophy in 1970 to devote himself full-time to "...the urgent environmental problems facing humankind", convinced that a philosopher can actively contribute to their solution.

All his life Norwegians have known him as a fervent spokesman for the benefits of the "*friluftsliv*" movement, the conviction that an outdoor life can provide an antidote to the stresses of urban conditions. (When it was announced that the Norwegian Trygve Haavelmo had won the 1989 Nobel Prize for Economics, a frustrated world press could

only report that their efforts to interview him would have to await his return from a trip into the forests. Informed of the prize, and well aware of the publicity it would bring, Haavelmo's reaction was said to be that he had gone out "pa tur", the Norwegian euphemism for heading for the hills for a little peace and quiet.) And now this man Arne was rushing ahead of us for his hut, his true home, where we would share tea. I contemplated my man, my mountain.

Arne's hut stands on the edge of a perhaps hundred-meter-wide bench just below the black cliffs whose tops are disappearing into the snow-heavy clouds. It's quickly becoming a winter—dark day, even though it's early June. Here below the cliffs called Hallingskarven up on the great treeless plateau of the Hardangervidda, dominated by its central icefield, the Hardangerjokulen, it is winter at least ten months of the year, with only the intense respite of an arctic-like summer intervening. The hut, which Arne had named Tvergastein, after the locals' name for the quartz crystals found near the small tarn below it, at just over 1500m above sea level is Norway's highest privately-owned dwelling.

As we trudge up the last steep pitch below the hut, we admire how its low form fits in here. Much of its wooden construction is weather-beaten grey; the eye shifts smoothly from the grain of the wood to the patterns of the lichens on the rocks. Stones spaced out on the roof to hold it down against the gales remind us of hardy mountain dwellings in other of the world's more isolated regions. With its view out over several thousand square kilometers of the Hardangervidda, it is a true aerie. "Simple in means, rich in ends," as Arne has so famously put it. This is the place after which he has named his own philosophy, Ecosophy T. The "T" is for Tvergastein.

He greets us warmly at the door, wearing his sagging old sweater and woollen trousers and seeming happy at our unrestrained enthusiasm for the place. He says that he had been sitting at the picture window watching us as we climbed up the last few hundred meters. So the tea is just ready. "Have a glass of 'T'!" We sit on the rustic, homemade chairs in the living-room, thankfully sipping the hot brew and listening to Arne's stories of the place and his life here. The chairs are before the large window where we would come to sit for many hours during the next week, brooding over the rarely relenting snowstorms and, before going outside to take advantage of the clear spells, waxing ecstatic over the panorama suddenly ours. This room, literally a living-room, would be the one where we would spend all of our waking, indoor hours.

It was part of the original, smaller hut—8m by 5m—which Arne built in 1938; he later enlarged it to its current size of 100 square meters. The windward side, facing the prevailing westerlies, consisted of a workshop-cum-storage room; along the northern wall there was a tiny toilet closet, a kitchen, and the entry hall, which also served as a storage room and which housed part of Arne's library. None of these areas were occupied very often, and so formed a buffer for the more often lived-in south-facing rooms. These were a compact library, which had a small brazier in it, a sleeping room (mattresses on the floor), the living room, and—the core of them all—the winter, or storm, room. Each of the south-facing rooms, unlike the northern ones which had only very small peepholes, had a large, sun-transmitting window. It was surprising how, even in whiteouts, a noticeable amount of warming solar radiation could be felt coming through the panes.

Arne has kept a log of how many days he has spent up here through the decades. Over 3650 days—a total of ten years now. At one point earlier on, he and his wife and two young children lived in the hut, mostly in the storm room, for four and a half months. It was an experiment in living in extreme conditions. The storm room is double-insulated and the only one heated most of the time. The whole family ate and slept, played and worked within its five-by-two-and-a-half meter sides. These days Arne lives in there, except when he has visitors, most of the time. It's much more efficient for him to keep that room slightly heated and just leave the rest at the same temperature as outside. He's

completely devoted to trying to live in a way which is as little consuming of energy as possible, so he has even rigged up a stand above the glass chimney of his coal oil lamp where he sets a small kettle that provides him with boiling water for tea. His small space heater is only lit for short periods throughout the day, then it roars. Arne's idea is to heat up the stove as much as he can, fast, then let it die out immediately, so as to avoid having the room's heat get sucked up the chimney. He calculates and cuts the bits of fuel so that they burn completely, perhaps within half-an-hour to an hour. The room is so well insulated that the stove's heat remains for a surprisingly long time.

Where does his fuel come from? Well, it's old roofing material. The roof has blown off three times and each time it has provided him with fuel for several years. Each bit of tar paper, each shard of wood gets pains-takingly ripped or sawed into tiny squares for consumption in the stove. We are able to vouch for this first hand, as one of our chores was to finish off the preparation of the last remaining box of roofing which a storm had so thoughtfully transformed into fuel for him. Oh, yes; all the used toilet paper gets burned also. It is deposited delicately in a pail beside the toilet bench, rather than down the hole.

The Spartan tale continues. His supplies get hauled up in bulk every three years. In the old days it was with horses, these days by snowmobile. One time, he read in a newspaper that a cannery was selling off its remaining inventory of blood pudding. For some reason, Arne thought it would be a matter of twenty cans or so. As it turned out, he had become the proud owner of 185 cans of blood pudding. When some of the people in the valley got wind of this, the rumor spread around that Arne Naess thought another world war was coming soon. As it was, he ended up eating it several times a week for a few years.

There is really no end to the fastidiousness with which Arne pursues his ideas of living in a way which does not harm or insult the mountains which he knows are his true home. The mountains have given him so much and he is fully aware of his impact. The point of all his Spartan habits is that he is *choosing* to have it this way. Of course he could live in a materially more consuming manner and he realizes that few others would want to live as he does; the important thing for him, however, is that he wants to live as faithfully as he can to his own idea of a mountain ethic. This ethic is not only in accordance with his philosophy, but has also done much to influence its formulation. "Voluntary simplicity" speaks for much of it, and so does the idea of intense identification with the mountains—indeed, with all of nature, of which humans are a part. Besides his professional systematization of this, he has a starker—as he says, cruder—way of stating it:

Mountains are big. Very big. But they are also great. Very great. They have dignity and other aspects of greatness. They are solid, stable, unmovable. A Sanskrit word for them is "a-ga", that which does not go. But curiously enough there are lots of movements in them. Thus a ridge is sometimes ascending, there is a strong upward movement, perhaps broken with spires, towers, but resuming the upward trend, toward the sky or even toward heaven. The ridge or contour does not only have movement up and up, but may point upward, may invite elevation. When we are climbing a mountain, it may witness our behavior with a somewhat remote or mild benevolence. The mountain never fights against us and it will hold back avalanches as long as it can, but sometimes human stupidity and hubris and a lack of intimate feeling for the environment result in human catastrophes. (From Naess, in Tobias and Drasdo's *The Mountain Spirit*.)

It is this kind of sensitivity which leads Arne to request that all guests—both his and the mountains'—attempt, "when they can", to step only on the rocks between the alpine plants, at least in the immediate area of the hut; it is here, after all, where his impact, and hence his debt, are most concentrated. This also explains why every few weeks, like a Chinese gardener, he takes the bucket out from under the toilet bench and meticulously

ladles its contents (not waste!) out around the bases of the plants at the periphery of the hut's impact zone. The hut's concentrated effects are thus at least slightly diluted. After a few days at Tvergastein, experiencing the intensity of Arne's careful routines, the area around the hut begins to resemble a zone of love. The mountain environment certainly doesn't seem diminished by this presence.

The days pass and we fall into the ways of the place. Arne figures it usually takes him at least a couple weeks up here before he can feel completely at home; then his thinking and writing really sharpen. We relish every minute of it, go out for ski trips in the whiteouts, navigating from boulder to boulder, and let the tranquillity seep into us. After every couple of hours' work writing indoors, Arne goes out for a short ski, often including a bit of bouldering while he's out there. We might have just come in to the hut and begun cooking our meal when Arne rushes out of the storm room and announces he'll be back in a little while; he's just going out to one of his favorite cliffs to do a bit of climbing. Or carrying rocks, from as far away from the hut as he can, to heighten the sheltering wall he's built on the windward side of the hut. Mind and body, action and thought, mustn't let this body stiffen with age and rot.

What with the steady snowfall, there really isn't so much to do, but one afternoon Arne declares that we're going downhill skiing. We look out the window: whiteout. We muster some enthusiasm, get out our gear and follow him out. We've got our touring stuff on and Arne is wearing an old pair of plastic alpine skiing boots. He says we're going to the "Frankrike" slope, the large permanent snow patch which, from the hut, looks like the map of France, on the boulder slope below the cliffs. We're finding out that Arne has names for just about everything in the area; so it is with the creation of a world.

We shoulder bundles of bamboo poles and head off for the slope. In the near whiteout, we realize that when the angle steepens we should begin packing, so we start side-stepping our way up an imagined slalom course. Packing and tramping, we eventually trace out seven or eight gates and stick in a pole at each one. It is only slightly surreal. But we have a blast out there in the middle of the fog below some cliffs somewhere on the vast Hardangervidda. We each manage a few runs, regrooming the course on our climbs back up, before Arne nonchalantly excuses himself and says that he has to go back in to the hut. He'd seemed pretty spry and nimble, performing old-fashioned, yet pictur-esquely elegant hop turns with his beat-up slalom gear, so we wonder what he's got in mind. Well, he explains, a couple years ago he'd broken his leg and he still had a steel pin in his ankle from it. Because of the pressure of the rigid ski boots, the head of the pin has pushed through the skin and is now bleeding slightly. "Oh," we say, rather nonplussed. He is adamant that he can manage it by himself and that we needn't come in. Since a break in the snowfall seems to be forming, it's easy to stay out for a few more runs.

After skiing and admiring the view for a while longer, we rejoin Arne in the hut. He's all right, so we sit around together over some bowls of soup. There's a story of his that I'd read where he recounts an experience he'd had as a boy in the Jotunheimen Mountains. Wandering around in the deep snow at dusk, he needed to find some shelter and came across an hospitable old man who was doing some caretaking at one of the alpine club's huts. They ate only porridge for the whole week that Arne stayed with him; the evenings were passed with the old man telling the occasional story of the mountain life, or playing out complex rhythms on his violin. Arne talks of the effect that that stay had on him, how it was the beginning of a deep appreciation for the layers of richness that actually underlie the superficial harshness and Spartan quality of mountain living.

In his story, Arne says nothing more about the old man. I ask if he ever sought him out again. He replies with a chuckle, saying that goodness, no, he was too young at the time to know enough about the full effects that his stay with the old fellow would have on him. He was too foolish and impatient for new things to have the idea that it might be worthwhile to try to find him again.

But with the passage of a few years, the realization of what he'd gained from him matured, and he began more and more to seek out mountain people. He became convinced that they had an inner relation with the mountains in which they lived. This was a "...certain greatness, cleanness, a concentration upon what is essential, a self-sufficiency; and consequently a disregard of luxury, of complicated means of all kinds...and the obvious fondness for all things above the timberline, living or 'dead', certainly witnessed a rich, sensual attachment to life, a deep pleasure in what can be experienced with wide-open eyes and mind." (quoted from Naess, in Tobias) He points to the rocky, barely two-meter-wide ledge before the drop-off outside the window. "There, for example, is my garden," he muses. "As you can see, only some tiny, tough alpine flowers, some lichens and rock; but for fifty years now, those few square meters, always visible—even in storms, for the wind keeps it swept—have been my forest, my garden, my landscape. They have been more than enough."

While we'd been out skiing and the clouds had parted, Eva and I had noticed that up on a ledge near the crest of the cliffs there was a small, oddly rectangular object. What was that, Arne? "That is Tvergastein's Nest. It's another tiny hut, three by three meters, which I built in the forties." Our jaws drop. "Now it's in bad shape, for the roof has blown off and I've no longer been able to dedicate the energy to keep it maintained. I carried most of the materials up myself, board by board, up the gullies along a protected route which I'd secured. There you really get the feeling of being on the very brink of the abyss. It's two hundred meters higher than here. I wanted to have that feeling of a raven perched on the cliff for long periods. The building materials that are stacked in the entrance hall are intended for it. Some local young people are going to repair it, so the Nest will still be used for at least a few more years."

After the day's exertions and several days of not bathing, Eva shyly asks Arne if she can heat up a basin of water. She explains that it would also stave off the chill which she is feeling. Arne's warm agreement is pleasantly surprising; during our first couple of days here, we hadn't pushed such requests too much. We simply got the feeling that our adaptability was being tested. Although Arne tried, naturally, to be the perfect host, I think the fact that we would be staying for more than just one or two nights was a bit more demanding for him. He and I had only had a few previous encounters, while this trip was Eva's first meeting with him. When alone, he lives so entirely according to his own all-encompassing, uncompromising discipline, that the sudden prolonged presence of two relatively unknown visitors in his hermitage took at least some effort of acclimatization. Besides, bathing could be an authentic chore.

Water was usually hauled up from a hole in the ice of the tarn a couple hundred meters off, although during our stay we were collecting it from beneath The Pyramid, an enormous boulder so appealingly true to its name, which is much nearer the hut. Melting snow for water is entirely too wasteful; as Arne says, taking snow from minus one degrees Celsius to plus one uses up as many calories as heating it from plus one to the boiling point, to say nothing of having to haul the fuel up here in the first place. The huge Primus kerosene-burning stove is temperamental as well, even though it is much cherished for its decades of faithful service. Its brass tank still has its dent from a fall down the University stairs in 1939. It stands in the unheated living room, so that when it's lit the windows fog up; the test of efficient cooking is just how much steam forms on the single pane. I guess we've kept the windows pretty clear, and that, combined with a few other things, is giving us a good rating. When Eva starts heating up her bath water, Arne's a real sweetheart by insisting that she take double the amount in her basin. It doesn't take much convincing for me to get my share as well.

When our sponge bath is finished, we come back into the living-room to find that Arne has retired for the evening. From his room we hear some quiet classical music, but since it's one of the old 78's that are stacked in the living-room, the scratches are quite audible. Power is from batteries which are kept charged by a solar cell panel on the south wall; the

head lamp which Arne uses for his reading is powered in the same way.

Tomorrow, we have to go back down, as our host has an appointment in Oslo, so it seems like an evening for everyone to indulge in a little bit of a foretaste of the softer side of city living. I am moved by the obvious age of the recorded music and by the thought of how many times it must have mellowed the loneliest evenings over the decades, its harmonies taking the edge off of worry about the Nazi Occupation and the rumors of the Gestapo coming to take him away for questioning the next day, its melodies easing the strain of the sick children, or wondering about the strength of the storm and the roof holding.

The next morning it is dead calm and the sky perfectly clear. The surface of yesterday's newly fallen wet snow has frozen concrete-hard in the cold night. We get ready for a fast ski down. With all of the garbage stowed in them, our packs feel almost as heavy as when we came up; Arne is taking advantage of our willingness and our young backs to have some of several years' accumulated junk taken down. Above the hut the black cliffs stand huge against the blue sky. Where is it? The Nest? Yes, there it is, one of its walls silhouetted sharply by the brilliant dawn.

Perhaps next time... Gazing up at the fantastic cliffs I'm reminded again of what Arne had written once, in Tobias and Drasdo's *The Mountain Spirit*.

As I see it, modesty is of little value if it is not a natural consequence of much deeper feelings, and even more important in our special context, a consequence of a way of understanding ourselves as part of nature in a wide sense of the term. This way is such that the smaller we come to feel ourselves compared to the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness. I do not know why this is so.

We fly down the mountain. Looking back at Hallingskarven, I can just make out the minute box that is Tvergastein. To the right of it is the raw gash of a huge break in the seemingly unending cliffs. I want to check with Arne if that is the location of a route we had been talking about a few days ago. Careless, I enquire if that was the "valley" that he had been describing to me. His reaction is pained and I wonder what was wrong in what I said.

"I don't think that that place would like to hear itself called a 'valley'," he reprimands me. "It is too wild and violent and rugged a place to be called that." He stares admiringly up at it, his head tilted back at an angle usually reserved for contemplating very large masterpieces.

"A gorge?" I try.

"No, think of how it would feel at being called that," he reiterates.

"What about a cirque, or a ravine; a box canyon?"

"Hmm, no, not yet," is all he can say.

"Well, a cwm, then," I venture, thinking of Everest.

"Yes, not bad perhaps, but maybe just a bit a too soft," he replied, muttering about Scotland.

Humbled at having not been as precise as I would have liked to have been, I quietly state, "Whatever it is, it is truly great."

Arne Naess turns and looks at me with a smile and then we all turn to ski back down. I am feeling pretty small.

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