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### Out to Nowhere: Travels with Arne Naess

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### The First Encounter

It has now been over ten years since I first heard of Arne Naess, and seven years since I began to work with him in Norway. I can tell you today that he has no method, he has no disciples. Each student is treated as a friend who must learn to follow their own path to Self-realization, a personal course of learning and experience. To follow his ecosophy only means to discover your own. Don't worry about his terminology, but study the man. He might show you how to become yourSelf.

In the summer of 1981 my friend Ted Mandryk and I drove west across America, cruising to escape responsibility and to discover the land. If it happened today we might call it "Dave and Ted's Excellent Adventure." It was just after my first year at college, but school was what I was trying to forget. We were after the wide open spaces, the pull of unfamiliar landscapes. In the Black Hills we climbed Harney Peak, sacred mountain of the Sioux, and lay down on the rock to listen to the beat of the rock itself, but all we heard was the advancing din of motorcycles coming up the *trail*. *There was no* escape, nowhere far enough from the noise of our time. We had along a book, *Earth Wisdom*, by Dolores LaChapelle. I was intrigued by the story within it of a Norwegian professor who had chained himself to the cliff beside a great waterfall to protest its demise through hydrodevelopment. He was a philosopher—Hmmm, I thought, philosophy as tool to solve the environmental crisis. *That* sounded like a promising tack. I don't know why, but it did. Perhaps Norway would be far enough away.

Upon my return to university life, I wrote to this man out of the blue, asking just what his work was about. To my surprise, a huge brown envelope arrived several months later from "AN" at the "Institut for filosofi": articles from "Spinoza and ecology" to "The Case Against Science" and "Self-realization in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep, and Wolves." What was it all about? These texts appeared technical and obscure for the most part. The personality of the author was somehow hidden, disguised in feigned objectivity. The articles came with a short note: "We will climb together if you come to Norway. You may find me at one of the following three addresses: office, sister, or former wife. In the city, I really have no home. My place is in the mountains, and I hope you will be able to visit with me there."

Two years later I was there, traversing the cliffs above Arne's mountain retreat, viewing

the open rolling wilderness high above the treeline. We climbed silently, so as best to hear the eagles crying over us with the wind. At night we each wrote in our own notebooks, and I read through his difficult diagrams of his ecological philosophy, afraid to ask any questions which might betray my ignorance. It took me several years to realize that no one really understands these diagrams, and besides, Naess redraws them completely anew each time he tries to repeat what he said before!

## **The Cabin of Crossed Stones**

Halfway between Oslo and Bergen, the train squeals to a halt at the tiny hamlet of Ustaoset. It is seven-thirty at night in the summer, and the sun has just begun its slow descent toward a midnight set. My friend Leen and I are the only ones to alight at the station, which is right at the shore of a long lake, with gentle waves lapping against the shore and the tracks. It is the first such lake above treeline along the train's route over the mountains toward the Western coast.

The train pulls away—we turn our back to the lake and look up at the clouds brushing the summit of Hallingskarvet. My eyes cast a sweeping gaze up the gentle ruddy ridges to a small knoll beneath the final cliff, where the glacier tore against the rock like a bread knife, slicing the profile of this benign, beckoning mountain. I'm trying to make out the tiny cottage at the base of this last cliff—do I see a candle burning, or is that just a reflection of the sun? Can we assume the professor is at home?

No one in the city knew his whereabouts for sure, so we decided to take the risk. It was a five-hour train ride from Oslo, and now at least a three hour trudge through swampy tundra, then a slow ascent over scree to the anchorage on that windblown overlook. Let's hope he's there. Otherwise it would be a long march down in the dark.

Leaving the village, following sheep paths out into the open ground. None heads straight for the mountain, but all meander past fine patches of grass, high priorities for the travelling sheep, though not so helpful for those of us concerned with reaching the cabin before dark. We leave the trail and slog it through the soaked sedge, and finally reach the snowpacks at the base of the rise. An unhurried climb up the ancient gray slush; as breathing quickens our speed decreases. Finally we emerge on the windward side of the hut. From there it just looks like a pile of rocks, a cairn, perhaps, marking a point meaningful in some other age, to some other kind of human race. But on closer inspection this is really a huge wall, built to shelter the fragile cottage from the brutal winter winds. We walk around to the front door; the house looks dark and uninhabited. What do we do now? I guess just knock. Da-dum. Silence. Da-dum- dum. What's that!? A faint sound of padding feet from the back of the house. The door opens. The familiar grizzled, white-haired grin. "Well...your letter, it was a bit hard to decipher. I wasn't sure when you were coming, but this is a tremendous surprise. Come, come in.... We must finish the conversation we began two years ago inside here. As I recall, you had some reservations about the eight points of deep ecology, no? Just a minute, I'll fire up the primus. You shall have some tea!"

It is the summer of 1985. This is the second time I have met Arne Naess, and our friendship is already set in the manner of a long, unfinished conversation that starts and stops across the seasons and the continents. We are up at Tvergastein, the mountain hut which he calls his home, nearly two thousand meters high, three wet hours uphill from the Ustaoset station.

Arne had this place built over fifty years ago, and he has spent over ten full years of his life up here. The walls and shelves are the material memories of his life. Up here he has carried the most stalwart works of Western scholarship and tradition—the complete works of Aristotle and Plato, handbooks of chemistry and physics, the novels of

Dostoevsky and the letters of Spinoza. Teach-yourself manuals for Romanian, Icelandic and Chinese. The most complete Sanskrit-English dictionaries available. Buddhist logic, Marxist rhetoric, the complete French editions of Auguste Comte and Henri Bergson. Wittgenstein, Freud, Ibsen and Strindberg. Astronomical guides to the heavens, multi-volume tomes on the wildlife of Norway. This is a hermitage fully outfitted for the study of philosophy in its widest definition, as love of wisdom, in the pure seat of mountain air.

With such a weight of ideas all around, one is never really alone here. The air is too thin for anything to decay. Unfinished manuscripts from the thirties look as if they were left yesterday, while the author went out to gather wood or to fetch water from the canal. There is a stack of postcards from a trip to America in the twenties. There are photographs of famous mountains, drawings by children. A Latin epigraph above a telescope hanging on the wall: *verba vana hic loqui non licet*— "vain words are not spoken here."

Tiny vials with a multitude of coloured substances line a special series of display shelves: These are the fruits of fifty years of amateur 'mountain chemistry' like the concoctions of a child's science kit, carried on by one who held onto curiosity through the prime of life—for fun, not for information. There are generations of forms of rock climbing equipment, from heavy leather boots and steel pitons to light carabineers and high tech nylon shoes. There are personal contraptions that only the master understands—kerosene lamps that heat tea and soup at the same time, solar powered reading lights that work even if the sun doesn't shine for weeks, portable desks that only fit particular chairs when particular people sit in them. A huge picture window overlooks the entire Hardangervidda, where herds of reindeer can be seen crossing the swampland, and the distant mountain Gausta comes in and out of view through the haze in the far south. The world evolves as we watch it through the glass. Shadows moving across the hills, light peeking through to change a brown slope to brilliant green. The greatest change is with the clouds, which circle through and around the cottage, blowing through us as we stare at them, making us feel as if we move through the weather, not only gaze at it.

Behind the hut rises the final cliff of Hallingskarvet, the bread-like mountain, with an innumerable series of possible routes of ascent, from scrambling to the higher ranks of aided difficulty. There are snowfields to schuss down, boulders to practice climbing on, rivers to divert into canals to bring precious water closer to the cabin's door. Endless ways to see the sun rising and setting, new vantage points, new angles to notice before the inevitable darkness comes.

The name 'Tvergastein' means "crossed stones," referring to the angled quartz crystals which used to be quite abundant in the rockfalls behind the hut, where snowmelt trickles down under huge fallen boulders into rivulets which drain into the jewel-drop lake several hundred meters to the west. But I imagine the stones as guides which themselves need to be crossed, in the search for the story of the origin of the philosopher's life up here in the hills. I see Arne running ahead of me, always wanting to be first on any of our journeys. Leading the rope, breaking the trail. He is leaping from stone to stone as fast as he can. These stones are the objects and memories we try to mark our lives by. And yet each is so precariously placed that we need to keep moving to enjoy the climb. Running across the stones. Picking up the flattest stones to rebuild the wall. Moving delicately around the largest stones with hand and foot holds, traversing the great boulders in practice for the true ascent, the climb of life from birth, through meaning, to death. This is why we want to live in the mountains, this is why everything tastes better high up where the air is thin, and this is why we always return here to clarify the range of light we call ideas.

## **Looking for Nowhere**

One spring Michael Soule, Arne, and I tried to take a trip in the desert. The first stop was

the Grand Canyon, but Arne found this too grand. "Spectacular!" he exclaimed, "why must we always wish nature to be spectacular? Can't we find something ordinary, with sun, a few rocks to climb, lizards, and flowers?" Okay, the search began, across the whole state of Arizona. We drove and drove through forests ("no, this is too much like Norway") and sweltering dry washes ("no, this is much too hot. And where are the flowers?") occasionally stopping for a meal in roadside dives ("Cafes? There is nothing for us there. ") There I would have to coax Arne into eating anything by ordering, say, an extra breakfast for myself and announcing that I just couldn't finish it, was he sure he didn't want anything, ("You don't want it? All right, I'll have some then.")

I've learned to put up with these quirks after years of journeys with Arne Naess in far wild places around the Earth. There is always some lesson to be learned from them. We finally found a ranger who informed us that we weren't going to find any flowers this year, as there hadn't been any rain, so Arne became less adamant in his demand for the bright colours of usual spring. We then just turned off the highway, drove our rented Toyota up a sandy wash, and stopped under a large, sheltering tree just at the point the arroyo began to get rocky and inviting for the climber. This would be home.

I was mad. We had forsaken the grandest of canyons for this piece of nowhere? "Our purpose," said Arne, "is to dwell, in the Heideggerian sense." To take hold of a place, to learn its meaning for each of our own quests.

Michael, the scientist, began at once to take a survey of the bird and plant species of the site. He soon discovered an immobile snake, digesting a mouse. Later he caught many lizards with the swift dart of his hands as they jumped into his grasp. Arne set up his various 'offices' on different sides of the valley, choosing the exact right amount of shade and sun. He was working, I believe, on an article on immigration reforms in Norway. He never stops working, wherever he is, as much as it seems like he is on vacation all the time.

I paced impatiently for the first days, but then began to calm down, and started to observe the site in my own way. Paying attention to the land led to a kind of phenomenological poetry that extended me into the surroundings. It's a form philosophy may take if mixed heartily with sand. Here is some of it:

DETAILS OF THE DESERT .to Arne Naess, who took me to nowhere... red ants on the warm sand I have no past A tiny wheatbranch spins in the wind sagebrush shadows on paper swirling over distant leaves an invisible cloud wisps fast past my head from front to back, gone; I am on a cold, high mountain with the clouds in this dream and yet I look straight out in to the desertsand, where each particle is made different, and blows and blows, only in its time. Then few reflect a moment's sunlight while still the night burns. A round tree, backlit by sun at the place in the sand where the river ends water stops beneath acres of air canyon winds flicker the leaves around the dark center annular glow eclipsing tree the shadow surround green, tan, the dark, the light sentinel cacti on the hills dolmen stares turn the desert day our fires burn without smoke in the sands, where the river ends. Night: after fire which leapstiny creatures emerge from the tree, and wander in a slow trance and dance — into and around themselves, not knowing the reason the light obscuring their nocturnal journey stunned by the spirit of the orange flames sound between fire and wind when one reveals presence in the other from the sounds — other possible unities than the birds which produce them. Why is reason light? Why do things blur enough in the sunlight so they can be analyzed? A world of insistent happenings — desert not a dynamism of colour but of light and dark, warm and cool naming things before knowing them shadows, swallows, and flies that bite discovering a place, you are the origin of its name; reversing wind from the valleys, up the canyon, meeting the water which dies. It's the wind that makes the shadows dance It's the sound which envelops all, the rushing air that lulls us to itself though nothing moves in the end, after receding rustles the insects return hummingbirds to tobacco blossoms hovering in the nowstill air.

But the wind which remains so that nothing moves, Frozen in the steady ripples particles dance in the webs we have woven which connect the world as spiders, softly go. At night, verging on sleep At dawn, at the conscious At the border, sifting memories and movements, then... perceptions which dance around a time aspects of impression which bring you back, without details is structure, but things should give us their own patterns, why even attempt to form them? to lead you toward their selves in the being so far away....

So toward our own selves in a place so unspectacular none of us will ever be able to remember its name, or know how to find it again. It is everyplace, or even just the instructions for how to understand any place. Arne surprises us once again by teaching how to love any bit of the land, any spot where humanity and nature can encounter each other with respect and time.

## **The Toy in the Tub**

On the eve of Arne's eightieth birthday, a crowd of his lifetime friends and admirers gathered in the great wooden hall of the venerable Holmenkollen restaurant on the hills above Oslo to toast their loyalty to their great friend, Arne Naess. It was a long evening of toasts and testimonials, and it was fascinating to hear so many of these people tell the same stories about travels with Arne that he had told about them in the many hours of conversations I had had with him in preparation for the book I was writing on his life. I kept waiting to see how Arne would top it all off with his own final response. When the moment came, the maitre d' quietly sneaked up to his table and handed him something inside a small velvet bag. When he got up to speak, thanking all his friends and family for their kind remarks, he pulled out of the bag a small, yellow plastic duck.

"I noticed this animal floating in my bath this afternoon and thought I should bring it in to show you. Notice as I tilt him a little bit to the left, his mouth opens, and he smiles a little. I tilt him the other way, and the mouth closes, but he still smiles. There is joy here, as there is in all of nature. I can empathize with the duck, even if he is just a toy. There is joy throughout the world, even in those reaches which seem so far from our human ways of being. You have helped me this evening to continue to sense this joy. And for this I thank you."

The plastic duck went back into his velvet bag and back to the bathtub, where he resides until this day. Arne has said goodbye to his friends, and he continues to travel and to look at the world.

## **A Walk in the World of Joy**

One night in Santa Cruz I take Arne down to see the breeding ground of the California elephant seals. The sun poised on the horizon, we dash down the sandy path of human footprints to be sure to reach the site before nightfall. Crossing rangers' barricades, ignoring large signs that cautioned "Warning: wild elephant seals!" we run on, against the law, as the sun disappears. The trail is much longer than either of us had imagined. It becomes difficult to see beyond our feet and the wall of the sand dunes, which seem to envelop us more completely the closer we come toward the sea. The path begins to dissipate into the surrounding sand, and bellows of joy are heard more and more frequently from beyond the hills topped with darkening grasses, swishing in the wind. Finally we round a bend to emerge on a landscape of only white sand, and see to the left a tiny ephemeral pool, full of huge frolicking animals, smiling in the night. They rise and plummet, submerging themselves only to surge up again into the air, murmuring happy sounds. It is almost dark now—the rich deep blue of the Pacific dusk. Arne leaves the trail, heads west over the crest toward the ocean. He saunters with the firm but ragged gait of a man in the prime of his life, eighty years old, veteran of mountain paths far and

near. He walks with conviction, appearing at once tough and fragile beneath the night sky. As he moves into his beloved distance, pausing to stand in the sand, it is harder to make out the division between the man and the world. He remains motionless, like some lone, sturdy tree with its white hair crazy with wind. Beside him lie two sleeping giant seals. They do not notice the intruder, his identity so fused with theirs in the darkness that there is no line. The world emerges and looks at the world, only to return to it once and for all in the end. Night falls on the beach of Ano Nuevo, and the philosopher and nature are one.

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