

One Eye on the Ocean:

The Memoir of an Empath

Introduction

"I am the shore and the ocean, awaiting myself on both sides."
-Dejan Stojanović

1983

Fear.
Total fear possessed me.

I stood beside my father, a temporary wave of rigor mortis grasping hold of my body. There before us lay a jetty that he led me out to walk upon; an immovable drawbridge, permanently lowered. It was a massive, man-made structure of giant dark stones that jutted out into the sea like a defiant finger pointing the way to death-by-abyss. He wouldn't venture too far out, as the sea swells were so large and powerful. The Pacific Ocean looked mad as hell to me. It looked as though every hateful thought and feeling crawling around in its ancient depth was exploding to life in front of my eyes;

reckless, destructive. The salt water, wind, and hopeless grey skies sewed their way right into my flesh, piercing my heart in no time. I believe that was the most afraid I had ever been in my ten-year old life.

"You see that?" Dad shouted above the swells as they crashed mercilessly upon the jetty and the shoreline itself. *"This is what the sea can be. Full of energy and power. You need to remember...promise me you will never turn your back on it. It'll swallow you in a flicker of an eye."*

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To be specific, I was ten-and-a-half the first time I saw the ocean in real life. That was still in the time of life when the "half" was an important distinction from merely being ten. It was January 3rd, 1983, and there was nothing at all about the day that fit what I had envisioned about "going to the beach". We had just moved thirteen hundred miles and had been living for three days in a hotel in Eugene, Oregon without even a house to call home yet. But Dad made sure we packed a day's worth of snacks and clothes and towels, so we could celebrate the new year and our new lives at what would eventually become the second most comfortable place for me to feel at home in the world; the Pacific Northwest Coastline.

My body twitched from head-to-toe all morning; bouncing around like Tigger bowling Winnie-the-Poo over on the path through the Hundred Acre Wood, an association Dad made of me often in those days. I just couldn't stand the wait. My eyes were practically starving for the palm trees, blue surf, and wet, happy dogs playing fetch with their half-naked, youth-fueled owners. Of course, it was winter. The cold and grey I felt seeping into my bones from the unfamiliar Oregon weather probably just meant that the people would be wearing more clothes. Or, I reasoned, the weather at the beach was probably just nicer all around.

Until that point, I had been a committed landlubber who hailed from the Big Sky interior of Montana. There my beaches were dirt and gravel roads, and my seas were gently rolling plains of wheat fields shaped into waves of gullies and foothills and occasional islands of ancient rock plateaus. The tides came in and went out over entire seasons. Grasses and grains would slowly rise from the low earth, into swells that would build from deep greens to golden yellows. Eventually the miles and miles of wheat created breaks of foamy white as uncountable millions of heavy seed heads bowed increasingly low toward the ground, eventually crashing and vanishing with either harvest or decay. It wasn't long until winter brought a new tide: one of snow, swept by hostile winds into dunes of drifts that would

crust with ice. They became fierce waves locked in place, standing defiantly frozen in time across the Great Plains.

I was certainly used to the scale of nature-without-a-budget, having witnessed thunderstorms and prairies and skies so vast that my personal orientation to the world was one of my own glorious smallness. And yet, even with all that context, I was utterly unprepared for what I saw from behind my fragile and naïve eyes, that first time I met the great Pacific.

Dad had been a navy man in his childhood. I say childhood specifically because my grandmother changed his birth certificate (unconvincingly in my opinion) so that it read 1943 so that her second husband could kick him out of the house at fifteen years old. Since he lived upon ships at such a formative age, I could see very clearly how much the ocean had come to mean to him. It was the place he went to escape the abuses of a terrible childhood and confining life that was just too small for him. It was the first place he felt free and the place he began to grow up. I incorrectly guessed that because of all those years of listening to him, I felt I knew the ocean the same way I knew beloved characters from favorite books; hearing all their inner workings and thoughts and responses to their lives and experiences. As it turned out, I knew it only as well as I knew the actors from any of my favorite shows or movies: I only knew the lines that were delivered.

“Staying safe means constant vigilance. You never know what’s going to happen, so you always stay alert.” Dad instructed with tones of seriousness befitting a former sailor. The brief seventy-or-so miles between Eugene and Florence, Oregon seemed to be crawling by, painfully.

How many more hundreds of times is going to say the same thing?

“Yeah, ok Dad. Got it.” I wonder if I rolled my eyes at the time. *Did he have to be mean and pushy about it? It’s just a beach for crying out loud.* I thought, in the seclusion of my head.

The weather upon our arrival didn’t seem any better than it had in Eugene, but then again, we were told that we had still a way to walk yet. My heart sank a little, though. I doubted it would be that much better only a few feet away. I mean, the sky is the sky, after all. And the ocean seemed like such a tease. We’d crest one set of dunes and I was certain on the other side was the water. I could hear it, after all. Surely it was there *this time*.

But it wasn’t. Several rough climbs up sand dunes left me thinking, *Jesus. I didn’t know it would be like this. Sand is hard as hell to walk on.* At least I had the motivation of the water that was just on the other side, thundering away, enticing me like the proverbial carrot-

on-a-stick. The image of Bugs Bunny popping out of the ground in swimwear running for Pismo Beach, followed by the cut to him exhausted in the Sahara Desert because he didn’t take that left turn at Albuquerque, came to mind.

Finally, out of breath from my asthma and sort of pissed off (Montana ten-year-olds are childhood swearing savants), I reached the top of an embankment whose seemingly massive height sloped decisively away toward the water. And that is where we found the jetty in all its masculine, jagged, arrogant presence.

From our minor excursion away from the perceived safe ground of sand dunes out into the middle of the angry waters, I found myself devoid of any thought but panic and doom. Dad explained (speaking close to my ear to be heard over the wind), that we were witnessing the highest tide day of the year. I have no idea if that was actually true or not, as he made something of a career out of hyperbole and suppositions across my entire life of knowing him. But on that day, I had no reason to doubt. I had no measure of comparison anyway. And this scene...this was far too alarming to allow much of any thought to be honest.

We stood there, frozen in time, helpless and, it seemed to me, completely vulnerable. When and only when he had grown too cold to keep standing stubbornly in the midst of the assaulting winds and spray, he turned us back. His words grew steadily louder

as we moved toward the higher, softer ground away from the treacherous boulders and deafening surge, at something of an angle so the hammering waters were always trackable. I thought for sure that at any second, the water was going to notice me; see me standing there defenseless and weak and small and then form itself into a mighty fist to grab me and bury me deep into the surf where I would be unable to breathe. How do you protect yourself against all that? How do you anticipate and react in enough time to ever hope to escape that unpredictable danger just waiting to pummel you and swallow you into darkness? How do you possibly come to understand and escape the whims of an unthinking and compassionless mass whose entire existence is to be concerned with nothing but moving with gravity and the weather, completely indifferent to your being?

When we reached the highpoint of the dune again and aligned ourselves to be taking in the entire scene, Dad leaned in and whispered.

“Always keep one eye on the ocean, Aaron.”

2017

Thom, my boyfriend of two-and-a-half years was driving behind the wheel of his latest car infatuation

while I sat in the back seat taking in the conversation he was having with our guest, David. We were roadtripping from Eugene to Seattle where David was to meet his parents for a cruise after having stayed with us for a few days. He was on a vacation from his East Coast-based job and life. I was all too happy to give up my usual place on the passenger side. The back seat seemed like a very indulgent way to spend the six hours on the road, letting the two continue their catching up and storytelling while I enjoyed the views and freedom to tune in and out as I pleased, taking in the soulful beauty of the Northwest forests, rivers, and waterfalls.

“Aaron...Thom told me kind of what you do...something about a nurse and pediatrics...but I don't really get it. Tell me exactly what it is that you do for work?” David inquired kindly, seeking to ensure I was included in the talk.

David was one of the kindest and sincerest friends in Thom's life and past. They had known each other since their early college days and had kept up over many years. I discovered through Thom's stories and David's own presence, that this was a pretty special and unique man. He was a pastor, and clearly one who felt that God was, if anything, defined by kindness and love. David seemed to me to have a unique gift for guileless wonder; he would ask any question that came to mind

which was driven by both his honest interest in you and his pastoral impulse to connect. I found his curiosity warm and inviting. I have a special affinity for people who just put themselves out there with courage and ease.

“Well, David, yeah...you’ve got it right. Thanks so much for asking.” I took a few moments to explain to him that I was a nurse who specialized in kids with all kinds of learning and behavioral needs. It had been my work for the previous ten years and included ongoing activities in practice and research, although for most of that decade, my primary focus has been in my work as a professor teaching at a School of Nursing.

“Ok, but I still don’t get it. What do you actually do with these kids? You diagnose them, or you take care of them in a hospital or what is your, like actual work?”

He struggled to fill in a picture of me in my daily life and I admit, that all sounded very high-brow, no matter how hard I tried to just keep things simple. So, I thought it best to give him some concrete examples. I described scenes of my in my professor role, giving lectures and workshops that were aimed at helping families build resilience in the face of the overwhelming power of children’s disabilities, health problems, and social and psychological differences. For these families, the metaphorical oceans were their children’s behavioral

and physical challenges. They were often lost and needing navigation; needing help working to keep their children (and the rest of their family) safe on the beaches of daily life.

“That’s so interesting. What do you tell them? What is it that they are dealing with that they feel the need to listen to you?”

“So...I will do a lot of things, but a common need parents have, has to do with their own self-imposed burdens of raising a child who struggles to make it in everyday life. They become extremely heavy and hopeless because no matter how hard they work to coach and support their child, it often seems like it has very little reward or payoff. They often feel that they are failing their children as nothing really seems to be solved, it just changes all the time. And they feel that their children’s entire futures are their responsibility.”

I explained to David how these families just feel like they have become trapped and there is nowhere for them to go. They imagine dire futures with terrible outcomes and they blame themselves. Often, their children are younger than eight years old when they come to me, but they have already conjured up pictures of future darkness and they live in those haunting images. The work they try to do every day is exhausting

to them. They don't feel they can give up, but they don't know how to go on."

"Wow. I had no idea things were so hard! What do you say to them?" David asked, with rapt attention and guileless curiosity.

"Well, one of the things I often will do in these cases is I will talk them through research on a totally different topic; research about adults who grew up as children of alcoholics. While there are a huge variety of ways these kids grow up to be adults themselves, there are two distinct, general patterns that emerge when we study them. Often, these children will grow up battling addiction like their parent or parents. Also true, they often grow up to be senators and astronauts and professors and CEOs...hyper functional people with excellent marriages and families who excel in all ways. So, we end up with a large group of grown children who find themselves in the same circumstances as the parents who raised them, and a similarly large group of children who grow up taking paths far, far away from the alcoholism they experienced as kids."

"And that helps them? Hearing this helps these parents? I probably missed something...this doesn't have anything to do with alcoholism, or does it?"

I couldn't help myself. I launched into a dense talk of points that I often make when speaking to parents and psychologists and teachers. This was my stage; I entered my character and lines just like any Broadway-stepped actor would do.

"What helps is that I point out the problem that comes from simplistic thinking about parenting and adult outcomes of children. I say to them 'look, society is very quick to blame the alcoholic parent for the child who grows up to be an alcoholic. But what do they do when the child grows up to be a completely well-adjusted, thriving community leader and citizen? Can you also congratulate that parent who was absent or neglectful or abusive because of their disease for the fact that their child just became president?' The point I make to them all is that, while what they do certainly has an impact, and they do need to stay engaged to be the best possible parents...their children are ultimately going to exercise their own spirits on their life paths. They are their own people. Parents cannot and should not carry the weight of everything about their children's futures upon their backs because they too, are on their own journeys of becoming. They will become who they chose to become. There is plenty of room for grace for all of us in raising children and in letting go."

David sat in silence for a moment, taking it all in; processing. Formulating new questions in his kind efforts to understand me; to know me. And no doubt, he was learning something that, given what I knew of David thus far, he would put to use in offering newly informed compassion to families he was shepherding in his pastor's life.

"So...just curious here...why do you think that some kids grow up in that situation to be so successful? Are they just overcompensating for their alcoholic parents?"

I considered his question quietly for a moment.

"To some degree, probably a large degree, I think that is true." I continued. "But I think its deeper, too. When you grow up in that terrible situation, even though it is fraught with pain and struggle and emotional and physical abandonments over and over again, there are still gifts that come from it all. It's a huge paradox, but there are gifts that are available if they can be seen and accepted; cherished and developed." I explained.

"And I should know; I grew up with an alcoholic mother, so I know firsthand what that experience is like. It's profoundly difficult."

I don't exactly know why I shared that last bit of information. I spoke it almost under my breath, to be honest. I think I dipped into myself for a moment as a way to offer some kind of evidence to the situation; a face of reality and humanity to what just sounded like a speech from a scientific panel presentation. And I like when I can bring evidence to the table in a discussion. Even if it is the anecdotal kind from my own experiences. Maybe even especially so. And honestly, I felt totally comfortable talking with David. He really was one of the kindest and most genuine people I had met in a long time. I love the honesty and transparency that comes from those who openly seek to know others authentically, with wonder and without judgment. Of course, at times it also catches me off guard and I find myself being confronted with an opportunity for some revelatory self-learning.

"You did? Wow. I can't even imagine. So what gift did it give you?"

Now it was my turn for silence. I was stunned by the question. I had given this talk to parents dozens and dozens of times. I had thought about the scientific evidence about adult children raised by alcoholics for years. But I had never been asked this question. I hadn't even asked it of myself.

I sat and thought. *Was I going to be able to even find the answer?*

It surprised me to be asked the question and to realize I hadn't ever considered it. But what surprised me more was how rapidly the images of life passed through my head, in a newly patterned order.

Visions came to me like milepost signs across my entire lifespan; of guiding and helping and healing others; of overcoming a chaotic and messy childhood; solving complex emotional and social problems for everyone from strangers to soulmates; learning to read individuals and even entire rooms filled with people to assess the social temperature; learning to take those intuitive and eerily accurate readings and translate them into behaviors and responses to people that would keep me safe; supporting my ex-wife artfully through childbirth three times; closing a business and spending twelve more years in school; becoming a nurse and offering my presence and guidance to people from birth to death; navigating a period of intense suicidal danger; finding my entire identity in cinders; living through divorce; losing my religion; nursing my parents through to their all-too-early early deaths; having my heart healed and broken over and over; learning to forgive and embrace both lovers and enemies. Walking up and down the beaches of my life, up and over exhausting dunes, through storms and trials of unpredictable weather...through fear and danger and uncertainty, and

on to clarity and safety and peace while awaiting the next pounding storm to strike land.

It was as if a hundred pictures of my life were illuminated on a dark stage in my imagination all at once and I took them in. And I recognized that there were themes and truths I had never before seen. And there **were** gifts; gifts that came directly from growing up with my Mom and her alcoholism, and my Dad and his mental illness. Gifts that came from being a living target of abuse and ignorance; of received spite, hate, fear, and jealousy throughout my childhood that, in turn, made me a deeply intuitive listener and healer and teacher. Gifts that allowed me to do all of these positive things in a uniquely "Aaron" way; a way that has taken over four decades to learn to love and appreciate rather than revile and reject.

And as all those thoughts and images and feelings fired in my brain in one time-defying moment, I heard Dad's words again, an echo of his ghost taking me back well over thirty years:

Always keep one eye on the ocean, Aaron.

With peaceful clarity and new insight, I responded calmly and decisively.

"It made me an empath, David. That is the gift it gave me."