

Extract from **Context XXI**<http://contextxxi.org/observations-of-a-coastal-wanderer.html>

extracted on: 26 February 2024

Date of this contribution: October 1995

Observations of a Coastal Wanderer

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The many beaches along the coasts of New Hampshire and Maine have a beautiful distinction about them. Most of them have the ocean approach adjoining roadways with few small walls or buildings to obstruct the view of anyone who has the opportunity to walk or drive along their edges. These beaches have been protected by town fathers from being over developed by those who see opportunity for the few instead of beauty to be enjoyed by the many.

Long Sands Beach in York, Maine, is one of those beaches. In between Route 1A and the beach is a walk. It is elevated which allows the walker to see yet not be seen. Living on the beach for the past nineteen years has taught me that the beauty of the coast does not only come from the physical surroundings. It also emanates from the visitors who walk along the long white sands of the beach. Also having an intense imagination I make up stories about the people I see.

Starting from where the beach begins at the point where Nubble Road meets the ocean, there is little beach at any tide. In fact, there is no beach at all. The people simply lean over the large rocks which separates the road from the water. Young and old stare into the pulsating ocean and lose themselves in the heartbeat precision of the never ending waves. This is where the expert observer notices what life's meaning should be. I have watched people find, live through, lose, and then finally search for memories that make and sometimes break their lives. I have observed people meet in large groups. Their conversations filled with laughter, youth, and of course the innocence

that we all begin our lives with. These groups eventually break into small separate clusters to be reduced to pairs attracted to each other by the possibility of creating their own memories.

During the course of the summer I see these pairs of people on their particular section of beach. They create their territory and do not like to share it. At first they are playing the part of friends not daring to get close or to appear to be interested in their now obvious partner. But as the weeks pass I observe their closeness overtaking the fear of being vulnerable. First their eyes meet and then they finally touch to be seen perpetually as one on their section of beach. I don't care if my observations are seen because I know that if I stood directly in front of them they wouldn't care. In fact, they would not know that I exist.

I also see the loners who dare not go on the beach but rather stay up on the black-topped path and dream about their time on the sand. They dream about their lost hours that were either rejected or just disappeared. These people do not have to be young or old, they are just in a stage of their lives.

One of the most exciting sights for me is when I first observe young couples and see them appear year after year together in the sun. Then one year passes and I see that they are not alone. They are now accompanied by a mirror of their own lives. They always appear so proud. Year after year I watch them grow older and their babies grow bigger. Sometimes visa-versa. Their memories never end, they just grow longer and newer. I've almost lived here long enough to observe the babies of the summer grow into adults. I have watched them grow to young children,

radiating innocence and creating memories for their parents and all around them. Yet, on the other hand, I feel remorse for the people who become singles again because of their life's fate. They are seen in many numbers staring out in the vastness of the ocean, obviously trying to forget while fearing that they will always remember.

The old are the people I enjoy watching the most. Especially the older couples who plant themselves on the park benches to stare into the ocean and reminisce about their own pasts. The old couples bring hope to us all. But the old singles display such loneliness and despair that I dread the thought that one day I might live so long as to remember my memories alone. Some old couples lie their beach chairs precariously close if not in the wake of the always approaching waves. They know that with each large entrance of water they will get wet. But they still close their eyes and react surprised as each new wave brushes their feet and then wets their bottoms. Maybe this sharp sensation causes them to remember the first time they exchanged a similar feeling using each other.

I remember once I observed a very young lady, perhaps five or six, being instructed by her mother to sit quietly and enjoy the beach. Not so far away I saw another pretty lady, perhaps sixty or seventy, being instructed by an oldest daughter as to how to enjoy the beach. The instructions made the two ladies fidget in their chairs. They were obviously uncomfortable by what was being told to them. But then, as if some magnetic attraction between the two of them developed, they gazed at each other. Their eyes met and it appeared

as if they told each other to calm down and enjoy the sea. One day I hope to be fortunate enough to experience what happened between the two of them. But I know that I must first survive time and simply get old.

Of course not all men and women dare to get that close to the ocean. Many on the beach are seen straight backed, standing like statues on their rock like pedestals, contemplating nothing more important than themselves.

Walking further down the walkway the ocean now allows more beach to appear. This is where most of the young are seen. The children are creating their own form of world in the sand while their parents dream about the world they either left behind or just re-discovered. During a sunny summer day the sounds of laughter and screaming drown out all that nature can muster up. But on fog bound days the inhabitants treat the shore like they would a church with their voices daring not to disturb the sounds of the sea.

Continuing my trek down beach I arrive at the place where the young are known to camp themselves for hours in the hopes of attracting each other into summer and maybe longer relationships. But again, during fog bound times, even the young are awed into staring into the ocean praying that sunny days are soon to return. The lovers are always there, arm in arm and body to body, in the hopes that their love is the true one which will last forever. But the fog hints to these young lovers that they are observing a truer reality. Whether or not this scares them or gives them hope is their own mystery.

Further down the beach is the territory of the more mature inhabitants. These people have already been through over half their lives and are in the midst of giving up their existence's to mold new futures for their children. Observing these people shows that they always seem lost in their own thoughts or possibly lost dreams.

The short summer season is not the only time one has to observe the beauty of the coast of Maine. Another season that marks the end of the excitement of summer and begins the preparation for the holidays and the cold winds of winter is also a prime time to observe what

life can be. It is a remarkably quiet time of year. The hustle and the bustle of summer vacations are still very clear in all of our minds. Yet normality is not the only idea that comes back to us this time of year. Serenity also creeps its way into all of our lives.

Walking down the beach clearly shows how the screams of playing children are now replaced by the songs of gulls overhead. The acrid smell of aloed bodies is replaced by the pure smell of salt water mixing with the salted air. Even the waves of the ocean, which during the summer seemed to be pounding their way to the beach in the hopes of dislodging all the bodies who would dare to step more than knee-deep, now seem to be enjoying their own sense of serenity by ever so gently touching the newly vacant beaches.

The people of this season also have changed. Not that the same people aren't seen on the summer's beaches enjoying the warmth and excitement of that season. But the bicyclist is not hurrying down the beach to be the first to arrive at his destination. He is now sitting by the beach on a bench, enjoying the eternity of the ocean. You can almost see through his eyes and feel that he is not even thinking of the fun of summer's past, but is experiencing his own emotions mixing with the emotions of the ocean.

The slow minded boy, whom almost everyone feared and made fun of during the summer months, easily joins the bicyclist in his losing of self. And of course the men and women of the rocks are seen again straight backed throughout the length of the beach, standing like statues on their rock-like pedestals. Different seasons or times mean nothing to them. Even the old, who during the summer were sometimes pushed aside to make room for the energy of youth, now set the pace, staring down into the sands of the beach, contemplating the sands of their lost time.

The very young walk with the old more this time of year. They play the part of a sponge soaking all the knowledge that let the old get old. The youth are so young and the old seem so old that is very difficult, especially on the beach, to tell them apart. The other inhabitants of the beach seem to trust us

more this time of year. The sand birds inch their way to a closer more fearless view. Even the butterflies and white moths fearlessly circle around our heads.

The colors of this season have forever been written about and pictured in pastels, watercolors, oils or photographs. But on the beaches you can't only see the green of the ocean with its frosty white caps. You can feel and smell how perfectly combined the colors are. How the browns of the sands go perfectly with the deep blues and grays of the sky. The morning sky takes a different form this time of year, in that its colors complement the sea's so perfectly that one seem to be a continuation of the other.

The clouds appear to form holes at the end of massive tunnels, sneaking a peak at a hopeful heaven in the sky. One particular morning a small sailboat broke this consistency by daring to float between the sea and the sky. I wonder if they knew how close they were in attaining that light at the end of all of our tunnels. The quiet is the most intense feeling this time of year. It is so extreme that the rumbling of chain saws and the banging of hammers can't even hope to overwhelm the quiet of the season. Even the sound of my footsteps, as I walk down the beach, seem to naturally belong to the serenity of the ocean front.

The summer months expose people's souls to anyone interested in observing them. The off season demonstrates the natural beauty of the coast. But to me the most exciting observation I can make is becoming part of a coastal storm. They always start with a lull. Not your ordinary quiet, but a time so quiet you can't even hear the gulls or the wind blowing through the trees. It is a time when all those who live on the coast walk to the water's edge to watch the low tide go ever lower, in preparation for the waters destined to explode on the beach.

The people are not the only ones who flock to the beach in the lull before the storm. The gulls also come to a collective realization that they must fly to the beach in preparation. They are more courageous than their human counterparts, landing right on the surf, staring

into the water en masse, like members of a religious cult awaiting their messiah.

The impending storm toys with the emotions of its observers, first by blowing gentle streams of fresh air that stir recollections of the gentler summer breezes. Then the ocean shows its first white frothing heads. Soon, the sea is a bubbling cauldron of milky white foam and spray. The air around the few observers left explodes with the sparks of mist, and the wind forces the viewers to squint into what has always been and will always be, as long as life can exist on this planet.

The gulls at this point pray to some gull God in hopes that mercy will keep them from being swept into the depths of the now violent ocean. At the peak of the storm, the skies and the sea be-

come one, torn in half by the foaming waves and violent water. Nothing else exists. Nothing else dares to exist. If there was ever a time when beauty and violence co-exist, the coastal storm is the pinnacle of both. The storm also puts the dreams of the observer into perspective. The day-to-day reality of life seems so desperately insignificant when compared to such violent majesty. Yet the strength of nature, as reflected in the storm, also inspires a sense that anything is possible, even achievable.

The beauty of the storm is that no one ever sees it to the end. Most viewers grow to cold or tired and head for shelter. The only thing that remains is the stark, gray tone that hangs in the air and over the ocean. It's a color that has never been successfully reproduced, because like a sunset over the volcanoes

of Hawaii, or the blinding white of a snowstorm in the Mount Washington Valley, the gray of a coastal storm registers directly on the mind as a feeling, a sensation of power, rather than a visual stimulus that can be tucked away for later use.

There are many reasons why people yearn to be by the ocean. The serenity, the perpetually fresh sea breezes, or the hypnotic sound of the waves striking the beach. I love living here for one simple reason. I am allowed to observe.

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