

The Psychology of Island

New Visions for Communities at the Edge of the Wild

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Prologue

Imagine that we begin at a height, at a mountain, noting the cliff shapes, the rock falls, the colours of the minerals. Our gaze travels down to the tall trees, then lower to human habitations with their gardens and, down further to the grasses, the flowers, to the sandy beaches. Then to the sea, where our gaze goes flat. After the intricacies of detail that we encountered in the landforms, we come to a great boundary of flatness, staying flat as far as the eye can see. Even in its worst moods, the flat line across the horizon is barely disturbed. What lies beneath that surface? Even with this relatively new gear called scuba, you can't go very deep for very long, and you can't see very far. Deeper than scuba range, one sees photographs of odd creatures in a dark world. Unlike the landforms with their colourful plants and animals, the sea is fundamentally unknown.

Islands, by definition, are surrounded by this immense mysterious body of water. Islands are defined by mystery.

The whole world thought of itself in this way thousands of years ago, surrounded by the great Oceanus.



Oceanus and Poseidon were grim characters, not conversational, not anyone's mate. Paradoxically water never stays still yet gives in the sea a dependably flat line across the horizon. The sea gods and goddesses are "in there" and "down there" somewhere, but you don't know where. The word "island" comes from ig-land, ig from Latin aqua or agua – thus water-land, a little dry land in the vast unknowable sea.

This land jutting up from the sea parallels the experience of the individual human being, the capital "I"-land. Every cycle of 24 hours we go to sleep, sinking into a place that is huge, mysterious, unconscious, and unknown. We emerge in the morning, as a newborn capital "I"-land freshly born of the sea around us. Where were we just before waking? Where were the familiar details of our perception, the many landforms of our waking life? We were in the waters of sleep. Early in our lives we dwelled in the waters, in our mother's womb, breathing water, in a place of quiet, darkness, warmth, and protection. Then we came into the light and air and danger, emerging from the waters of the mother's womb into the air, a little "I"-land.

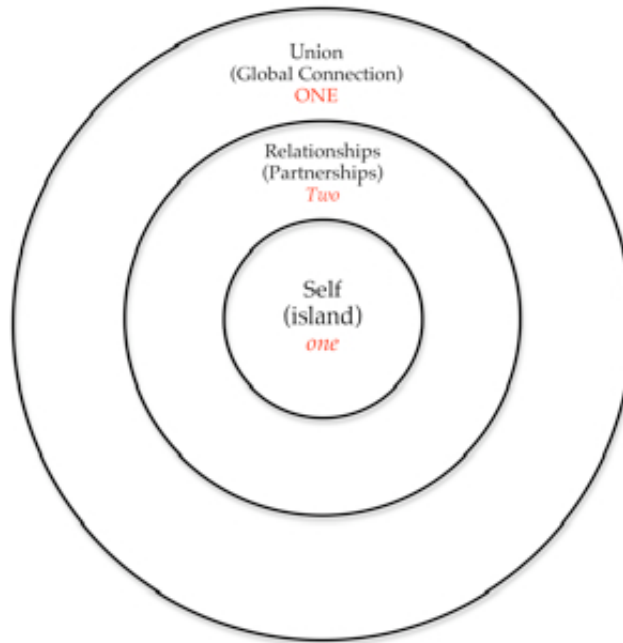
"I"-land and Island are intimately related. From one we can learn about the other. At night we travel back in that direction again. Occasionally we bring back to the day fragments of our experience in the form of dreams, dreams about "I"-land and dreams about Island.

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We would like to speak about some aspects of the psychological experience of island, and then speak to how these might be useful in designing the culture of small islands. We draw on the framework given in our book *One-Two-ONE: A Guidebook to Conscious Partnerships, Weddings, and Rededication Ceremonies*, and on our experience in building the Mountain Seas community on Flinders Island. In our book, we differentiate between

- the individual – the first One,
- the relationship between two individuals – the Two – and
- the communion possible when a relationship is successful – the larger ONE that encompasses both individuals as well as all of creation.

We devised this system when we were asked to act as celebrants at weddings. We found that two people wishing to marry wanted the feeling of communion in their wedding ceremony and subsequent marriage. We learned quickly that they all needed fundamental skills in relating to one another, and before that, a healthy sense of themselves, their individuality (One). We have since found that this model is helpful for many other relationships and situations.



This framework becomes useful in many other systems, including the One, Two, and ONE on islands.

We'll begin with the ONE, the greater mythic reality that sets the tone for island. Once we get the model in place, we will apply this framework to future directions for island communities.

The Grand ONE – the whole of creation

Islands are surrounded by an aura of mystery, the mighty sea, into which we all merge in our nightly travels through sleep. This has several characteristics:

- Surrounded by an unknown power. The sea can be warm and inviting, or dangerous. The island is out in this mystery by itself. Islanders use words such as marooned, exiled, castaway.
- Magical. Magic occurs on islands, as in Prospero's island – to which one arrives by drowning and then being rescued. Ulysses experienced the magic of many different kinds of islands. Iona, St. Michael's Mount, Delos, Avalon, Galapagos – each of these today evoke a sense of magic even to someone far away. The highly mythic Book of Revelation was experienced and written on the isle of Patmos. All islands partake of a sense of magic.
- Paradise. The word comes from the Persian root *pairi*, meaning around, and *daeza*, a wall – a walled enclosure. For an island, the wall is the sea. Islands have been popular as settings of utopian visions of paradise.
- Moody. An island partakes of the moods of the sea, whether it is flat calm or roiled into white froth. People on islands pay attention to the direction from which the waves are coming, to the currents and tides.
- Rhythmic. Waves sound repeatedly and regularly. Either large or small, they become the island's clock, hypnotically marking a regular passage of time. Two times each day, and never at the same sun time, the sea gives

- an island more space or less space, changing with the drifting moon. Or is it the island itself that rises and sets in the sea? Islands relate to the moods of the moon. Biological cycles are ruled by the moon (see the hundreds of examples in *Moon Rhythms in Nature* by Endreys and Schad), moods that affect everything. Our bodies are two-thirds water, with the same proportions of salts as the sea. We feel the ebbs and flows – and the moods – of the sea. Moody can have a positive side – being in touch with your feelings – or a negative side – being overcome by your emotions.
- Wild. The sea is wild and often imagined as populated by monsters, from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* to "Jaws." A shark attack gets much more widespread attention than a car accident, though it is much more rare, because it affirms the general view of the mysterious sea. The interiors defined by the sea are also wild, partly because people find it more difficult to get there. Our mountain and its bush on Flinders Island is wild.
 - Holy. In earlier centuries, those seeking to improve themselves through separation from the maddening crowd went to islands, to be alone with the elements. Others wishing to find these saints, sometimes to emulate them and sometimes to receive a healing or a blessing, visited them. These hermits' islands became what Peter Harbison called the world's "first and oldest bed and breakfast establishments." A pilgrimage to such a place leaves one changed at the end. The mystic isle of Avalon could host the mysteries of the Druids, and Arthur, and the Knights of the Round Table. An experience of paradise is marked by awe. Often we hear from a wide-eyed visitor, "I saw the photos but I never knew it would be like this." This is a statement from someone who has experienced a bit of the holy, which by definition is far bigger than we are. People recall their experiences of this sort for many years afterwards.
 - Rich and Strange. In Shakespeare's *Tempest*, about a visit to a strange island, Ariel sings, "Full fathom five thy father lies." A fathom is six feet, so five fathoms is nine metres down. "Of his bones are coral made. Those are pearls that were his eyes. Nothing of him that doth fade, but doth suffer a sea change, into something rich and strange." The sea that surrounds islands has great power of transformation. People leaving the cityscape for immersion into Nature, seeking a transformation in their lives, commonly call it a "sea change." Nothing fades! The bones find kinship in the corals. The eyes sparkle like precious pearls. Through the "sea change" to the wild, we become something rich and strange; we become colourful like the strange plants and animals that populate islands.
 - Fascinating. We are fascinated by the sea's colours, from purple to white to what the Greek poet Homer called wine-dark to bright turquoise. The quality of our gazing at the sea shows that we are hypnotized by this great force of nature. This can elude even the most hard-headed scientists. Galileo said it well: "I had fewer difficulties discovering the motions of the heavenly bodies, despite their incredible distances, than I did investigating the motion of flowing water, which takes place right before our eyes." Flowing water is now being found to have independent layers

- (laminar flow), with the layers separated by a kind of plasma (a magnetized flame-like flow).
- Dreamy. Dreams can bring insight or the sea can dreamily enchant us in dangerous ways. The enchanting songs of the Sirens or the Lorelei call sailors to crash against the rocks. There is a fascination with death on islands. People visit the sites of shipwrecks and relive the stories of desperate destructions and deaths. Several traditions imagine that at death one is ferried across the mysterious sea to an Isle of Death. The sea can take islanders away, one route being through alcohol. Through spirits, islanders may seek union or oblivion.
 - Edgy. Biologists know that wildlife flourishes at the edges of biological zones, such as between forest and grassland, or coast and sea. Small islands poise more at the edge of sea and land than large islands. They have more edge per area. The commanding spiritual center of the Greek Cyclades – Delos – was the smallest of that group and thus its most potent.

The personal One – the power of the individual

The number 1 and the letter I both stand vertical and upright, connecting earth and heaven. I can do this anywhere on earth – the heavens will soar above and the earth beneath. On an island, when I wish to travel horizontally, I will encounter the vast sea. Then I have certain experiences:

- Isolation. The fundamental experience of being on an island or traveling to an island is isolation. This can lead to positive or negative feelings. One can feel disconnected with the whole of life, or realize that one has been placed into life's very bosom, closer to the rejuvenating powers of Nature than those in the cities. One can feel small-mindedness on small islands, people feeling disconnected from the larger issues of the world. Or one can feel expanded into an intimate connection with Nature. Life on a small island can feel like exile – recall Napoleon sent to the island of Elba, or any of the prison islands in Australia, or Alcatraz in America. Or isolation can feel like liberation from urban tensions.
- Eccentricity. Individuality becomes exaggerated on islands. This is the human version of Darwin's observation that an animal form that comes from another place slowly changes into something quite unique. You can call it species drift or you can call it eccentricity. Darwin observed odd forms in the Galapagos. Peculiarities abound, beyond the limits of one's imagination. The descriptions by Ulysses of the islands of the Lotus-Eaters or of the Cyclops or of Scylla and Charybdis, or the descriptions by Lemuel Gulliver in his travels to the little people of Lilliput or the big people of Brobdingnag, or the pictures of Ravana's island in the Ramayana, or the scenes from Doctor Moreau's island (from H.G. Wells) are, as strange as they are, yet surpassed by the actual discoveries by anthropologists and others who have recorded their experiences on islands.
- Hermits and Egotists. Hermits can be found on islands, as well as egotists, those who have developed their "I" more, in greater proportion than on the mainland. Some people are attracted away to the wider opportunities

- of the larger world. Some people seek out the reduced noise and intensity of an island.
- Independence, Resourcefulness, and Resilience. Island life can afford opportunities to develop one's individuality not found in crowded cities. Used to making do with what they have, one finds a high level of independence, an ability to cob things together, a wily ingenuity not seen in the cities. These are some of the most resourceful people that we have ever known.
 - Exaggeration. Tim Flannery commented in his book *Among the Islands* that islands tend over time to transform mammals that are large on the mainland into smaller versions, and also make small mammals larger. In the human realm, this effect tends to create exaggerated personalities. Islands abound in these. We have encountered more strange people on an island than elsewhere. In cities those you meet in shops, restaurants, and public places have learned to act in a certain way. The ones who have gone a bit mad are tucked away at home. In a small community bounded by water, everyone knows everyone else more intimately, and exaggerations are more obvious.
 - Creativity. Islanders have a high degree of creativity. Does this come from the remove from the noise and haste of the mainland?

The Two – Relationship

A relationship links two individuals. Two healthy and self-sufficient Ones can choose to become a Two, something different than either, and greater than both combined.

- “No man is an island.” Though hermiting has a long history, we have found that a more stable and healthy way to experience communion with the awesome powers of nature is through the Two, through relationship of two individuals. John Donne wrote in the seventeenth century, “No man is an island entire of itself.” To what extent are we connected to each other, and to what extent are we individual? How do we manage this unending tug-of-war between we-are-all-one and I-am-me? Donne spoke true, yet many steps exist between the hermit and the stampeding crowd, degrees and kinds of relationship.
- Trustworthiness. Because of the boundary of the sea, islanders are more trustworthy. All lives are known and seen. You can ask a neighbour for anything. You can't steal anything without others knowing about it.
- Safety. When one man was asked why he left his keys in his car, he responded, “Well, someone might need it!” This speaks to safety, to trust, and to helping your neighbour.
- Reversal of small and large. This reversal effect spoken of above is paralleled by a comment made to me recently by a member of Council on Flinders Island: “The big hard issues are easy.” He was speaking of the easy passage of a proposal for many millions of dollars for a renewable energy plan. He added, “It's the small ones that take all our time.” He was speaking about the issue of the physical location of a BBQ at a public beach that had taken up four months of Council time, with dozens of

- pages and photographs about one meter this way or one meter that way. The small ones – the tempests in teapots – seem to take more attention.
- Gossip. Never have we experienced the telling of stories about another move more quickly and transform so rapidly. You can travel to another side of the island, and your news has preceded you, altered. Attempts to set the story straight sometimes fail. Islanders seem to like the story better than the facts. “Going viral” must have first occurred on islands.
 - The importance of cooperation. As we’re in the same boat, then we ought to cooperate. We have heard both sides of several arguments wherein each accuses the other of being individualistic, egotistical, and competitive, and not looking out for the whole. That shows that cooperation is a value, even if not realized in the same way.
 - Warm interest. Gossip is a special case and aberration of a widespread genuine warm interest of each in the lives of the others. We’re in the same boat together, so I’m interested in my shipmate.
 - What exists between us. Island life teaches us about separation. I see you across the waters, one “I”-land to another, and the quality of what exists between us partakes of my qualities, your qualities, and something from the great ocean. That middle area is where cooperatives are formed, where business takes place, where government speaks. On islands these forms of relationship are informed by the peculiar nature of the grand ONE and the individual One.

Working Actively with One-Two-ONE and islands

When we work with the One-Two-ONE model with a couple or a corporation system, we learn to interweave between the mythic (ONE) and personal (One), and then set up structures of relationships (Two) that supervises this flow. What practical conclusions can we make from understanding the psychology of islands?

EXAMPLE ONE: Early education

Numerous studies of education for children (as in those summarized by Jane Healy and Joseph Chilton Pearce) have shown that electronics and literacy can be premature. The brain is forming rapidly in the first years. The first seven years ought to be in nature, learning to use one’s body in relation to stones and wood and water and plants. Otherwise the brain becomes hardwired in ways that reduce the capacities for judgment, moral choices, and savoir faire with the natural world. Dolores LaChapelle, who ran nature retreats for many years, said that she had to have a child before age ten in nature; after that, it was too difficult to help them find their place in nature and in their own bodies. Waldorf Schools have developed this pedagogy to a sophisticated level. In our terms, this is the inclusion of the ONE, at which islands excel. An important idea for islands would be to offer early childhood education. It was recently reported that all the executives at Google, Hewlett-Packard, and IBM in Silicon Valley, California, send their children to a Waldorf school – which insists that a child not watch television or computers until the age of seven, as those are the years to explore the physical world, to develop awe at its beauties.

EXAMPLE TWO: Isle of the Dead

The artist Arnold Böcklin painted the *Isle of the Dead* to depict the solitary passage of the deceased across the sea to an island with tall cliffs on all sides except for a small landing beach.



One realizes that the island appears small, but when you alight onto its shores, it must expand internally to be more than its apparent size. Can we learn anything from this myth in the realm of ONE? There is something here about the passage through death taking place enshrouded in and embraced by mystery. In contrast, all of us – islanders included – send our old and infirm to large hospitals in cities so that they are surrounded by wires and tubes, fluorescent lights, and the noisy environment of a well-equipped medical establishment. When you ask people how they would like to die, none say they would prefer living their last days and weeks inside a noisy machine. Böcklin's painting is closer to the ideal. This then suggests the possibility that islands could cultivate a business in palliative care (called hospice in some places) after a full life has been lived. There one can come again to know the ONE that may have been forgotten in the busy years of life.

EXAMPLE THREE: Greeting Visitors

We have observed that tourism accommodations don't understand why people come to islands. They try to mimic the gourmet meals and large wine selections of the urban dining and sleeping establishments. Both the tourists and the providers have been trained in how accommodation ought to look, and it's a city-based model. Our approach through the One-Two-ONE model suggests that people come the extra distance to an island because they are seeking something special, something magical, something holy. Some islands do sense this and create non-ordinary venues. More should follow that lead. There are plenty of people trapped in cities who would like to take a pilgrimage to a place whose holiness is the ONE that we've described. Any offering of food or wine or place to sleep is secondary to the mystery that the island holds by its nature. We often

see the commodification of the natural feature, making it into a “thing to do.” The truth is that your encounter with a source of magic and mystery never exhausts that source. You can’t say, “I’ve done Mount So-and-so,” and feel you’ve consumed its essence, because it’s a living changeable presence.

We observe people coming for “something,” and they don’t know what the “something” is, and the tourism operators don’t know what it is either. People behave like pilgrims coming to visit the magic and mystery, but they don’t understand themselves in these terms, because they have been trained to see themselves as consumers. An improvement would be for the tourism operators of an island to experience more regularly the wonders of their own place, and begin to develop a language about it that recognizes that they are gatekeepers to something living.

This error isn’t new. Centuries ago, philosophers wondered if nature was living and changing (*Natura naturans*) or finished (*Natura naturata*). The new views of Gaia as a living being, and of Sophia as the body of everything living, give the context for why people come to islands for rejuvenation. Cultivating “living traditions,” “living treasures” (as in skilled artisans who live and work on a particular island), and “living experiences of nature,” in other words, cultivating a relationship with the living ONE of an island, will support a growing industry of visitors.

ADDITIONAL DIRECTIONS FOR SMALL ISLANDS

Each of the following could be more fully developed as the examples above. For reasons of space, we simply give hints about how they might evolve.

- Admit the powers of the wild. What streams from the city – from the mainland – to an island? Shipments of needed supplies, electronic gadgets, cars, energy in many forms. But is there an exchange? What streams from an island to the city? We suggest that the quality of mysterious wildness is something that an island offers to the city, an essential ingredient for city living that comes from the outlying areas. You may not be able to take the clean air and clean water back to city, but simply knowing that it exists at the island strengthens those who live in urban settings.

No elaborate rides of a Disney park can outdo the powers of the grand ONE. People come to islands as modern pilgrims to visit the hermits who live there, or to visit the places where hermits once lived. Any program to greet visitors has to include the powers of the wild in some way. Owners of resorts and accommodations must take the time to immerse in the wild of their islands, to experience that which is luring their visitors.

- Embrace your eccentricities. Island communities can find ways around the stereotypical bureaucratic responses to situations. On our island, we have a site with a ramshackle collection of tin roofing from the rubbish dump, and posts, and bits of wire, and old windows, covering an entire acre. Hippies came there originally to assemble those bits and pieces, and paint it all with bright colours. It is a picture of what a shipwrecked crew would create from flotsam and jetsam, thus an expression of the ONE. It follows no building codes, and in a city would be torn down. The community has become proud of this sprawling creation. The island Council creatively

- condemned the property, but then dragged its feet on insisting that it be dismantled – for twenty years so far. This is very creative thinking! It is both necessary and appropriate for an island community.
- Totally organic. An island could be entirely organic, keeping off the strange GMOs, for which the science gets worse and worse, or the chemicals that pollute the ground water.
 - Actively choose so-called advances in technology. You're marooned without contact with the outer world – that's the myth (ONE). Now take from that myth what serves quality of life. On many islands, including Hydra in Greece, and several in Australia, there are no cars. Some islands hold this for a part of the area. Some islands restrict mobile phone service, which is the ubiquitous experience of city living. Most visitors register relief at this limitation, showing that they have visited in order to experience the mystery (ONE). Some islands restrict visitors. Different islands have tried different things. As you can't marshal the resources of the mainland, don't try. Indeed, go in the other direction. Exaggerate existing eccentricities. You will find that this is constructive not only of your tourism business, but it will enhance creativity.
 - Go slow with branding. We have attended many workshops on branding, with experts telling us what the public wants now, and how we could become what they want. But branding ought to occur *after* you have established what's important, not before. Attract the artists, the dreamers, and the entrepreneurs. Support their lives and ideas. Then create a brand that describes what they are doing already, not what the marketing people say the market is buying right now. Authenticity wins out in the end.
 - Embrace isolation and aloneness. We have a saying, "When you come to a beach and no one is on it, then go to another beach." Give the opportunity for aloneness, a rare experience these days. It essentially mimics that rare encounter of One with ONE. Give an opportunity for confrontation with the wild, either through the sea or inland. Don't try to do what the mainland does with its factories. If what you do best is a gateway to the wild, then protect that gateway.
 - Designate places for the wild on land and sea. Perhaps the Parks Department will do it for you, otherwise you have to do it yourself. Set aside places of wild in the sea and wild on the land. This might include what they have done at Findhorn in Scotland: setting aside no-go zones, no-go for vehicles and no-go for people. Leave those areas to nature spirits. If you haven't experienced nature spirits, then take a course in developing your senses.
 - Foster the sense of pilgrimage to the wild and mysterious. That time-honoured tradition is the reason that visitors come. Let your visitors take the path of a pilgrim, with the expectation that they will leave a familiar place to come to a new strange place, and then return to the familiar changed. If you enter the heart of the island, this expectation will come true. Become the wise and holy ones whom the pilgrims came to visit. People are often embarrassed in speaking about the holy, and it is wise not to pontificate. But don't ignore the precious quality of wild natural beauty that must be recognized. We found at the Healing Dreams (now

- Mountain Seas) eco-resort how people gravitated to a place where they could look at the sea. They would sip their glass of wine and gaze blankly at the sea, partaking of its hypnotic somnambulant powers, even from a distance feeling the lure into it. We formalized that by declaring “Gaze Time” at sunset, which we view from that site, the sun setting into the sea.
- Honour the sea, ceremonially. Some island communities have an annual memorial where a flower garland is thrown into the sea. It usually involves recognition of those who died there. Some include an acknowledgement of the scope and power of the sea, and thanks for its bounty. Such ceremonies are most appropriate. They enliven one’s inner life, as well as the life of the community.
 - Self-sufficiency is easier. Somewhat more familiar with doing-without, islanders are good drivers of self-sufficiency, in current parlance called sustainability. Sustainable energy is more appropriate, as well as the question, “Why do we need all that electricity?” People will look to islands for how to solve the problems because islands have faced those necessities before the rest.
 - Local currencies and local banks. As nearly half of all transactions occur between different members of a community (from *New Money for a New World* by the economist Bernard Lietaer and the physician Stephen Belgin), thus creating a local currency keeps that circulation at home. Better still would be to create a credit union that is interested in mini- and micro-loans, in which the big banks don’t care. Bill Mollison said that the best size for a credit union is under two thousand people. Over that, one doesn’t know the others, and issues of trust arise. Small islands are well suited to self-generated credit unions.
 - Recycling with a twist: An organized rubbish tip becomes a major asset. Many people take their rubbish to the tip and come back with more than they discarded. We may not be able to recycle aluminium cans, but we can make use of many other things.
 - Modes of employment and governance. With a stronger community network, one can factor in the greater occurrence of barter and other exchanges. These should be fostered, despite the tax-man’s distaste for them. They will make for stronger community, and stronger businesses, and the tax department will benefit in the end.
 - At Mountain Seas, we are developing a hybrid model for investors, making it possible to build a simple and energy-efficient house to which the investor – as pilgrim to the wild – can come anytime, while leaving one bedroom available for the eco-resort, so that others can come to enjoy the wild. We include staff as participants in our valley. We encourage cottage industries which make for a more robust economy. Islands are terrific places for the creative in artists to develop.
 - Community ownership in general. At Mountain Seas, using strata title, the community of investors owns 90% of the land. The nearby neighbourhood, what the new planning scheme calls our local hamlet, governs the closest land. Mountain Seas has 40,000 acres of National Park on three sides and we actively support the conservation efforts there.

- Conflict resolution. Einstein reminded us, “No problem is ever solved at the level of its creation.” In a city, you can often ignore someone with whom you’re having difficulty. You can’t ignore such a person on a small island. A small island community has to develop superior methods for communication, in which everyone is trained. This begins with nominating an ombudsman or mediator with high integrity. The mediator will slowly train everyone else.
- Models of community worth looking at. Because of its natural borders, an island can experiment with different models. For example, a community in Italy where the community owns the property, including all houses. You buy in at the beginning, a significant amount. When you leave, you sell your share to the community. As another example, Mondragon in the Basque country, where the community owns the land and buildings, and unemployment is zero. Islands with their natural borders can experiment with different forms.

Island life has the extraordinary opportunity of developing the One (the individual), developing healthy relationships in the Two, and realizing the sense of grandeur of all creation – the larger ONE (unity). Life is meant to circulate between One, Two, and the grand ONE. On islands we have the opportunity to live that ideal.

Gaze into the sea and into the wild in the interior of your island (ONE). Enter as you would your sleep, emerging as an “I”-land (One) to serve through relationship (Two) your Island community.