

A WAVE IS NEVER THE SAME

Essays, 1998–2025

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First edition.

PREFACE

The five essays in this small collection were never written as a set. They were written years apart, in different countries, for no reader in particular — the earliest in 1998, on the deck of a half-rebuilt ship in Oakland, California; the most recent in 2025, on a beach in Java, watching two children learn to read the ocean the way their father once did.

Between those two points sits nearly three decades of the same underlying question, approached from different angles each time: what does it actually take to build something, keep it afloat, and figure out what you owe the world in return for the privilege of being alive on it. “Dry Dock, 1998” and “The Red Sea” come from the earliest years of the RV *Heraclitus*, an eighty-five-foot ferrocement junk rebuilt from almost nothing by volunteers of the Institute of Ecotechnics. “Singapore, October 2006” catches a stranger moment — by then, a second ship had entered the picture, and the essay is as much about learning to let go of one thing while learning to love another. “The Climate Has Never Been Stable, and Never Will” steps back from any single voyage entirely, an attempt to think through, plainly, what’s actually owed to an ocean that gives so much and asks so little in return. And “A Wave Is Never the Same” closes the collection on dry land, decades later, with a different kind of ocean lesson entirely.

They are collected here largely as they were written, lightly copyedited, because together they trace something a single essay couldn’t: not a philosophy, exactly, but the shape of one man’s attention to the sea, held steady across a very long time.

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Impressions

The world is going tribal, and here we are going for the impossible. With our bare hands, with hardly any money, we are rebuilding the ship. Against all odds, we are pushing the limits of what people think mankind can do.

Right now the cement, just poured, needs to be kept wet at all times to give strength to the overall structure. We are also working under an impossible deadline. By the twenty-fifth of July we need to be back in the water. Everyone is on their knees. But it's the spirit of all of us that will make it happen.

All the original creators had a grin on their faces, because they knew what we were getting into. And as we always toast on Sunday night: without the threat of falling, we wouldn't dance at all. On a few occasions, the life of the Heraclitus has been in serious jeopardy. We are working with universal forces.

The synergy of all our effort, all our resources, makes it happen. In my mind, emotions are in a shaker. The "I" disappears, leaving only the human. Our minds and bodies are being shaken raw, tortured, mutilated, in order to give rebirth to ourselves, and to continue a dream started twenty-three years ago.

Random moments:

The cement is poured all over the deck like a giant cow turd. My hands dig in, attacked by all the wire sticking out — like an American Indian rite of passage, laceration to the raw flesh where the mind erases the pain.

Thousands of tie wires everywhere, mesh and burlap. The hands keep twisting.

All packed into the "yellow van," tying your shoelaces, sipping your coffee, while Lazer takes a sharp turn so as not to lose any tempo.

"Would you like a piece of cake?" In true blue Ralph fashion, everybody must get stoned — except that no one knew about the cake, and he'd dosed it heavily enough to put elephants into a deep trance. To top it all off, it was the night before the big pour.

Lucky for us, the cement didn't set properly. A blessing from some gods, somewhere.

Finally I started painting the eyes today. I set the paint up and put my harness on. I could only do one side; the wind blew all day. It made me feel good, gave me some peace of mind. We also started putting the electrics together — a huge task. We're so far behind, but the prospect of going back out to sea is my salvation. Often I get lost and overwhelmed by the task at hand, with so little time left to dream. I took the bicycle to the office and couldn't write a single line. So instead I headed into town and found a small aboriginal festival. The music was great, and watching kids and people of mixed race dancing together was even better. I danced too, for a while, though I couldn't quite loosen up completely. I watched people, met a few musicians who later came to a party on the Heraclitus. The famous sponsor party where no sponsor actually showed up, but we jammed the whole night through — the first time in years I picked up the saxophone.

A rock band, with didgeridoo and some jazzy stuff too. A real study in culture. It's genuinely amazing how much a man can pick up just from watching.

The Red Sea

The Red Sea, "la mer rouge" — the wild, the free, the magical. We penetrate her full blast, at ten knots, racing through current and wind, faster than ever before. Dolphins leap on the bow, the sails blown full. The sun rises over the Sinai. Moses came down from there with the Ten Commandments, the code of social conduct that would go on to shape the world.

The land of Egypt greets us on the port side. But more than anything, I know deep inside that the journey east has only just begun. We'll soon be in our own initiation with the sea — diving, and, in a way, coming home at last.

*The sea,
what is it in you,
that makes me feel so free,
what is it in you,
that makes me feel so alive.
In the foam
I dream of freedom.
Among the reefs,
I fill my mind with beauty and grace.
With dolphins,
I feel part of a special family,
the grace of the whales
brings peace to my soul,
from my soul
comes the love for the earth,
mother of all creatures,
mother of our destiny.*

Singapore, October 2006

Deadlines to keep us alive, and out there.

We entered a cosmic dance, in an arena where the impossible doesn't exist.

Some vivid moments:

Thirty meters up in the air, we're hoisting hundred-and-fifty-kilo cables. There's nothing tall enough to hoist them from, nothing to stand on. Everything's rigged with rope now — first a rope ladder, then arm holders, ropes with standing eyes to lift the head of that steel snake and lock its jaws shut with a one-kilo bolt and nut.

The body discovers new positions, finding new points of balance to achieve the strength needed to pull, hold, place, and secure the big, dangerous steel snake. Every gesture conscious, precise, thought through. Each tool becomes an extension of oneself. No mistake allowed.

Lactic acid burns the muscles, the stress rotating from point to point to accomplish the task.

We climb a Chinese tower, seven levels, contemplating the characters of the Chinese horoscope along the way, visiting incarnations of an old culture — we are the horse, the bull, the rabbit, the pig, the monkey, the snake. An oasis of values. The art of control and beauty in a garden of three-hundred-year-old bonsai. Around it all, the buildings reach for the sky, maybe like plants seeking the sun's energy. Down below, the shadows they cast make you aware of the movement of the spheres, if you can pay attention to the light.

But the light is dim. As we arrive, a fog has settled in — not water, but the smoke of forest fires burning on the island of Sumatra. The sun stays a dark red bubble.

We're only a few miles from Malaysia, across the river, though we can't see the other side. Singaporeans now rate the level of smog, announced across every broadcast channel — radio, TV, newspaper, the internet. Our noses clog naturally, the body already knowing what to do to keep the poison from invading our lungs.

The party's on — underwater scenes on the screen, octopus, sharks, sea snakes, vibrant reefs, and our own film on the Phoenix Islands and the effects of global warming. The guests, a magic mix of Indians, Malays, Chinese, Indonesian Bugis, Europeans, Australians, Americans, Costa Ricans — the whole world aboard our ship, celebrating life and death on our home planet.

All at once, six pallets of provisions come flooding aboard. A human chain brings it all in. Synesthesia fills to the ceiling with goods for the year ahead.

We arrived with a tired ship. Rusty standing rigging, half a railing gone, empty fuel tanks, a sad generator, no compressor, a worn-out gypsy on the winch, chafed halyards and sheets.

It feels like a constant stream of material pouring like heavy rain onto our new ship. First the container — outboard engine, dive gear, small boats, spare parts, deck generator, all our personal belongings. The exodus of a sea tribe, settling into their new home.

The task load is heavy, enough for months of hard work, and we're compressing it all into a three-week stop. We arrive broke, with mourning still in our hearts — not death, but the birth of a new ship. Two ships now sailing across the blue planet. But the will is there, the will to dream, the will to do whatever it takes. We knew it would take a lot. We had no idea how much.

We have friends here. Yves came down like a guardian angel, pulling every string he could to help us. A

generator arrived after endless drama over three-phase versus single-phase compatibility with our new compressor — not so new, actually, a 1970 Bauer, bought in Phuket, Thailand, from a business that collapsed after the tsunami. We got taken for a bit of a ride; the compressor hadn't been used in years. But the sturdy German engineering held, and Laser, right up to the last minute, after a sponsor party, put it all together with the particular magic he brings to these things.

Know-how, and learning by doing, step by lucky step, the systems come together — all at the last minute, at one of the highest tempos I've experienced since Darwin, when we rebuilt the Heraclitus.

In the midst of all this, a team went ahead building our new educational homepage.

Political navigation with Indonesian visas, Papua New Guinea visas, the politics of Raffles Marina, one event after another, presentations of our work, visitors wondering exactly who these people are. We created our own kind of typhoon, and the brave and curious came to feel where the force of it was coming from. At the center, an unexpected peace, held together by the task itself. At its edges, everything whirls — emotional centers flying off in every kind of manifestation, the intellect visualizing our very next moves, the bodies carrying it all through.

Timelines criss-cross, past intermingling with present, all of it in service of a new future, dreamed up by sea people.

Tonight our sponsors come to say goodbye. Two Indian families arrive with their whole households — kids running across the deck, the women carefully climbing down to the engine room in their saris.

Our new shrouds were tuned and balanced by a master, Simon, who simply knows. Invaluable knowledge, transmitted by watching, feeling, knowing what he's doing while he's doing it.

I play the monkey one last time, ratchet in hand, tightening the bolts on the spreaders. By now my body knows every move, an aerial dance performed for the completion of an endless task.

Next time, next time, next time. A list for next time. Get it while you can. Next time is only ever a possibility.

October 1, 2006

The steel empire surrounds us — cargo ships, and the endless suppliers of black gold, the new world currency.

We pass first through the anchorage of the hazardous ones, the dangerous ones, floating potential bombs, then the tankers, hundreds of them, waiting for a free berth to load or unload before carrying it all to the other end of the planet. The technosphere fully exposed — scary, awesome, intimidating.

Now we're dodging a different kind of bullet. Container ships that will stop for nothing, because they can't. Our little ship wedges herself into the superhighway of the sea, at the crossroads of the heaviest shipping lane in the world. Attention, all attention, in exactly the right places.

The purple ship got away, just.

The Heraclitus isn't far — she remains in my heart and body. But I'm making love to another ship now, learning how she moves. A symbiosis is necessary for a life at sea.

I surf the internet for news of the Heraclitus. I know Eddie's aboard.

A WAVE IS NEVER THE SAME

The Climate Has Never Been Stable, and Never Will

This is not to say we're ignorant, burning so much fuel that the planet's getting out of balance, depleting the ocean of fish. But balance was never going to be some hunky-dory world where we all live happily ever after. It's this basic, misleading assumption that keeps us from seeing clearly. It isn't that hard to think for yourself. We've been given, or grown, or co-created, the most amazing vehicle to perceive, explore, think, feel, create. It seems a crime against our own intelligence to feed it nothing but ready-made ideas and thoughts, suppressing, most of the time, the real thoughts and observations that could arise from our own perception.

Intelligence, and our capacity to change, is our real survival. Death still exists because we haven't yet learned enough to live longer. The day we use our intelligence for the benefit of all, in essence, the nature within us will open its own door to something closer to immortality. But why would she hand that tool to the same ruthless idiots currently in power? Humanity, for now, is immortal in its way — our genes carry on, keep the best, discard the rest. An amazing system. I'm in genuine awe of what I've been given to live inside. An extraordinary planet. So extraordinary I wouldn't want to leave it. But some of us will, because exploration is written into our genes. We're not the only ones — dolphins, rats, dogs, we all do it, one way or another.

Every day I learn something. Sometimes I have to learn what I've forgotten. Sometimes I have to learn to forget what I've learned.

Power is the ability to control and use what surrounds you. The machines aren't responsible for our actions. They never have been. We're the ones controlling the

machines. The real problem is the value system, or the lack of one, running the technosphere.

Our materialism is becoming the new religion. Progress is good, progress is evolution — but progress is really the increase of true wealth. The abuse of power is the abuse of that true wealth. If I throw poison into my neighbor's garden, I'll eventually eat it too. No fortress will save my children forever. No castle will protect "my clan" indefinitely.

The biggest walls, the strongest weapons, won't protect me. Maybe my body, but what is a body without a soul inside it? Souls grow — not by themselves. We're the growers of souls. A man without one, or who's sold his, isn't complete. He's given up what he was meant to do: grow souls. Why else would nature have created man? Some accidental byproduct of evolution? I don't think so. Not if I'm actually thinking.

Let's start by thinking through a few of our real problems, and let's try to fix them.

There isn't enough fish to sustain the population of the bioregion, and the main cause is overfishing. The sea, our last real frontier, is the last place to receive our intelligent attention — because she was always so big, so powerful, so bountiful, with such a remarkable ability to regenerate. Just not fast enough anymore. We've been too wasteful. She'll provide, with proper management. But you don't tame her. She isn't tameable.

Because she regenerates fast, and because two fish can become millions within a few years, let's actually be intelligent about it. That might mean starting from the assumption that everyone you're talking to is exactly as intelligent as you are. Anyone who comes to you believing they're more intelligent than you, be wary. Do your own thinking. I'll share part of my experience, you

share yours, and we act together. Anything untrue can be refuted and dealt with.

Fact one: there's less fish than ten years ago.

Fact two: there are more people than ten years ago.

Fact three: we need more money than ten years ago.

Fact four: we want good, healthy products we can afford.

Fact five: if I want to buy good products, I need to catch more fish.

Fact six: I want my children to get a good education.

Fact seven: I enjoy the time when I'm not working.

Fact eight: it takes more time now to catch the same amount of fish as ten years ago.

Fact nine: if I plant a seed in good soil, and rain comes, the seed grows.

Fact ten: two fish will spawn millions of eggs.

Fact eleven: one fish alone cannot spawn.

Fact twelve: if I leave the fish in the sea, they'll grow.

Fact thirteen: the bigger the fish, the more money.

Fact fourteen: if I don't have fish, I can't eat it.

Fact fifteen: and on, and on, and on.

Leave part of the reef alone, as ground to reseed the rest. Don't take the pregnant female — though if I do, the buyers will pay me five times more for her. How do we win that one?

Economics doesn't follow the laws of intelligence. It follows demand, or demand that's been created. If I can't

see it, materially speaking, I don't know it exists. Most products arrive in packaging that has to tell me what's inside. You buy the package when what you actually needed wasn't always in it. You bought an idea someone sold you, and most of what came with it is never really seen or used again.

Because we're explorers by nature, we want to know. So we buy it once. The market creates something new for the shopping explorer to chase. The urban environment does the rest.

A Wave Is Never the Same

A wave is never the same. It can have intricate patterns, immense length, surging strength, towering height — but it's always singular in its particular, majestic form. Some waves you can gracefully sail. Others you can skillfully surf. And some, as they reach the shore and unleash their almighty power, all you can do is stay at a respectful distance and be in awe.

The southern coast of Java receives the powerful swells rolling in off the Indian Ocean. In a small, protected cove, full of dark, shimmering black volcanic sand, the waves turn a corner and form the perfect, gentle shape for longboard surfing. No sharp reef here to shred you into a thousand pieces, only soft sand to make your wipeouts bearable. I've sailed across oceans for a good part of my life, but I am decidedly not a surfer — sailors, in fact, tend to stay well away from surf spots, especially when they're aboard their own sailboats. We're in Batukaras just now. So, the novice that I am, I rented a board from the local boys, their boards all parked, pointing skyward, waiting to come alive. I started with a boogie board, catching a few small waves, watching my fearless kids play in the frothing foam, where Aphrodite herself might have been born — the goddess of love couldn't possibly have emerged from anywhere else. And then, suddenly, a reincarnation of her appeared, dancing effortlessly on a board, moving through space and time with the most gracious elegance I think I've ever witnessed. Hypnotized, my attention utterly captured. A Japanese longboard surfer, with a perfect, fluid entrance onto the top of the board, a mesmerizing dance of movement, and a flawless exit back into the sea.

I do have a real weakness for beauty, and watching the ocean's turquoise crests melt into a sky and clouds full of their own storytelling, all while a goddess danced across

the surface, was genuinely hard to beat. But intense attention never lasts forever, and eventually I "woke up," or "fell back asleep," depending on how you look at it. The familiar noise came back in — kids screaming, cars passing, motorcycles starting, scattered voices, beach towels, a few pieces of rubbish, plastic bottles, an ugly plastic bag or two. None of it seemed to matter much anymore, not once you've witnessed something close to a paradisiacal sight.

How do you possibly top an experience like that? By trying to get closer. So, board in hand, I paddled out to where most of the surfers waited for the incoming swells. I watched, and watched, and watched, then paddled a little, learning to sit on the board, floating, letting the waves pass beneath me. I'm realizing now you need to be genuinely fit to surf. Watching those sculpted bodies paddle effortlessly into the waves, my own neck started to stiffen, rashes forming on my chest from rubbing against the board. But despite the discomfort, I did catch a few. And then, suddenly, the perfect one arrived. I rode it all the way to the very edge of the beach, to full completion — the only wave I'd ride quite like that on this whole trip, but enough to bring me a little closer to my Japanese ocean muse.

There's a small restaurant here, a warung, that used to be one of the best-kept secrets in the known universe. Cold Bintang beer in a small bottle, going down like the elixir of momentary immortality. Baby squid in oyster sauce — and if you've ever had to clean and peel the skin off two-centimeter squid, you'd understand what an achievement that actually is — and perfectly grilled fish. All of it while huge monitor lizards crawled out of the forest along the rocky volcanic cove, some of the very waves people were surfing crashing on the mini-cove behind them. Shaded by remarkable trees, served by the friendliest, most naturally beautiful people, they worked hard to give you something real: honest, fresh delight. I

nearly forgot to mention the rice — this is the land of rice, and they know exactly how to cook it, and I, for one, certainly knew how to eat it. How quickly one forms new habits, and here, every single one of them was healthy, pure sensory delight. For meaning, though, I had to keep going back to the waves.

Conversations unfolded with artists, business people from Bandung and Jakarta, surfing legends, and fellow beginners. I even met someone who'd once visited me on Bintan, the island where I live most of the year. As people love to claim, there are no coincidences. I keep my skepticism, though — not for lack of enough repeated coincidence to make a believer of me, but more as a reflex of my biggest fear: getting caught, and losing some particular form of freedom I hold onto like a lifeline.

My two kids, Moana, seven years old, played with her cousin on a boogie board, catching wave after wave, so naturally she'd already started striking playful poses at the end of each ride. And Charlie, three, was fearless enough that you had to watch him like a hawk — he loves the waves, puts his whole head underwater, does all kinds of crazy things, though he doesn't swim yet. I trailed him with a boogie board, at a dead run, right at the edge of the foam.

We drove over the hill to Matasari Beach, thick with lush jungle, to feel the full, raw power of the waves once they finally crash, spray, and carve into the land. There's nothing quite like the immense power of the ocean to bring the ego, and its illusions, back down to size.

If only truth were half as addictive.

A Note on Twenty-Seven Years

There's a version of this book with fifty essays in it instead of five — the archive holds far more than made it here. What's collected in this volume are simply the pieces that stood on their own, without the surrounding scaffolding of a ship's daily log to hold them up.

Reading them together now, in order, the thing that surprises me isn't how much changed between 1998 and 2025, but how little the underlying question did. Twenty-seven years apart, and I'm still, in some sense, asking the same thing: what do you owe the water that's given you this much.

A WAVE IS NEVER THE SAME

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