

Tales
from a
Distant Shore

THIRD EDITION

by
Tom Wallace

TALES FROM A DISTANT SHORE

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Introduction

This is a short collection of essays where I don't speak entirely in my own voice!

In other writings I have attempted to find positive things that we can work on individually and collectively, to try to solve the many problems our world faces and to try to make the world a better place. But problems are complex and we might not see solutions any time soon. So, I wonder, what if we were to take very different approaches to my usual positive spin? That's not to say a total reversal of proposals I've written about elsewhere. But perhaps I'd describe it as a more cautious, more cynical, more conservative approach. What if we follow what seem to be current trends through to their logical conclusion? What kind of world would we end up with? How might we respond as individuals if we took a more pessimistic view of life? What if we took the view that human nature is not likely to change any time soon, and as the world's problems get worse then the less appealing aspects of humanity are likely to win out over the 'better angels of our nature'?

All this is the 'distant shore' I'm trying to explore. It is not an entirely negative journey – not a case of just taking my usual opinions and turning them on their head. There are always some positives in life that can be asserted as long as we think it's worthwhile being alive at all! So I hope these investigations will be thought-provoking and still somehow inspiring, despite dealing with some difficult issues.

These stories first appeared on the websites

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Booksie.com and Storywrite.com.

In this third edition I have added a few new essays.

Why Write?

Why do I write? Well, let me explain. You see, the artist loves the world, which is good. But the artist also has a problem with the world, which is not so good. Or so you may think, when at first you hear the idea.

We are the Cassandras and the Jeremiahs – the prophets who will never be heard. Yes, that's right, the first thing you have to understand is that we are on the losing side. So, you may say, why, if you are losing, do you trouble yourself to speak? Why be angry with the world when you can simply go with the flow?

But going with the flow is the very reason we are angry! Because going with the flow, as you like to call it, means going to hell. So there is always a reason to be angry! And this is it. To save us from hell. But, you say, what about non-violent communication? Ha! Listen, I will take your non-violent communication and shove it back down your throat! You know why? Because with your gentle words you make it seem like there is a choice. You do your thing and I'll do mine and we can all get along! The nice, liberal, tolerant nonsense! That, my friend, is the road to hell!

And now you are telling me you do not want power-over. Power-over is the patriarchy; there should be power-with. But you do not realise that people are deeply in love with power. When you ask them to relinquish their power, you ask them to kill their souls. It is only us angry prophets, who know they are on the losing side, who can tolerate this lack of power.

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We are, you might say, power-under, who challenge the status quo, power to power.

And now you are asking me about equality! Think of the tango! And what is the tango about? Sex and death! That is what it is about. And that is what life is about – only those two things that control all of what we do. So there is always a hierarchy my friend, the winners and the losers in this game. To ask then for things to be equal is to ask for the impossible. But of course, we long for fairness! So how do we resolve this conundrum? Acceptance, you suggest? A broken and contrite heart? No, I tell you! Remember we are power-under, not worm under or doormat under. So we will take up the broken things of this world and shove them in the faces of those who have the power to change them!

And what of freedom? The powerful will always offer you little dreams of freedom because they know that is what you want. But what they mean by freedom is the freedom to go with the flow. And we know that is the road that leads to hell. Real freedom is to challenge power and that is something the powerful will never accept. So do I have hope? No, of course not! There is no hope! Didn't I tell you that we are on the losing side! The only hope I have is that there will always be other losers with the courage to take a stand – for art, for soul, for true freedom! What's that I hear you say? What about the sacred? What is it that I have been trying to tell you all this time? This is the sacred! Think back to what I said right at the start! We love the world. But we have a problem with the world. We are angry with the world. That, my

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friend, is the sacred - the grace that is given
and the grace that is ours to give.

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Give Me Privacy! Give Me Autonomy!

We often hear the loss of community cited as a symptom of the decay of society under the onslaught of consumer-capitalism. We hear of plans to build towns and cities that try to promote a return to community, with walkable neighbourhoods and local shops. Part of me thinks this is worth a try. One reason is that the support and friendship of neighbours can be a good and healthy thing – especially for those who live alone and for the elderly or infirm. Another reason why compact neighbourhoods can be good is that they can help reduce infrastructure costs and foster a reduction in car use.

Right now though, things are heading in the opposite direction. Suburbs are spreading out further and further. Shops and entertainment venues prefer sites where they can capture passing road traffic. City centres are often large transport hubs with corporate headquarters the only folk who can afford the land and rents. The fact that so much stuff can now be delivered to our doors, rather than us having to go out and shop for it likewise has a big impact on our towns and cities. And finally, working from home, especially subsequent to the Covid global pandemic, has changed the face of work.

Many of these changes have added to that loss of community and to the sense of us being isolated. But part of me is thinking, well, actually, I like the anonymity that all this brings. I like the privacy! I like the autonomy!

So instead of fighting all these changes, let's instead imagine what it might be like if we pushed all this still further and became more independent, autonomous, isolated, private and safe from the onslaught of community!

The first thing that springs to mind is a cabin in the woods or by a beach. No other cabins are in sight. It's just my place in amongst nature. But then we have to think about whether or not everyone could have such a cabin. Depending on where we live in the world, the answer may be no. Too many people, not enough land. And also, we have to think about infrastructure, in terms of getting services to the cabin, or us getting out to other places when we definitely need to travel (or just want to go on holiday). All of this adds to the difficulty of providing for a population that chooses to live in such settings – it is like the suburbs taken to its absolute extreme.

But thankfully most people couldn't cope with a cabin in the woods as a permanent residence. Too isolated. A bit spooky at times. Nothing to see but trees! (They don't think of this as heaven!) And the cabin by the beach is good only for summer. They could not hack the winter months.

So that's my ideal. A cabin – off-grid, to avoid the infrastructure issues – but at the same time close enough to civilisation that I can walk to a shop, a health centre, a dentist, or take a bus somewhere if I need to. There's no road right up to the cabin, but there's a post box on the nearest road and I can get everything but food

delivered to there. Perfect!

Given that most people don't want to live in a cabin all year round, what would towns and cities be like if we pushed current trends further?

Firstly, a lot of people are just obsessed with going places just for the sake of going! (This is another reason why the cabin in the woods doesn't suit a lot of people – too static!) So we should just acknowledge the fact that so many of us would never give up the autonomy and freedom of the private car. Shopping malls are becoming destinations, and this has nothing to do with their proximity or otherwise to where people live. And given that there is less shopping, the mall has to become a place of restaurants, cafés and entertainment. This then provides people with all the excuse they need to travel! Disneyland and Las Vegas therefore are the models for future development!

A few of us might relish the idea of living in a theme park. But for most of us, housing would be elsewhere and very different. It's that split – the split between where people choose to visit and where people choose to live – which is the trend we're witnessing in the modern city.

So if we pushed trends in contemporary house design to their limits, what would we get? Most people, it seems, would prefer to live in a suburb rather than the centre of a city. The city centre just becomes a place inhabited by day-workers who go to lunch or for coffee, plus tourists who visit art galleries and museums. It has become another type of theme park. So the

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housing is now in suburbs and perhaps increasingly guarded and without any kind of local amenities, since these are the things that force community and community is what we're trying to avoid! The suburb is clustered together for a particular kind of safety – a kind of assurance that in some extreme emergency there are others near by, but at the same time an assurance that for the most part other people will leave us alone! This is the ethos of the gated community – which are of course, 'communities' in name only.

The house itself has two aspects. For one thing, people have an intense curiosity about what other people are doing! So even with our increased drive towards privacy, autonomy and independence, I don't think this desire to see who is coming and going is ever going to leave us. (And this is yet another reason why most folk don't like the cabin in the woods – can't see who's coming because of all the damn trees!) We're especially interested in arrivals and departures – which will generally be by car. So these will always be a place in the home where we can see the street and the neighbouring property entrances, if at all possible. (This is part of the reason why condos, apartments, flats and the like are less popular. We lose control by not being able to see who's coming in and out of our building.)

The other aspect of the house though is its private side. The garden becomes a private world, and if at all possible, the rooms of the house will mostly relate to this private space. So every house design will try to achieve this sense of secure and enclosed privacy. Again,

personally, I have to say I really like this! If I cannot have the cabin in the woods then the house that looks into its own private garden is the next best thing!

What if the world were to become more bleak than it already is? What if, for instance, there was a collapse of world trade, a global recession, and perhaps these things were brought about by a severe disruption to climate, or through loss of bio-diversity, pollution or war? The best answer to these things – by far the best – is for strong, resilient community. And it is exactly that which we have been trying to avoid! Instead, the ideas we have been exploring are more suggestive of the ethos of the survivalist. The cabin in the woods is rather like the 'bug-out' solution. Provided there is enough food hidden away somewhere, or it's possible to forage or to hunt, then the isolation of the cabin might prove to be its strength. Provided you can protect yourself. Provided you don't get ill.

Meanwhile the more regular house is suggestive of the survivalist's 'bug-in' solution. Could it be a refuge in a time of crisis? Could we have a basement or a panic room to shelter in whilst we wait for the crisis to pass? As times get tougher, and violence increases, our houses will become increasingly like fortresses against all the hazards of a dangerous and unpredictable world. Perhaps those isolated and gated communities would be able to respond, because as I've said, in extreme circumstances, people will band together to help each other.

There is a chance that a major disaster will act

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as a wake-up call and be such a shock that we will all – individually and collectively – re-assess our attitudes to life and recognise the importance of community. But people don't change their ways easily, so that's why I've tried to think about where things might be going if current trends continue. Maybe you're thinking that what I've described (barring the disasters) is not such a bad world (and after all, just having somewhere to live is a privilege). Or maybe you'd prefer the genuine community – a kind of small village community, even if that's just within the neighbourhood of a city. Either way, I hope this has been food for thought.

There's a saying – perhaps it is peculiar to the UK – but I'll share it anyway. It says: take a bunch of hippies to the woods and they'll all fall out with each other. It's an odd saying, in as much as we often (at least nowadays) see hippies very much involved in community spirit, through such things as communes and eco-village projects. And yet, the hippy is also a free and independent thinker. The two aspects don't really sit well with each other. Free thought tends to work better for the recluse. Community maybe sits better with people who are less independently-minded. This is perhaps a sad fact about human nature, but one that we would do well to recognise.

Enchantment is a Minority Pursuit!

Enchantment is a word I've chosen to use in other pieces of writing to mean something very specific. I don't mean it in the sense of fantasy – as some kind of magic spell that might occur in a fantasy novel, film or game. I mean enchantment as a particular way of looking at and seeing the everyday world around us and as an ability to see the beauty in our everyday world. I also mean it as a particular kind of pleasure – the ability to find pleasure in our lives just as they are right now, without having to seek too far outside of ourselves. Enchantment, in this sense, is to know ourselves and know our pleasures. Fantasy is to escape the world, enchantment is to embrace the world. But I'm writing this because I recognise that all of the above is problematic. For one thing, perhaps the explanation I've given is just difficult for people to follow. (Perhaps you, dear reader, have found it puzzling.) Why not just say beauty or pleasure? The reason I offer is that I'm talking about a particular approach to beauty and pleasure, rather than just beauty and pleasure for their own sake. As such, it's difficult to give examples of enchantment in the sense that I'm meaning. It is as much about the attitude of the person than the particular thing they are looking at or experiencing. Unfortunately, even very great beauty can pass people by, whilst other folk will find enchantment in the most mundane of circumstances.

Attitude!

Why does this matter anyway, you may be

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