

A Week on Star Island

**An Overview of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science
2005 Conference on
Spiritual Transformation**

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August 7, 2005

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

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All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times;
but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our
personal experience. Johann von Goethe

Introduction

What follows is a lightly edited version of a post I made to the Recovery from Mormonism
bulletin board at http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/w-agera.php3?site=exmobbb&bn=exmobbb_recovery on August 15, 2005.

Those who know me understand that I am a compulsive analyser who uses writing (usually
prolix – and this is no exception) to process observations that either intrigue or confuse me.
This is part of what was, until I recently found Goethe's quote above, my unwitting attempt to
follow his wise counsel.

This is the first in a series of notes I made to myself with regard to a conference that I attended
with some members of my family last week at Star Island (off the coast of New Hampshire – see
www.starisland.org) hosted by the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS – see
www.iras.org).

The 2005 IRAS conference was, by far, the richest intellectual banquet to which this humble
traveller has been invited. The series of notes to follow do two things. First, they attempt to
explain why my experience with this conference, and more importantly, the community of people
who one generation after another have made it happen each year for over 50 years, was so
moving. I have decided to post this aspect of my notes here because my experience in this
regard will likely be relevant to many who read here and are also looking for communities and
sources of information that will help them reframe their worldview and feel connected (as most
of us seem to need) to groups of human beings who share our sense of reality and purpose. I
do not suggest that Star Island or IRAS are the only (or even best) purveyors of this kind of
experience. Rather, I hold them out as great examples of the kind of social groups and places
that exist in abundance for those of us who are at the moment stumbling out of cloisters of
various kinds.

The second purpose of my notes will be to digest some of the massive amount of useful
information I took on board during the conference. I am not sure how much of that will make it to
a point at which I will be prepared to post it. I will post whatever passes my minimum (and no
doubt in the view of many people, low) standard in that regard.

My family and I are now in a condo at Hull, MA just across the bay from Boston. We left Star
Island yesterday afternoon and drove down here for a week of introducing some of our children
to the Boston area. We arrived last night at suppertime so exhausted we barely had the strength
to have dinner and fall into bed. The week at Star far exceeded each of our expectations in

positive ways, but late nights, early mornings and immense amounts of stimulation during the course of most days left me (at least) completely drained.

It is shortly after 6 am as I start this. My family will be asleep for at least a couple of hours, and so I will have time to begin to assemble the ideas that came to me while on Star, and to attempt to understand why that experience was so moving for me as well as the rest of my family.

A Star Island Haiku

Before I get started in earnest, here is a Haiku that came to me at the end of our week on Star that is relevant both to my experience there, and the last three years of my life in general. James Clement Van Pelt, a staff member at Yale who works in an administrative capacity in the divinity school there, contributed a number of Haiku (as well as the odd wickedly satirical shot at the conference itself) to the conference newsletter that came out each day. I have saved those newsletters. They evidenced a fraction of the creative horsepower that was on the island. It was really something. And I note in the passing the importance of an institution like IRAS being willing to allow itself to be satirized in its own newsletter. That is a sign of institutional health. Any organization that will not allow fun to be poked at both itself and those who wield power within it, is likely headed in a direction that does not bode well. Humour is a wonderful antidote to the abuse of power.

In any event, while reading James' Haiku and hence becoming more familiar with the form, I decided to try to condense some of my thoughts into Haiku, and gave what follows to Ursula Goodenough (<http://www.meta-library.net/bio/goode-body.html>) at the end of the conference as part of my "thank you" to her for encouraging us to come and for the massive contribution she has made to the community of people who have been conditioned to have a religious ethos and are trying to find their way in a world awash with information that strongly suggests the inadequacy of many such perspectives. Her book "The Sacred Depths of Nature" (see <http://www.sofn.org.uk/Bibliography/ursula.html> and <http://www.scispirit.com/goodenough.htm> for reviews) was very helpful from my point of view.

Journey

Leap from the stream's grip.
Against the grain to die, fly.
Creating new life.

I was trying to work with the image of salmon leaping upstream under the impulse to create the next generation of their kind. The analogy falls somewhat short, however, because what I want to capture is the amazing transformation that can occur within a human being when a tipping point, or critical mass of a kind I don't yet quite understand, is reached. This does not occur within individual salmon. The capacity for this type of change is likely uniquely human – a function of our self-consciousness and capacity for symbolic thought. Maybe something better relative to this idea will "emerge" (the topic of next year's IRAS conference is "emergence") as I synthesize my conference notes.

Since I am thinking about Ursula, I will use her "candlelight" service at the end of the conference to organize my thoughts about Star and IRAS in general. To do her presentation justice, I need to set it on context, and so say something about the way Star Island and IRAS work in general and how they each use ritual in different ways to convey and perpetuate their personae. This

will constitute my first “Note from Star Island”, and will attempt to deal with some of what are from my point of view the things that make Star and IRAS important.

Conference Overview and Format

The topic of the 2005 IRAS conference was “Religious Transformations” and the speakers ranged from physicists to neurologists to biologists to psychologists to cultural anthropologists to new age synthesizers of philosophy and religion to liberal theologians from various faiths (see http://www.iras.org/conferences/book2005_nomap.pdf for a copy of the conference booklet). And the speakers, while very substantive, at times seemed in an odd sense to be mere excuses to get together; launching pads for the intense discussions that occurred before, during and after the seminars. These flowed, and in some cases raged, during “happy hour” each day (quickly dubbed “spiritual transformation hour” in honor of the conference theme), on the porches of the Oceanic Hotel that has dominated the landscape of Star Island for about 150 years, while sitting on the island’s whitish rocks watching the surf or while walking its hills. In many cases, women dominated these discussions while the men simply listened, another refreshing oddity for someone programmed by years of experience within a patriarchal culture.

Many of the conferees were former conference speakers and as (or in some cases more) qualified in the areas under discussion than were this year’s speakers themselves. And most of the remainder have sufficient expertise in relevant fields to engage in challenging, informed discussion. I learned as much during these discussions as from the lectures themselves. My favorite “porch partners” tended to be from the agnostic/atheist (“non-theist” is the term preferred by most of these people) side of the conference, but I regularly sought out several of the theists whose views stimulated me in constructive ways. It was most useful and enjoyable to hear many personal histories, and to compare how my experience with Mormonism has shaped what I am prepared to believe to how their varied experiences has perhaps shaped them in similar ways.

The IRAS conference, while having a long history, does not cater to one community of people. Rather, (it seems to me) it is used by several overlapping communities that are making what may be seen by historians of this period an historic attempt to communicate with each other across the religion – science divide. I observed, in progress, a social experiment that in the US particularly is monumentally important. I will add more on this topic below.

Much of what I both said and heard at the conference was filtered through an obvious (though new to me) insight that I believe was offered by Phil Hefner, a theologian who edits *Zygon* (see <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0591-2385>). He remarked during the conference’s opening address, that in general when discussing different religions we tend to note the most profound, beautiful and moving of our own tradition and the most superficial and ridiculous of all others. While the same might be said of any matter of supposed significance about which strong opinions differ (including the merits of different makes of automobiles or professional sports teams), Phil is right on the money with regard to religion and I both observed this rule in action during the week and tried to remind myself of it with sufficient regularity to at least slow down my own tendencies in this regard.

Star Island and Its Rituals

Star Island was settled in the 1600s by John Smith among others, operated as a fishing and whaling outpost for a long time, and has been functioning as a resort for well over 150 years. IRAS was formed there more than 50 years ago by a group of scientists who were interested in

religion and theologians with a scientific bent. Not surprisingly given their age, both Star and IRAS have rituals. All human groups develop rituals within a short time of forming, usually by adapting rituals from the other groups from which they come, merging them with each other, and then modifying them as time passes to reflect or recall experience of the group itself. The nature of a group's ritual is telling with regard to the essence of the group in far more ways than I will attempt to describe here. There is a massive scholarly literature on this topic.

Star has many rituals. To give a sense of the place's personality, I will outline a few.

The staff who make the island run (known as "Pelicans" or "Pels") are underpaid university students. They are honoured in various ways by bringing them out for ritualized recognition. For example, at the end of the last banquet, we chant "We want the waterii" over and over while clapping and stomping our feet, and after a few minutes the waiters run through the crowded tables slapping hands as they go. This proceeds down through each category of Pelican using archaic names like "buttercutters" that likely either shows how old this ritual is or that someone is trying to make it look old.

At the end of the lobster banquet at mid-week, which is by far the largest mess with which the Pelicans in the kitchen have to deal, we retired to our evening lecture and half way through it there was a huge commotion out on the porch near our lecture hall (an old ballroom in the Oceanic Hotel, the island's main structure) and then we heard a crowd of people run screaming away. Few in the lecture seemed to notice. I found out later that because of how disgustingly greasy the Pelicans get while cleaning up the lobster mess, they celebrate when it is over by cheering, and running en mass down to the dock and jumping into the sea.

Each boat that arrives on the Island is met by a large group of Pelicans on the dock chanting something like "Oceanic, Oceanic, rah rah rah (three times), you did come back (three times)". And the crowd on the boat replies with the same chant, except saying "we did come back" three times. Each boat that leaves is sent on its way by a huge crowd of Pelicans chanting something like "Oceanic, Oceanic, rah rah rah (three times), you will come back (three times)". And the crowd on the boat replies with the same chant, except saying "we will come back" three times.

At the end of the season (and this year that occurred at the end of our week for some reason), as the last boat departs, something particularly interesting happens. A Pelican runs down to the dock carrying a suitcase and shouting "You forgot your suitcase!!" and then attempts to throw it to the departing boat. It falls short, and so into the sea. The Pelican then jumps off the dock into the sea and swims after the suitcase, and is followed by all the rest of the Pelicans, hotel staff etc. right up to the general manager.

I could keep going with Star Island rituals, but won't. They are important in the sense that they give the place a relatively fixed persona that can be carried from one group of humans to another – a kind of social DNA or particularly well-maintained meme, to use Richard Dawkins' term. This, indeed, one of the purposes of ritual. Star Island is justifiably proud of its long history, and works hard to preserve an upbeat, welcoming ethos that honors the work of its underpaid staff and promotes the nature of the relatively unique experience of "being on Star".

The Pelicans' have a job to do that involves presenting Star in a certain way, and this requires having (or at least appearing to have) some crazy fun. But really feeling nasty after cleaning up lobster goo and spontaneously deciding to jump in the ocean, and being required to do so each week (and I am not sure that they are required), are not the same.

IRAS Rituals

I should note that it was hard for me to tell where Star ritual ended and IRAS ritual started. It would take having been on the island for at least a few non-IRAS conferences to do that. So, I have somewhat arbitrarily drawn the line between Star and IRAS where what I suspect was unique to IRAS, at least in content, appeared to be. And it has been pointed out to me that much of what I thought was IRAS ritual is in fact Star Island ritual that has been adapted by IRAS in some ways.

IRAS is the oldest of several organizations that exist for the purpose of attempting to bridge the gap between religion and science. Hence, its rituals evoke religious imagery and to an extent pageantry, while being much more open to the change that is science's hallmark than the rituals to which I became accustomed as a Mormon. That is, the nature of IRAS's ritual is in keeping with its purposes.

The first ritual is partly fun, partly pragmatic – the polar bear swim. The island does not have enough water to allow all conferees to shower each day. Hence, showers are limited to two per week and conferees are invited to dip in the Atlantic Ocean (temperatures ranged from 60 to 69 F. while we were there). At 7 am each morning the “polar bears” hit the water. To my amazement, my 11 year old son (who has never shown in interest in this kind of thing before) asked me on the second day we were there to make sure I got him up in time for “polar bearing” and so we participated from then on. The morning swim was accompanied by the usual joking about cold water, etc. and generally ended up in a combination of fun and fine conversation to get the day off to a good start.

Several people who are familiar with other Star conferences noted that the nature of conversation while polar bearing that occurred at the IRAS conference was unlike anything else that occurs on Star. As a group of us floated one morning, nicely numbed by the water, and talked about some (from my point of view) fascinating topic that had been raised the day before, someone else swam by and suggested with tongue only partly in cheek that it seemed “wrong” to turn polar bearing into another seminar. Such is IRAS.

Those not inclined to polar bear can find before-breakfast yoga, walks around the island or conversation on the huge deck that surrounds the hotel at any time after about 6 am. And many simply sleep in until just before breakfast.

Star Island's chapel figures prominently in many of IRAS's rituals. This structure is over 200 years old, without heating or light (other than that provided by candles). It sits on the island's highest hill. When the island was still dominated by a fishing community, one of the chapel's purposes was to serve as a gathering place during storms for those waiting the return of loved ones still at sea. It was a moving experience to sit in that little structure and think about what it has seen. I found that more moving than the experiences I have had in the much older grand cathedrals of Europe and Latin America. Perhaps the spare nature of the little stone chapel on Star Island allows it to convey the echoes of its human history to me more effectively than the cathedrals whose ornate nature speaks eloquently of the power that once distorted the basic human experience and so still muffles its perception.

Each IRAS conference has a chaplain appointed for the week. The chaplain gives a 30-minute “chapel” service in the chapel each morning at 9 am. This year's chaplain was Karl Peters (<http://www.meta-library.net/bio/kpet-body.html> and <http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/hsr/>) who was also one of the conferences organizers (along with Andrew Newberg -

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1175/is_6_34/ai_82261860) and along with Phil Hefner edits Zygon. Karl's chapel services were remarkable syntheses of philosophy, science and religion (both East and West), expressed in language that would likely inspire in different ways religious literalists as well as atheists who appreciate some aspects of religion as an art form, and most people who fall somewhere between those poles. The ritual in this case, as far as I can tell, was limited to the fact that each day started with this type of spiritually oriented dedication of remarkable range. I am told that this characteristic – the ability to simultaneously speak to both the religious and scientifically oriented – is a hallmark of those honoured with the chaplain's podium. Karl was at liberty to use music, the written and spoken work, distributed illustrations, etc. to attempt to achieve what he wished. I understand that the notes that he used for his services will be made available either at www.iras.org or through Zygon (see <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0591-2385>) They will be worth reading.

During each of Karl's services I attended the chapel was jammed (its capacity is perhaps 100 and there were perhaps 200 adults in attendance at the conference) and people were seated on the rocks surrounding it listening to his amplified voice.

While some of the following may sound like simple conference structure or scheduling, in my view it is ritual. I will explain why below.

The pre-adults (from age 4 through 20ish) in attendance were off doing their own thing from 9 am through noon and for part of each afternoon and evening. They had their own rituals that I don't have time to describe. Suffice it to say that my children arrived on the island in states reluctance varying from my 15-year-old son's "whatever Dad" to my 13-year-old daughter's refusal to speak to me and embarrassingly loud and negative assessment of the people with whom we were travelling to the island by boat. Within hours they had all been won over, started making friends, and are insistent that we return next year. Several serious (I am not joking) requests have been tendered that we move to the Boston area so that they can be nearer to their new friends. The conference, goofy rituals (as they put it) and all were a smashing success from our children's perspective. Each of them (aged 3 (a grandson), 11, 13, 15 and 24 (our oldest daughter)) were delighted with their experience. I credit much of this to the people who ran the children's program, and in particular Sandra Woodworth who has masterminded this aspect of the IRAS conference for several years. I also credit plain old good luck, since it would be too much to expect to have things work out for everyone as well as they did for us.

Meals on Star Island are nothing fancy, but adequate. They are a great chance to get to know new people and connect with family members who have gone in different directions during the day. Meals are taken in a large dining hall at tables that seat ten each. The seating arrangements are free form, and changed with each meal. While conferees eat numerous announcements are made that indicate much about the nature of IRAS. These range from the trivial (lost hats; old timers who can't make it this year sending their hellos; etc.) to program changes and other logistical fare. These are not made with a view to efficiency, it seems, but rather to respect the position of many people who have for a long time made IRAS what it is. A respect for IRAS's history and the relationships that have formed around IRAS fosters tolerance of inefficiency in various ways. And this comes off as a good thing, in my view.

During the day there are two plenary sessions, and about four minor session slots during which conferees have as many as five different seminars from which to choose. These include things like walking tours of the island, yoga, painting, various intellectual topics, other more practical subjects like the psychology of overeating, self-counselling, etc. Conferees are also invited to propose and put on impromptu discussion groups or presentations during this slot. Many did so.

Happy hour occurs each day from 5 to 6. Perhaps 50% of the adults on any given day would drop in there. In addition, several choral groups scheduled practises for the talent show at the end of the week, plays were being written (some awfully funny, other simply awful, but that's OK), the children were rehearsing items for their separate talent show, and a newsletter (as noted above) with a significant amount of creative content was produced each day.

At all times during the day from 6 am to past midnight, whether sessions were on going or not, groups of people could be found sitting on the rocking chairs on the hotel's huge deck looking over the Atlantic in three directions engaged in various kinds of conversation. There was a lot of laughing as well as serious discussion. At the same time, many people could be observed reading books, napping, walking, playing with children on the large lawn surrounding the hotel, sitting in the gazebo on a point above the hotel from which the view is particularly nice, swimming off the dock in front of the hotel, etc.

My main point in describing what I just have is the diversity of behaviour that is expected of those who attend this conference. It was the most interesting combination of serious academic discourse with fun and relaxation of various types I have ever encountered. Diversity of activity and opinion were both encouraged by the structure of the event and the behaviour of the key people at the conference.

At the same time, it was clear that there are raw nerves of which many conferees are wary. This surprised me. It took several days before I was familiar enough with what was going on that I began to pick up on this. For example, several fascinating papers were presented (Andrew Newberg, David Hufford, Joan Koss-Chionino, Bruce Greyson for example) that dealt with the neurology and other aspects of phenomena that are considered "spiritual" by many people, such as near death experiences, the appearance of demonic or angelic apparitions, spiritual healings, and the meditative or religious epiphany. None of the speakers addressed the ontological implications of their research such as do spirits really exist, is their perception entirely explained by what goes on in our head? Pretty basic stuff for people who have been talking about science v. religion for over 50 years, one would think. And of course strong opinions are held on both sides of this kind of point. Likely for this reason, it was deemed too risky in even this relatively tolerant community to place this issue squarely on the table. And on these issues, most of the "porch" discussions afterwards formed along ideological lines. Few were prepared, even in private, to plunge into these waters.

The daily "candlelight" is the most ritualistic of IRAS's group activities, and is a variation on a standard Star Island ritual theme. Each evening at about 10 pm., a different person – each with a significant history of involvement with IRAS – would conduct a 30-minute service in the chapel. Beforehand, those who wished to attend would pick up a lantern containing a lighted candle on the porch of the hotel, and walk in silence up the hill to the chapel. Silence was to be maintained during the walk up, the service (unless called upon to sing to recite), and the walk back down to the hotel. I inadvertently ran afoul of this rule a few times, and my questions or comments were met with polite silence until we reached the hotel. The reverence accompanying the candlelight service was unique to the conference, and set it apart from all other events I attended there. There was something about sitting reverently in that old chapel that sent shivers up my spine. Lit only by candlelight; in a crowd of silent worshippers; with waves breaking and a foghorn sounding over the Atlantic in the background. It was lovely.

Between 50 and 100 people attended these services. At the end of a long day, one more opportunity to sit and listen instead of chatting with people on the porch or just going to bed,

tended to thin out the crowd. The content and quality of these services varied. All were worth listening to, but in general they did not have (nor were intended to have, I suspect) the polished feel of Karl's morning devotionals.

Ursula Goodenough's IRAS Candlelight Service

Finally, we are ready to discuss Ursula's candlelight service. It was held the last evening we were on Star, and was something special. It started much later than the others as a result of a talent show that went overtime. We picked up our lanterns and covered the dark distance up to the chapel in silence, entered and hung the lanterns in their places. I noted again the symbolism of flickering light arriving with the equally unstable human presence.

We sat as usual for a few minutes in relative silence as the chapel filled and some struggled a bit to get their lanterns in place. Roger Brown, a talented pianist, played sacred music that I later learned he had made up on the fly to the theme "water". Roger treated us to several such performances. He is one of those few musicians who are talented enough to convey emotion with his hands on a keyboard as deftly as most of us can with our voices. While he was playing, I noticed that we could hear faint but distinct "funk" music and laughter drifting up to us from the Pelicans' quarters. It is characteristic of the place that no one would have arranged for the Pelicans to maintain silence during our devotional, so the sounds of young life celebrating became part of our reverie, mingling with Roger's piano, the breeze through the window and waves breaking on the rocks below us.

Then, abruptly, Ursula began to speak. When lecturing with regard to biology in an academic setting (which is where I first heard her) she has a calming rhythm to her speech and body movement that sets her apart. In the chapel she appeared to be in her natural element, which is particularly ironic since she says that her earliest recollections of talk about the kind of god most religious people worship made no sense to her, and nothing has changed in that regard since then.

Ursula told us that she had been ready to present something "cerebral" but during the week had decided against that, and then launched into an at first confusing description of a spider she had found in the middle of a huge, newly spun web in her window one morning earlier in the week. I say confusing because Ursula's presentation was so unlike what we had heard in that space all week long, and we are all conditioned by prior experience. But I soon adjusted.

We learned all kinds of things about Ursula's spider – about the ebb and flow of its life and how it was within its environment. At one point Ursula told us how she thought she had been privileged to see the spider's egg sack emerge, but on closer examination found that she had rather been witness to spider defecation.

As Ursula described how she had come to relate to "her" spider (was she "its" human?), and as I learned more about both this spider and spiders in general, I began to feel a reverence for this ancient and relatively unchanged spark of life that I had never before felt. It occurred to me that this was yet another illustration of the principle that it is hard to come to understand anything – "even" a spider – without feeling reverence for it. The word "even" now feels out of place for me in reference to Ursula's spider.

Ursula did not break for the usual hymn or reading during the middle of the service, perhaps because of the late hour. And she concluded by explaining the importance of touch in a spider's world. Spiders have poor eyesight and hearing, but an amazingly sensitive touch. That is how

they appreciate and navigate their world. Ursula invited us to become more aware of our own sense of touch by holding hands with the persons next to us. There was a little uncomfortable shifting as we clasped hands with people in many cases whom we did not know. Ursula then concluded with a few more spider thoughts as we sat acutely aware of how we were touching each other. She then dispensed with the usual concluding hymn by telling us that she would see us off with an embrace. I expected a nice metaphor of some kind related to touch that would wrap the whole thing up and put a bow on it. Instead, the meeting simply ended. Ursula said nothing more. Rather, with a huge smile on her face, she began to hug one person after another at the front of the chapel. Within moments spontaneous hugging broke out all over the place, along with laughter and quiet thank yous and other reverent, joyful communication while funk music, wind and waves continued faintly in the background. Strangers comfortably hugged strangers as well as those close to them. I saw tears in several eyes. All of this was, of course, in violation of the "rule" that silence be maintained from the time the lanterns are picked up to the time they are returned to their resting places at the hotel. And yet no one objected or even appeared fussed.

I cannot imagine a more fitting end to the "programmed" part of a spectacular week.

Ritual Wrap-up

I was left with the thought that for IRAS on Star Island, ritual is not the curator of spiritual experience, but rather its handmaiden. Ursula respected the essence of the candlelight ritual, while expanding its boundaries in some ways. By remaining formally open to this kind of innovation, the IRAS culture should be expected to change so as to remain more in touch with the people it serves than is often the case when ritual is more rigid.

Hence, my conclusion overall was that IRAS's rituals are designed to facilitate diversity, and that this group has gone a long way down a path that few have dared attempt in terms of dialoguing relative to science and religion. And yet much remains to be done. The remarkable thing about IRAS is that for over 50 years people who hold conflicting beliefs about things they deem fundamentally important have met annually to consider, with as much good will as possible, issues of mutual interest to them and about which they often disagree. I felt privileged to participate. And I note the particular importance of civility and respect in this forum. There is a direct correlation between how respectful we are capable of being relative to views with which we disagree, and how much we can learn. Those at the IRAS conference scored very high in this regard. But as noted above, when they reached the limit of their civility they simply stopped talking. I hope that as time passes an increasing percentage of the group will be able to venture into terrain they now find too threatening to face, and do so with the same civility that I saw so well demonstrated in other ways.

And on top of all of that, my kids tell me they had life changing experiences while on Star Island. It does not get much better than this.

Concluding Star Island Haiku

I am still having fun with the Haiku form. Here is what came to me as I was typing the above.

Star Island

Small, sailing Starward.
To wonder, connect, emote.
Greater going home.