

# How Ed Ricketts and the Ocean Brought Purpose to my Life

by Charles Seaborn



1967: Exploring Oregon coast tidepools at age 13. I was so lucky.

Recently I had a deeply personal experience on Cannery Row. It was a bright sunny day and the “row” was crowded with weekend tourists. I happened to be walking by the Pacific Biological Laboratory, better known to the world as “Doc” Ricketts lab. Looking up I saw the door at the top of the wooden steps ajar. I peeked in and discovered that this was one of those rare days when the lab is open to the public through the generosity and good work of the Cannery Row Foundation.

I was warmly greeted by two of the lab’s guardians, cannery row historian Michael Hemp and Frank Wright. Frank and Ed became friends through their shared military service in the 40’s. He remains one of the founding members of a group of men who took ownership of the lab in 1958 and have been its caretakers ever since.

As a long-time Monterey Peninsula resident I have walked by this national treasure many times. And as a life-long marine biologist each time I have passed the non-descript, gray wooden sea shack I always feel as if I am on hallowed ground. Here was my chance to finally see the home and workplace of the man who unknowingly gave me my life’s passion and purpose. The man who gave me the greatest gift of all: a meaningful life, and in the process a life-saving therapy for managing my difficult, sometimes tragic childhood.

Thanks to Ed Ricketts and an exceptionally perceptive mother, I am one of those very lucky people who found their passion in life at an early age. It started when I was twelve, winning thirteen goldfish at a Country Fair fundraiser for my small parochial school in Portland, Oregon. I won them at the carny game where you throw ping-pong balls at a pyramid of small glass bowls each containing a shell-shocked mini-koi. Imagine what that must be like for an animal that has a delicate sense organ (the lateral line) attuned to feeling minute vibrations in the water. No wonder they all died a few days later!

This brief, (all be it tragic) encounter with those beautiful, golden piscines triggered something in me that created an immediate and memorable connection with aquatic life. I can still hear the gentle clanging of the glass bowls piled in the cardboard box balanced in my lap on the dark ride home. For decades I kept all thirteen tucked away in a storage unit until I finally realized that one would be enough to hold the memory: it sits on my desk today, empty yet so full.



1974: Looking up at the world 30 feet down in front of Hopkins Marine Station. In that moment I experienced awe, by myself, alone under the sea. A powerful experience in nature that I will never forget.

My mother carefully observed the powerful connection I had made with these urban fish. Immediately after we flushed the last one she took me to a pet store for my first five-gallon aquarium, adroitly setting the hook in my psyche for what would become my calling in life. At the same time she brilliantly provided me with a psychological escape route from the chaos that surrounded our home.

My father suffered from two neurological impairments. Both he and his identical twin brother were born with an extreme form of psychomotor epilepsy. My father also developed a tumor in his frontal lobe. Being the sensitive, caring person that he was this must have been a hellish life in that his seizures and nervous disconnects would often take the form of extreme violence or suicidal behavior. Imagine coming out of a mental fog vaguely remembering having thrown all the living room furniture out the window, or worse: physically harming someone you loved.

When it became clear to my mother that she would have to be the leader of our family she put aside her own promising career as an attorney and politician (as a woman in the 50's) to take care of an ailing husband and my prematurely born younger brother who had his own set of physical challenges. I learned about personal sacrifice from her by seeing the special kind of thoughtful love she gave to her family.

As the oldest son I felt the responsibility most elder siblings do to somehow "fix" what was an extremely stressful, challenging and at times overwhelming home life. When my uncle committed suicide after the death of his wife my father literally turned his face to a wall for most of a year. Our lives were largely regulated by his often violent, unpredictable behavior and the following days of depression, sadness and silence that followed.

What can a boy do at age twelve to make the pain of his father, mother and brother go away? My mother saw me struggling with this unfair and impossible task, so when the goldfish appeared she latched on to them as a way to give me a distraction from the responsibilities that I inherited simply through fate. Those thirteen fish turned out to be my godsend.

Enter Ed Ricketts. For my thirteenth Christmas "Santa Claus" (a.k.a. my mother) brought me Ed's great contribution to the literature of Pacific coast marine science: *Between Pacific Tides*, sealing my future as a marine biologist. Finally I had someone to "talk to" about all the wonderful and curious marine animals I had been discovering in Oregon coast tidepools. Here, in one place, were the answers to so many of my questions. I vividly remember reading the entire book cover to cover over the holiday, escaping to the world of tidal pools, mudflats and kelp beds. This is how my life-long relationship with Ed Ricketts and John Steinbeck began. These two men shaped a large part



Looking into the ocean today, with reverence.



My current photographic work centers on seeing the surface of the water as abstract images formed by wind, waves, light and tides.

of who I am through their art, science, spirit and deep understanding of the human condition.

I quickly became a marine biology nerd, memorizing the scientific names of all my newfound real and imaginary friends. I began to develop an intimate relationship with the sea from the confines of our small, downtown apartment that was rapidly filling up with aquariums, including one in the refrigerator. From *Anthopleura xanthogrammica* (the giant green anemone) to *Hermisenda crassicornis* (the “ubiquitous” sea slug) I entered the world of marine invertebrates and never looked back. I embraced the undersea world as only children can and as Steinbeck so elegantly described in *The Log From the Sea of Cortez*:

*Small boys have such sharp eyes, and they are quick to notice deviation. Once they know you are generally curious, they bring amazing things. Perhaps we only practice an extension of their urge. It is easy to remember when we were small and lay on our stomachs besides a tide pool and our minds and eyes went so deeply into it that size and identity were lost, and the creeping hermit crab was our size and the tiny octopus a monster. Then the waving algae covered us and we hid under a rock at the bottom and leaped out like fish. It is very possible that we, and even those who probe space with equations, simply extend this wonder.*

The world of marine biology became my secret refuge from the suffering I watched my family go through growing up. How lucky I was to have a mother who saw that the ocean and its inhabitants could be the unlikely escape that would bring me joy, peace and beauty – my entire life.

We all seem to understand intuitively that the ocean has a soothing influence on our souls and psyches. Perhaps that is partly why I was so drawn to it. Perhaps it became an unconscious balm for my painful childhood. Only now are we beginning to see that there may be some quantifiable evidence of the calming effects of the sea on our emotions. This work on the mind-ocean connection is being pioneered in the nascent fields of cognitive neuropsychology and neuroconservation. There is even an innovative group of dedicated scientists and researchers called *Bluemind* who promote collaborative investigations of the complex connections between science, emotions and the ocean. This holistic approach is entirely in keeping with the worldview Ricketts and Steinbeck were hatching up from their perch on cannery row over seventy years ago. Through advances in technology (fMRI, for example) we now have the tools to explore the human mind *in vivo*, and what we are learning about the ocean-mind-emotion connection is groundbreaking, paradigm shifting and fascinating.

But of course Ricketts and Steinbeck gave me much more than a childhood escape. They put meaning in my life. They showed me how I could be useful, which in turn told me that I was needed; that despite the fact that my love alone could not make my father whole I still had some-



Exploring Lover's Point as Steinbeck and Ricketts did over 70 years ago. I overheard one boy say to the other, "What does explore mean?" "To have fun in nature" - how true!



thing to give and that I was genuinely good at something. That "something" happened to be connecting people with nature. Ed and John did all the heavy lifting for me; I just had to read their work and go to the tidepools to see how nature, art, knowledge and spirit combine to show us our place in the world. This is how I learned about the cardinal virtue reverence at an early age, which has stayed with me my entire life.

I also had some help from a series of men who acted as male role models when my real father simply could not. In high school my biology teacher saw my intense interest in all things aquatic. We built saltwater aquariums, sponsored Cousteau film-festivals and he even allowed me to organize an all-school (250 students!) three day field trip to the marine biology summer camp I worked at; Camp Arago, a summer camp dedicated to hermit crabs, starfish and sea slugs - perfect!

Fortunately he was also my soccer coach. Knowing I could not afford college John somehow engineered an athletic scholarship for me to the University of Hawaii in 1972, just as the sport was becoming popular in the United States. UH also happened to be a world center for tropical marine biology. I nearly went blind counting gorgonian spicules for Dr. "Bob" Kinzie who gave me my first research assistantship as an enthusiastic freshman. It was these (and many other) acts of kindness given to me by several mentors that fueled my desire to explore the ocean realm in a deeply personal way. I am eternally grateful to all of them.

I reconnected with Ricketts as a junior when I attended Stanford's Hopkins Marine Station for a summer course in subtidal marine ecology. There I met a pivotal mentor, Chuck Baxter. He encouraged me to stay on for the year to study snail penises, but that is not why he was pivotal, although they are fascinating in an arcane sort of way. Chuck taught a holistic brand of marine science and life, for that matter, that was very much in keeping with Ricketts and Steinbeck's worldview. At one point we decided to measure the oxygen content of a tidepool over a 24-hour period, continuously every half hour. This meant camping out in the intertidal. For one glorious night I got to look down at the tidepools, up to the stars and back to the tidepools again, living that famous passage from *The Log From the Sea of Cortez*. I had many significant conversations with Chuck that year in exactly the same tidepools and neighborhood where Ricketts and Steinbeck had been solving the world's problems 30 years ahead of us.

These experiences left a lasting impression on me and strengthened my ties to Ricketts and Steinbeck to the point that I felt I had truly been born at the wrong time; that somehow I had missed the point along what Steinbeck calls "the elastic string of time" where I was meant to be - with them. Of course this is nonsense. Everyone is born at exactly the right time; sometimes it just takes an experience or a person to help you see this.

Remarkably, this is the epiphany that happened for me a month later during my second visit to the lab. Michael invited me to be a guest interpreter for the lab tours celebrating Steinbeck's 110th birthday. He wanted me to share my story with those interested in seeing the place where so much humanity had been poured over by two great intellects. "Honored" is *close* to how I felt that day. Forty-five years after my loving mother had given me the key to my future I found myself speaking in the place where that key had been conceived, developed and written. I was telling my story in the place where my story began. One young man said to me, "So this must be your dream gig." "You have no idea" I replied. From goldfish to *Between Pacific Tides* to now, I was reliving my childhood as if I were in a movie I could not control.

Aren't we all truly connected to each other? Do we not all belong to a kind of communal subconscious lying just below the surface of our reality? I found myself getting caught up in exactly the kind of deep philosophical thinking that had occurred at the lab so many times before. But I was doing it in my "now", my present. This was my moment to realize my connection with Ed and John at precisely the right time.

As I finished my last tour Frank came up to me, looked me square in the eyes and said, "Good job Charles, you're one of us now." Feelings, thoughts and spirit really do pass from one generation to the next. At that moment I felt a certain completeness envelop me. I felt Ed's spirit flow from Frank to me as he warmly shook my hand and continued to gaze into my eyes. This is what life is truly about: connections, making memories and finding your place in the world. All this was confirmed for me at the right place at the right time. The confluence of nature, art, knowledge and spirit I felt on that hollowed ground reminded me that these are the things that bind us together. These are the elements of life that give me hope for a shared, united, compassionate humanity firmly centered on reverence for nature and all that makes us humane.



I watched in awe as Lisa Bryan sketched Frank Wright sitting under a portrait of Ed - in about five minutes!



## Charles Seaborn

Charles Seaborn is an acclaimed underwater photographer, marine biologist and freelance writer. Born in Portland, Oregon, Charles was educated at the University of Hawaii, Hopkins Marine Station of Stanford University, the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole and Brooks Institute of Photography. He earned his undergraduate degree in 1976 from the University of Puget Sound with honors and did post-graduate work at the University of Washington's College of Fisheries in Seattle. His creative consulting firm, Seaborn Projects, develops interpretive exhibits and programs for zoos, aquariums, museums and resorts. His last book, *Underwater Wilderness*, is an overview of America's National Marine Sanctuaries, published by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Charles is a former board member of the Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL). His commitment to interpreting the natural world to the general public has consumed his professional and personal life, and has taken him to four continents, as well as numerous spots in Oceania.

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