

What We Loved and Lost: Now and Zen Authors Urge Islanders to Hesitate

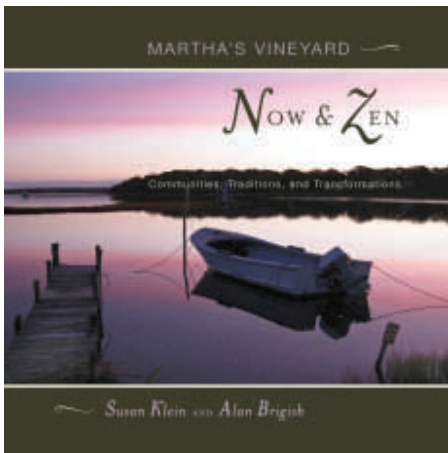
By MIKE SECCOMBE, VINEYARD GAZETTE JULY 2010



Photographer Alan Brighish and storyteller Susan Klein launch book *Martha's Vineyard Now and Zen* tonight at Bunch of Grapes.

Fourth of July weekend, I have witnessed, with a mixture of irritation and pity, a number of hurried, hostile honkers (all with out-of-state plates, I might add), but because it seems apposite to a discussion of Susan Klein and Alan Brighish's new book, *Martha's Vineyard Now and Zen*.

For this is more than just another pretty coffee table book about the beauty of the place; it is also an illumination of the way of life here. It is both a celebration of the people and the history and the culture of the place, and also a lamentation about that which has been lost, or is in danger of being lost.



Book will likely charm, then change, readers.

And it is silly, when you think about it. Are they hoping for an encore?

Quite frankly, Ms. Klein writes, it grates on the nerves of Vineyarders who have long practiced a tradition of their own — "observing silence as a response to wonder.

"First swim of the season; dusk pinkletink chorus in spring, nor-easter on the Chop; beach plum jelly in January; skinny dipping in sea foam; fishing the rip; gazing at meteor showers from the beach; a mess of blue shell crabs; Gay Head Cliffs — anytime; rock-

Some years ago, as a fresh washashore, I made the mistake of honking my car horn.

It was at the blinker, coming from Vineyard Haven on an off-season day. There were but two cars: mine, and that of the woman in front who had been unaccountably stopped, for maybe a minute, maybe less. I didn't lean aggressively on the horn, just a little beep, to say "I'm here."

She waved a hand and turned right onto Barnes Road. I was going that way too, and followed her to the other end, where we pulled abreast, she turning left, I turning right. She wound down her passenger side window, and gestured for me to wind mine down too.

Then she smiled nicely and said, "We don't honk here," smiled again and drove on.

I mention this now not just because this week, in the run-up to the

It is like the literary equivalent of slow food — not just beautifully presented, but based on a philosophy of quiet appreciation and sustainability. It does this in 27 short, easily-digestible chapters, broken into four sections: elements, communities, traditions and issues.

Each chapter contains but a few hundred words of distilled insight from the Island-born Ms. Klein, accompanied by Mr. Brighish's sublime photographs. Little tastes of Island life, from the "truly huge" bump in the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road, which was the only year-round amusement park ride, until 1969, to the Community Services Thrift Shop, Honesty Boxes, the Inkwell, the Gazette, Camp Jabberwocky, the Ag Fair, beach plum jelly, the fishing derby, and so on.

It's not a preachy book at all, yet it is a wonderfully instructive appreciation of the Vineyard Way.

Let's cite just one example: the chapter on the storied sunsets of Menemsha, and the phenomenon of recent years of the gathered tourists who applaud as the sun sinks.

rumbling tide at Squibnocket; a lady slipper — suddenly — in a pine forest; littlenecks on the half shell; Ocean Park at dawn; sailing the Sound; return of the osprey; snow-frosted seagrass; Menemsha sunset — the sublime needs no applause.”



Ms. Klein: “Island could carry you through rough times.”

As the two authors tell it, the book was separately, complementarily conceived over many years. There was Mr. Brigish, the washashore photographer who loved the place but could not find anyone who could muster the words to explain it, and Ms. Klein, who had nursed growing concern over a decade or more about the changes to the lifestyle she’d grown up with, but who lacked a vehicle.

Said he: “For the longest time, I skated right over the real Island. I was a summer resident. It was ice cream, restaurants, all that stuff.”

He knew there was a deeper culture, but “I just couldn’t find my way in.”

Then, after several false starts with other writers, he introduced himself to Ms. Klein one day a couple of years ago, in the Fedex parking lot.

For her part, Ms. Klein had written one piece for the Gazette 10 years ago, voicing her concerns about the “transmogrification” of the Vineyard, then kept writing about it, just for herself. She had no thoughts of a book.

Mr. Brigish suggested a series of essays, each about 300 words, to go with his pictures, initially to be posted online.

“But I’m a storyteller,” she said. “A 20-minute storyteller. Like most students I abhorred the essay assignment. Ugh. To become an essayist at this great age is kind of amazing. I didn’t think it was a form I thought I would warm to.”

As for the idea of online posting, it seemed beyond the pale.

But they tried it and it worked. They built a loyal following of a few hundred people, then, eventually, collated it all into a book.

As for the title, it is a play on words which works at several levels, said Mr. Brigish.

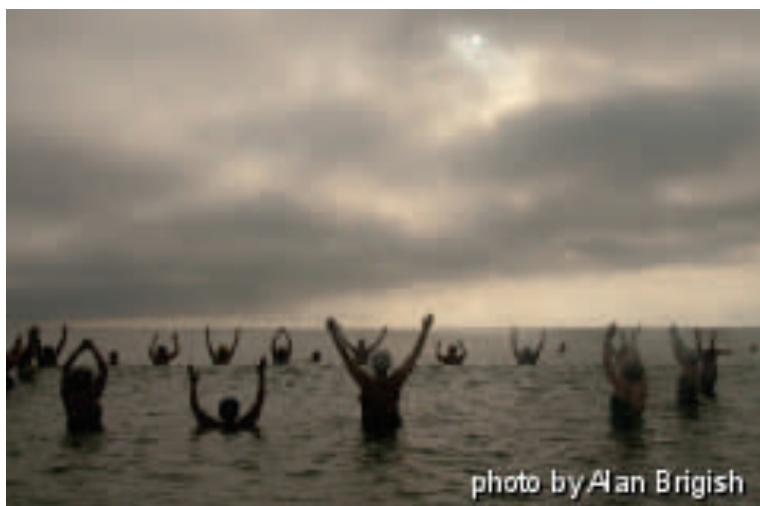
“The way it started was that Susan would tell it the way it was, and I would shoot it the way it is. So it was Now and Then. But, since I happen to be something of a Buddhist practitioner, I said, well why not Now and Zen, instead.

“The Zen part really works well. Because the whole idea is slow down, take it all in, savor the moment.”

As Ms. Klein puts in chapter 27, the title chapter, the Vineyard existed, and to a great, but diminishing extent still exists, as “a place out of time and not in sync with the ever-increasing pace of society’s evolution away from our spiritual center.”

But it seems that Zen state is harder and harder to achieve, as the years go by, and the pressures and pace of the outside world press in.

“The parameters of summer are no longer Memorial Day and Labor Day,” she said. “That’s long gone. That was the case when I was a kid: the door slammed on summer and then you had another life.



Polar Bears chill out at Inkwell beach.



Bird's eye view of south shore.

“People who breeze in don’t understand that just 40 years ago we were hunting and gathering. You knew your personal resources and the resources of the Island could carry you through the rough times. We don’t know that anymore. It’s not a truth anymore because we can’t afford to live here anymore.

“When a place changes so much that the children of the residents can no longer afford to buy land, something has broken.”

The irony of the whole thing, which they readily admit, is that it is all the publicity about the Vineyard, all the media and pretty pictures and news events, which have propelled the changes which they lament. Does another book extolling the Island run the risk of simply fueling that change?

“That was my question at the beginning,” said Ms. Klein. “And basically we had to agree that ship had sailed. [But] this book doesn’t say, it’s beautiful, you should all come and take a piece of it.”

“What this book does is opens a window into who we were. So maybe as we go forward, there’s a possibility that people might be able to see, through the stories and the photographs, a chronicle of who we have been [and see] the opportunity to go forward consciously.”

To do otherwise brings the risk of becoming what she calls “every other place.”

“If we become every other place, then the one thing that sets us apart — indescribable as that is — is gone. We’ve lost the treasure.”

Exactly how that might be avoided, neither author is sure.

“I wish I had answers,” said Ms. Klein “I wish I knew what to do. You know you can’t rewind, but you sure do wish you could hit the pause button, and say ‘give me a little time just to catch up and let me think this through before I have to make another decision.’”

They see their book, interestingly, as a complement to another recent publication, the Island Plan prepared by the Martha’s Vineyard Commission.

That plan came out while they were in the final stages of producing *Now and Zen*.

Ms. Klein said when she first read the Island Plan her reaction was “Geez, it’s the same story.”

But not nearly so accessible, of course.

“Even if people perceive it as dry, it’s wonderful,” she said. “It’s very difficult to make statistics anything other than what they are. But a friend described the Island Plan as the numbers beneath the narrative,”

Said Mr. Brigish: “We’re trying to popularize, in a sense, what’s in that document. And every time we sit down to talk about it, we’re going to talk about that document. Our book is an easy way of understanding what’s important in the plan.”

But the average casual visitor, the summer resident, it’s a fair bet, is not going to wade through the dry statistics of the Island Plan. They are likely, however, to be charmed, and then changed, by *Zen and Now*.

Little changes first, perhaps, like not applauding the sunset. Staring for long periods out to sea. Not honking.

Then, maybe bigger ones, like thinking of ways to better address environmental and social problems.

The first thing, said Mr. Brigish, “is to make people aware of what we have here, and what’s at risk.”

One reader at a time, you marshal the collective will to find answers.

“You know,” he said, “A friend of mine, a summer resident, read the book, and then he rang me and said: ‘I had no idea. All these years I’ve been coming to the Vineyard and I had no idea of any of this stuff. I’m shocked.’

“So that’s one.”

Susan Klein and Alan Brigish will be signing copies of Martha’s Vineyard Now and Zen at Bunch of Grapes Bookstore in Vineyard Haven on Friday, July 2 at 7:30 p.m.



Mr. Brigish: book is about what we have here.