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Tom Blake: The Surfing Pantheist

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by Harold Wood

When the surfing culture came to the mainland USA from Hawai'i in the early 20th century, one of its principal exponents was Tom Blake. He is credited with bringing not only surfing, but also a Hawai'ian-flavored Pantheist spirituality to California.

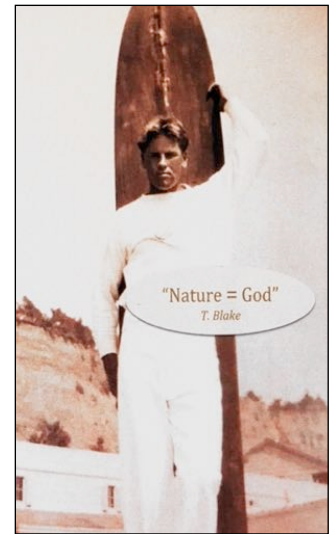
Historians generally credit Duke Kahanamoku, a full-blooded native Hawai'ian, as the person most responsible for revitalizing the ancient Hawaiian practice of surfing in the modern era, bringing it to the mainland USA, and, ultimately, the world. After swimming his way to an Olympic gold medal in 1912, Kahanamoku demonstrated surfing to enthusiastic crowds on both coasts of North America and then in Australia. Modern surfers see him as "the embodiment of an ethical spirituality that may be just this side of a religious belief system."

While many surfers see Duke Kahanamoku as surfing's original prophet, Tom Blake became his chief apostle.

Blake changed the face of surfing and has long been lauded as one of the true pioneers and innovators in the sport. Among many other accomplishments, in 1924, he was the first person to surf Malibu, along with Sam Reid. He went on to invent several technologies that made surfing easier and transformed it into the viable sport it is today: the hollow surfboard, the waterproof camera housing, a surfboard with a built-in keel (skeg/fin), and such lifeguarding rescue devices as the torpedo buoy and rescue ring. One surf historian pointed out that Blake, together with Duke, "helped to accelerate a modern rebirth of the Hawaiian sport of kings, which had been in a state of lethargy brought on by the decimation of the Hawaiian people and their culture by Western encroachment ... The missionaries brought their western God to Hawaii, but in the end it was surfing missionaries such as Duke Kahanamoku and Tom Blake who had the last word. Not only is surfing more widespread than many established religions; it has also proved to be a far more peaceful, benevolent, and inclusive 'faith' than most. Aside from isolated pockets of territoriality, surfers of many races and languages co-exist with a degree of tolerance and harmony that should be envied by many world faiths."

Blake was not formally educated (he never graduated high school due to the devastating influenza epidemic that swept the world in 1918 and 1919), but he was an astute observer of nature and had a deep understanding of science and its implications on such perennial questions concerning ethics, God, and the goal of human life.

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Tom Blake, Nature = God, photo courtesy of David Lane.

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Born in northern Wisconsin, as a boy Tom Blake saw a newsreel about surfing, and, as an eighteen-year-old, met Duke Kahanamoku in a Michigan movie theater lobby. He moved to Los Angeles to pursue the sport. Blake also became deeply involved in both lifeguarding and surfing subcultures in California, Hawai'i, and Florida before returning to Wisconsin in 1967. There he wrote "Voice of the Wave," which was published in Surfing magazine in 1969. For its time, the essay was remarkably innovative. Blake found a divine force in all of the waves in the universe, including ocean waves, concluding that "nature is synonymous with God." Blake expressed reverence for the sea and biocentric kinship ethics, which was also the ground of his vegetarianism and belief in the equality of all peoples. Blake formulated a belief system predicated on the idea of "Nature=God," and he practiced this faith out-of-doors in what he called "The Blessed Church Of The Open Sky."

Atomic Philosophy

The essence of Tom Blake's philosophical outlook is best captured in his book, *Voice of the Atom*. This engaging narrative centers on his conversations with a young nomadic wanderer named Anthony. The book was deeply influenced by Albert Einstein's theories, and summarized the $E=MC^2$ law of physics simply as "Nature=God." Blake wrote, "The word 'GOD' is a man-made term for Mother Nature and Father Time." Blake finds God's nature via atomic theory explaining that "Scientists now agree that the atom consists of many states of being. They have proved that while the mass and energy of the atom change identity, it does not disintegrate into nothing." Dovetailing with many religious adherents who believe in eternal life, Blake too suggests that we live eternally. But it is not what one usually imagines. Instead of a bodily resurrection into heaven or a voyage into uncharted astral planes, Blake focuses on Einstein's theories concerning the interchangeability of matter and energy and concludes: "After all, we are made of atoms. In dying, we change form, but cannot escape from the kingdom of the atom... So we do continue to exist by the compulsive laws of Nature and God, by changing back into the atoms' kingdom as a necessary and useful part of nature or God; when we die we are not turned out of the universe; merely returned to the good earth; to our original atomic state, more peaceful, stable, and harmonious than a stress-full human state. Furthermore, the atoms cannot escape the so-called universe; so we not only have eternal life, as Jesus and Einstein tried to tell us, but we cannot escape eternal life."

The intrinsic sustaining balance of the natural world is self-evident to surfers, who say, "If you ride waves long enough and keep your eyes and heart open, you get it... Blake enlivened the essential surfer's philosophy of respect – for others, for history, for the power of nature... He believed that it was all God."

Another author who interpreted Blake, David Lane, explains, "For Blake, there is an underlying unity behind nature and he doesn't want to speak of a God that requires a belief in something transmundane. He approvingly quotes Emerson, who writes, 'Truth is the summit of being.' And upon this, Blake adds, 'The atom, nature, God, and morality equal truth; the first class way to go.'"

The Circle of Compassion

Blake's philosophical ideas were not just abstract theological speculations, but something that established a moral code. He concluded that Einsteinian physics dovetailed with the spiritual teachings of all the world's religions in embracing compassion for all, given our fundamental unity with all things. Applying a circle of compassion, Blake reasoned that "I knew I didn't want to be killed and I figured all animals felt the same way." So, in 1924, at the age of 22, he became a vegetarian. Furthermore, he combined this compassion for animal life with engagement in a burgeoning personal health movement, because he "depended on my health for my swimming and lifeguard work." When he was 41 years old, he told an interviewer that we all had access to "the finest food in the world, and plenty of it. I pass up the meat, fish, and fowl, but the variety of other food is extensive, and sufficient to balance a diet. There is a salad or fruit at every meal, as well as butter and milk." In *the Voice of the Atom*, he wrote, "vegetarian meals are more healthful than the denser, chemical laden food... Vegetarian foods [also] eliminate the need to kill, or share the burden of responsibility for killing of God's

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The Surfing Pantheist *continued*

creatures... All of this points up a way of seeking the better life, and encouraging others to do the same. In a word, respect for life, your own, and all of the earth's living creatures. They too are of nature's kingdom."

However, Blake was not an absolutist in his philosophy, since he clearly realized that "compassion must be balanced by compulsion to survive." We are sometimes controlled by instinct, even while attempting to transcend our more animalistic tendencies. For Blake, this entails learning how to align one's self with the natural ebb and flow of differing circumstances. This Earth, according to Blake, will never be a utopia, but we can optimize the best it has to offer while minimizing those aspects that are damaging or harmful.

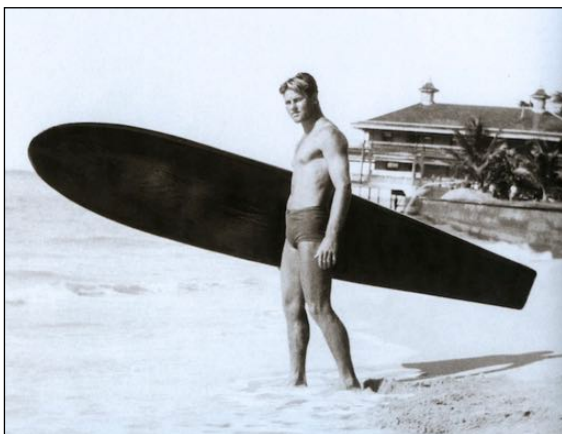
Blake was considered a loner by many. But he felt a kinship with all life: "I found my greatest interest in swimming, surfing, and camping, traveling around, and that - it's a lonely life, that's true. But your friends are the trees and the forests and the birds and the animals, and everything that you can see, and the different people that you meet briefly... every day was new."

The Surfing Lifestyle

Blake had to break societal expectations to embark on the kind of life he chose, since surfers in his time were typically regarded as simply loafers who contrived nothing to society. To live the surfing lifestyle, you are not bound by an 8-to-5 job, yet surfers are very aware of time when it comes to a freshly arrived swell. Surfing can be an art form of its own, just as beautiful in its way as poetry, music, or painting. And there is a spiritual side to the surfer being aware of how nature works, by paying attention to Nature's more wild and pristine manifestations.

As David Lane puts it, "What can be more beautiful than a surfer rhythmically gliding on a wave generated from thousands of miles away performing an instinctual dance that adapts to the bending contours of cascading water molecules?" And so today, surfing is considered a wonderful and healthy activity, a leisure sport enjoyed by millions, with competitive matches televised just like any other sporting event. Surfing was recently recognized as an Olympic sport when it was introduced at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

But in Tom Blake's day, it was a radical departure from the norm to follow the ocean's ebb and flow and not the workaday time clock. Tom Blake was the progenitor of an oceanic lifestyle where less is more, living in the moment is sacred, and Nature is God. As Dave Lane puts it, "For Blake, Nature is God and aligning one's lifestyle to it is the highest form of worship."



Tom Blake with surfboard, source unknown.

If religion is seen as incorporating three major elements - The Way of Knowledge, the Way of Devotion, and The Way of Works - Blake's contribution to Pantheism is clearly seen in all three, with his "Atomic Philosophy," his "Circle of Compassion," and his promotion of the "Surfing Lifestyle."

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