

Marvels & Mysteries at Sea



by Betty Blair

One of America's most distinguished journalists—Bill Moyers (born 1934)—recently mused about his type of journalism in front of a distinguished audience of 150 guests who had come to honor him for “extraordinary contributions to public cultural, civic and intellectual life.”¹

“We are often asked whether our kind of journalism really matters,” he began. “People are curious about why we give so much time to novelists, playwrights, artists, historians, philosophers, composers, scholars, teachers—all of whom we view as public thinkers. The answer is simple: They are worth listening to.”

“Why should we subsidize intellectual curiosity?” Moyers continued. “Reading Shakespeare does not erase the budget deficit. Plunging into the history of the 15th century does not ease traffic jams. Listening to Mozart or reading the ancient Greeks does not repair the ozone layer....crime is still rampant, the divorce rate continues to soar, corruption flourishes, legislatures remain stubbornly profligate....”

And, we, at Azerbaijan International magazine might add that thinking about Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002) who dared to sail 4,000 miles across the Pacific Ocean on a raft made of balsa logs in 1947, or the recent Tangaroa raft expedition led by Torgeir Higrav, which was based on Heyerdahl's experiment, doesn't alleviate tensions in the Middle East. Nor will it lessen the brutal nightmare in Iraq of occupying forces and suicide bombers. Nor is it likely to deter what seems to be an administration hell-bent on dropping nuclear bombs on Azerbaijan's neighbor to the south, which, if carried out, will have unprecedented catastrophic consequences for the entire region.

In his speech, Moyers went on to quote award-winning novelist Maxine Hong Kingston: “All human beings have this burden in life to constantly figure out what's true, what's authentic, what's meaningful, what's dross, what's a hallucination, what's a figment, what's madness. We all need to figure out what is valuable, constantly. As a writer,” Kingston continues, “all I am doing is posing the question in a way that people can see very clearly.”

own destiny—at least to some extent. Though war had demanded blind obedience, wanton destruction and murder, Heyerdahl set out on an insane voyage to prove that oceans served as avenues of conductivity, not separation, for human kind.

Despite three other major sailing vessels that Heyerdahl later went on to construct and sail—the Tigris, Ra I and II—on different seas, with different winds and ocean currents, it was the Kon-Tiki that captured the world's imagination. Kon-Tiki gave him a microphone to become a spokesman for world peace, scientific exploration and a healthy global environment.

Heyerdahl was always looking for what linked mankind. He rejected man-made constructs of separation and isolation, such as political borders, boundaries and walls. For him, mankind was connected to each other and, thus, we were all responsible for each other. For him, the words “me and mine” needed to be replaced with the more-embracing terms: “us and ours”.

Heyerdahl came to Azerbaijan on at least four occasions—1980, 1994, 1999, 2000—the last three of which were upon the invitation of the late President Heydar Aliyev. He was embraced in the Soviet Union despite some of the academic challenges that he faced there. For example, when “Kon-Tiki” was first published in 1951, the book was forbidden until Nikita Khrushchev came to power [1958]. Then it soared to the top of the bestseller lists in all of the Eastern European languages. “Kon-Tiki”, thus, became the first book ever to sell more than a million copies there.

In Constantine Pleshakov's obituary,² summarizing the legacy of Heyerdahl, he observed that the Soviet Union was one of the nations that loved him most and the crazy imaginativeness of his seemingly flimsy expeditions at sea always inspired and gave hope. He was the David daring to stand up against Goliath.

“Somehow, no matter what happened in the Kremlin or in the White House, the ocean, with its waves and riddles, was still there. The coral reefs were just as beautiful as ever. And life went on.”

And maybe that's the most important lesson for today—“Life does go on!” Perhaps, that's the most essential message “worth listening to”. And if it is true, then we all must take responsibility for our tomorrows.

“If there were something I could wish for in the future, it would be that there would be an end to all the conflicts between the different religions, and that everyone who believes in a creative force behind nature would use intelligence, conscience, intuition, the Holy Spirit, and everything else that is in our collective power to get advice and help to preserve nature before we completely disturb the great Day of Rest.”

Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002)

“In The Footsteps of Adam by Thor Heyerdahl,” London: Little Brown, 2000, page 298

It's an understatement to say that we live in dangerous times. But Thor Heyerdahl, too, carried out his experiment, on the heels of World War II, which at the time had been the most devastating man-made disaster known to modern man. He knew what war was all about. He himself had been drafted as well.

But when others were pessimistic about their destiny in life, Heyerdahl gave breath to the possibility that one could confront forces and institutions larger than one's self. One could influence and shape one's

1 Excerpts from Bill Moyer's acceptance speech for the Frank E. Taplin Jr. Public Intellectual Award given to him and his wife Judith for “extraordinary contributions to public cultural, civic and intellectual life” by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. New York City on February 7, 2007.

2 “Thor Heyerdahl: “Adventurer's Death Touches Russia's Soul,” by Constantine Pleshakov. Japan Times on May 5, 2002. [See Azerbaijan International 10.2 (Summer 2002). Search at AZER.com]. ■