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The sea, the sea ...

If I swivel round 45 degrees from where I sit at my desk, the view never fails to impress me. In the foreground is a hundred yards of grass, bracken and gorse, leading down to a rocky shore. It borders a sheltered bay where in the summer skinflint sailors anchor, to avoid the official harbour dues levied on the other side of the island. Beyond lie the restless waters of St Mary's Sound, separating us by a mile from the low-lying duo of St Agnes and the Gugh, two inhabited islands linked by a sandbar at low and mid-tides. The only buildings I can see are a dozen houses clustered on the northern slopes of Agnes, presided over by her 17th century lighthouse. An architectural work of art, the rounded bulk of the lighthouse no longer supports a working light, but Trinity House maintain its white walls and gleaming glass. Beyond, and to the west of Agnes, I can discern a few of the deadly Western Rocks, the unquiet graveyard to so many sailing ships over the centuries and still a hazard to be feared.

I've lost count of the number of patients who, on sitting down beside my desk in a chair strategically placed to look straight out to sea, remark on the view and say that they feel better already. I routinely reply that it's a good job my seat faces the other way or I'd never get any work done. I am doubly favoured in that the view from my living room and kitchen — there are always volunteers to do the washing up — is even more spectacular, facing directly to the west where sunsets simmer, blaze, dazzle and sink over a sea as multihued as opal or silk.

To live surrounded by the sea, and under an unimpeded sky is to live exposed to the elements in all their moods, physical and metaphorical. In practical terms, our daily lives are affected in all sorts of ways by the vagaries of wind, tide, sun and rain. In fog we can't send pathology samples to the mainland for processing, patients can't get to outpatients, and visiting specialists sit stranded in Penzance heliport; emergency cases have to be evacuated on our water ambulance, at

great cost to their stomachs and the public purse. Storms bring us the occasional trauma, and sunshine — particularly in the ozone-depleted skies over the Scillies — presents us with skins beetroot-coloured, blistered or both. Sports and leisure activities are dictated by the weather, as are their attendant accidents: endless sprained or broken ankles sustained on the slippery coastal paths; fish-hooks in fingers; decompression sickness among the wreck divers; hypothermic sailors and prostrated passengers from the round-bottomed mistress of mal-de-mer who plies to and fro through the tourist season.

But it is the sea as a source of metaphor and simile that interests me more. We speak of its fury, its calm, its restlessness, its beauty, its moods and its ever-changing nature. It can match our own moods, or it can challenge and change them. If we stare at a pink sunset over a gleaming silver sheet of still water, and watch as the disc of the sun slides silently out of sight, doesn't something stir in our heart? As Bob Dylan has put it: 'Look at the sun, sinking like a ship: ain't that just like my heart, babe, when I kissed your lips'. When we stare for minutes or hours at a raging sea crashing on apparently immovable rocks, can we resist ruminating over events in our own lives or in those known to us: the disasters that come our way, the unexpected strengths, the havens of security that come to our aid? When we gaze down through crystal clear water to the subterranean gardens of waving seaweed and darting fish, aren't we transported to some place other than our accustomed solid ground, to a place of primeval echoes and mysterious possibilities?

I love the sea: I fear it less but respect it more than when I first came here. I have no doubt that its omnipresent influence enriches and strengthens whatever it is that we call the soul, or the spirit. So, I look out of my window and wonder if this is the treatment we all need. A double-blind trial to confirm its efficacy would hardly be feasible, I'm afraid.