

Wind and Woman Power

From August 23-26, 2006, my daughter Cody, our good friend Tracey and I stepped out of our comfort zones and off terra firma, onto the deck of the schooner Seaward. We took up the “3 day challenge” offered by Tall Ships Education Academy to get a crash course in sailing and raise funds for the Academy’s Semester at Sea for Girls.

I woke up the first day after returning from our three-day sailing voyage reciting commands in my mind: “ready about” “ready forward” “helms alee” “trim for a close haul”..., as if by saying them to myself, I could set to memory the actions and their do-or-die details. Fact is, I won’t likely remember the commands for long. But the adventure, yes!

For three glorious days, I put my faith in strangers and pocketed my ego. I cannot contain all the rewards in words. I attribute my satisfaction, though, to the opportunities created for us to try something new and yes, challenging. My most profound lesson came very early in our voyage. I tried to winch the jib sheet (secure a rope) using a counter-clockwise wrap –wrong! The winch only turns clockwise. It didn’t budge. When I loosed the rope, intending to wrap it the other way, the wind ripped the line out of my hand. That’s how I discovered the force that fills the sails. Harnessing that force, I’ve discovered, is the thrill of sailing!

From the moment we cast off at Pier 40 beside the Giants ballpark, the crew gave us their all. Theirs is a job more daunting than sailing itself: into our untrained hands they put the lines, cranks, anchor chain, even the steering wheel, that seasoned sailors manipulate with artful precision. Then they show us, with great patience and repetition (though it’s never the same twice), how it’s done.

Our first full day aboard, activities began with unintelligible terms and chaotic exercises. The massive container ships plying San Francisco Bay made “large as life” the stakes for getting things right! Still our recognition of purposeful details remained hit-or-miss. But as the day progressed, the frequency of correct actions improved. What to do and when, started to become predictable; started to make sense.

What we saw was as captivating as what we did. The first evening’s sail took us past Alcatraz, and around the east side of Angel Island to anchor; the second night, after meandering in the Bay and beyond the Gate a short distance, going through our paces as a novice crew, we anchored on the back side of Tiburon. All the Bay geography, so familiar to many of us, we’d never known like this before. Seeing inlets, coves and weathered structures, feeling the wild variations of wind for which our Bay is famous, we got a pelican’s view of the Bay.

Despite the fact that we were 18 people confined to a deck of about 60-foot length, and limited bunk space, our nearly constant exposure to wind and cold seemed to keep folks hungry! Good food, prepared by a graduate of the 2004 Semester at Sea, kept us happy.

Grace, the galley goddess, also sang our wake-ups and knew her way, along with the other crew, around the vessel and the demands of sailing.

Our other Tall Ships graduate and guide, Christina, freshly returned from her Semester at Sea, exuded passion for the experience. Even more than words, her confidence and sailing competence translated into an astute ability to help newcomers learn. At Christina's insistence, her mother was also on board. I saw in their mother-daughter pride a mirror of the pleasure it was for Cody and me to share this adventure.

Throughout our trip, the crew's spirit affected me. I thought we were at full sail when Anita high-skipped by me on deck, nimbly dodging sheets and shrouds, chanting gleefully, "set the fish, set the fish, set the fish!" We did, and "the fisherman," a small, not quite square sail billowed jauntily, high between the masts, like a feather in Seaward's cap!

Our day of sailing up the north coast to Point Reyes included an afternoon of playful sailing maneuvers in Drake's Bay. The first pass around a buoy, Sterling, the captain, coached Cody at the helm, and we all strained to understand what we were trying to do and how to do it. Even after Cody successfully brought Seaward around the buoy, the task seemed baffling. But as we took turns at the helm, the options and the ability to control our course became clearer. Sterling chided us to see who could get close enough for others to pitch pennies and hear them "clink" and bounce off the buoy. We exhausted ourselves!

That evening, the crew proposed a change of plan. The winds had pretty much died by day's end, and predictions for a morning wind were not much better. We were offered the chance to travel by night, under motor, to reach the Farallon Islands in time for sunrise. The possibility of seeing puffins and the islands themselves lured us. I understood opposition, several had been laid low during the day by the ocean's rock and rolling motion. Not only would they be subjected to more motion, but the trade-offs sounded grueling: traveling by night would require all of us, divided into two teams. Each team would take a night watch, with a first shift from 0100 to 0330; a second shift from 0330 to 0600. The vote to set up night watches and go for it was nearly unanimous – the crew's spirit of adventure was infectious! After a short course in navigation, we eagerly hopped into our bunks for a little rest before the night travels.

The clanging of the anchor chain (apparently stuck until it loosed suddenly) awakened me as the first watch got us underway. Not long after, the ship began to pitch and rock in open sea. Unable to go back to sleep, I fumbled and jounced out of my top bunk and bundled up to venture topside in the nighttime. Enveloped in fog and quiet, but for the slapping of lines and creaking as the boat heaved and pitched, people went about their business.

When the second watch got briefed and took over at 0330 hours, the first watch headed to their bunks, ready to get warm. We set our course by the compass and later, by a tiny light flashing to the southwest. Well into the second shift, the tiny flashing light began to

look larger. Around 0530 hours, we heard the distant barking of sea lions. A hint of dawn made visible a rocky form. Not long after, the ship nosed into a cove where bird cries and calls joined the sea lions barks, filling the predawn air. While the ship hovered, the darkness ever so slowly gave way. As it did, the barely visible form of one then another bird flying overhead, landing in the water or circling to the rocks beyond, became clearer. Soon “all hands mustered” on deck, amazed at the density of wildlife and the teeming activity along the stark cliffs, caves and crags of South Farallon Island. We cruised at times very close to the rocks, backing off when the downwind stench got overwhelming. Flies from the island made their way to the Seaward, and we slapped and swatted, hoping to send them elsewhere. (What happens to a fly at sea?) A couple of hours after our mystical predawn arrival, we rounded the island’s north tip and headed east toward the Golden Gate.

A shout of “whale off the starboard bow” roused those catching up on sleep. In the next half hour, several sightings thrilled us – spouts, breaching fins and glimpses of body mass arching and rolling, one full fluke, and a pair sighted very near us that looked like drifting logs until one spouted. In this same area, porpoises, too, flashed alongside the boat.

I had a good long turn at the helm as we traveled east, and though motoring cannot compare to steering under sail, I found myself much better able to hold my course, check bearings and understand the buoy markers than I had managed less than 24 hours earlier.

High drama came shortly after our return under the Gate to the windy Bay. We found ourselves in the midst of a flood tide, a capricious wind, and Saturday regattas. We tried to come about (turn), but stalled. With no momentum the sails fell slack, slapping (luffing), useless; the rocks seemed menacingly close. Our mistake – a great lesson -- the wind did not fill the sails as we’d expected, shifting with us, instead. The crew showed restraint. They did not jump up and take over, but suggested (urgently) a strategy to catch the wind and try the turn again. With one shipmate steadfast at the helm, our second try brought success!

After lunch, our final challenge was a complete 360 degree sail around Alcatraz, capitalizing on wind power. The competence we had begun to feel on Friday manifested and we rounded the island a well heeled team. We struck the sails for the last time, then Sterling directed docking. The ship glided smoothly to Pier 40 where we began.

Exhilarated, Cody and I congratulated ourselves, hugged our shipmates and climbed down to the dock. Back on terra firma, the rocking and pitching sensation still overtakes me when I close my eyes. I hope it lasts a good long time. Our memories certainly will!

With love and thanks to every friend and relative who supported and encouraged us, deep gratitude to Call of the Sea. org and Tall Ships Semester for Girls, a shout-out to our shipmates and a pledge of continuing support for the Tall Ships Education Academy.

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